

Chapter 21

Beyond the Damascus Road: The Theology of the Apostle Paul

I.

The earliest explicit theology in the New Testament is that of the Apostle Paul. Paul began his writing no later than twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus and possibly as early as fifteen years thereafter; the earliest gospel was not begun until his work was completed. His writings range from a personal letter to the slave owner Philemon to a rather orderly treatment of his Christian faith written to the church at Rome, a group of Christians he did not know personally and to whom he wanted to introduce himself. He wrote a largely autobiographical letter to the Galatians in which he tried to defend both his apostleship and his understanding of Jesus Christ; carried on a lengthy correspondence with the Christians in Corinth in which he attempted to answer the many questions raised by both his supporters and his antagonists; and he issued a call to joy in Christ to his close friends and coworkers in Philippi. But his writings, being letters, were not systematic. They were written primarily to deal with specific issues before his churches and, in the course of this, he dropped some ideas we would have liked to have seen him explore in depth, and he became carried away with matters we do not consider important today. The result is that nowhere in his writings did he present a full and complete statement of what he believed but instead left us with the intriguing task of reconstructing this earliest interpretation of what God was doing in Jesus Christ.

Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, an important city a few miles in-land from the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea in what is today the country of Turkey. Tarsus was a seacoast town, a center of trade; since, in those days, ships did not sail the open seas but kept their routes close to shore, every boat passing in either direction between Rome and Egypt or Rome and Persia would put in at Tarsus. This bustling sailor's town was also a center of culture; Strabo, the geometer, considered it the rival of Athens. Paul had a unique up-bringing. He was born a Jew, nurtured in a synagogue of the Diaspora, educated as a Pharisee, and studied in Jerusalem under the prominent rabbi Gamaliel. In addition, the members of his family were Roman citizens, and possession of this citizenship was to open doors for Paul that were available to almost no other Christian leader of his generation. He was probably born about the same time Jesus was, although a young man, he was a determined enemy of the church of Jesus Christ and fought against it with vigor. Then, probably within two or three years after Jesus' resurrection Paul became a Christian. He used that same vigor to serve Jesus Christ that he had formerly employed in fighting him. The important events of his life from that time on are traceable and

somewhat datable. After spending almost a decade in the area around Tarsus and Antioch in some form of Christian preaching, he went with fellow missionaries to Cyprus and came back to the mainland through Galatia, the Roman province in the south central part of Asia Minor. Around A.D 48, he was recalled to Jerusalem for an assembly of all the leaders of the church and at that time was given the authority to continue his ministry among the Gentiles. By the winter of 49 he was in Corinth in Greece and then returned to Jerusalem with the money he had collected among the Gentile churches. While he was in Jerusalem, in A.D. 56, he was arrested by the Roman authorities. He asked that his trial be held in Rome and, because he was a Roman citizen, the request was granted. He was transported to Rome, probably in the year 58, and was imprisoned there for at least two years. Though Scripture does not tell us directly, we presume that Paul was executed in Rome, and this chronology would fix the date of his execution around A.D. 60. He had had thirty years of ministry, and by the time he had completed his work Christianity had moved from being a Jewish sect centered in Judea and Galilee into a movement that the whole world had to take into account.

Paul's theology developed from the unique concerns of his Christian lifestyle and, as we identify these, we come to understand the force of what he represented in the church.

Paul was a missionary with a vision that the Christian Gospel would reach the whole world. The center of his own activities was the Christian community in Antioch, a Syrian city about 135 miles south and east of Tarsus and the third largest city in the Roman world; from Antioch he first ventured forth into Asia Minor and to it he returned to be refitted for his later journeys into Greece. But Paul had a goal beyond that of reaching Asia Minor and Greece. He wanted to go to Rome and, when he was finished there, to take the Gospel all the way to Spain and the Gates of Hercules. This was the known world of Paul's day, and it was his aim to preach the message of Jesus Christ to every part of God's creation. His theology therefore was a missionary theology, built around a burning zeal to make Christ known to people of mixed religious heritage. He had to formulate his message in a way that would make it understandable by persons of different backgrounds than his own, and he had to defend it against the sharp attacks of others who wanted no part of him or his message of Jesus Christ.

Paul was also a churchman, and this affected both his work and his writing. Its effect was seen most clearly in the greatest controversy in which he became engaged. As the apostle to the Gentiles, he had begun to bring into the faith people who had no extensive background in Judaism. Those Gentile God-fearers, while attracted to the synagogue by its monotheism and solid ethical achievements, had not become proselytes; and the issue arose as to whether they could be baptized before they had been circumcised or had committed themselves to keep the Jewish food laws and paying the tithes and offerings to the holy Temple. The old-line Christians, especially the community of James in Jerusalem, insisted that the only route into the Christian faith passed through the way of Judaism.

Paul took the other side of the argument. He argued that the Spirit of God in Christ could come upon a Gentile before he was a Jew and he pointed to the lives of some of his converts as examples of this. The debate was so critical that it could easily have split the church into two or more warring sects who would want nothing more to do with each other.

At this point Paul's churchmanship asserted itself. He did not try to settle the issue on his own but instead went to meet with Peter, James, and John, with the brethren and the apostles, to work out the matter with them. The leaders of the church met in council in Jerusalem and debated the issue at length. When the council was over, it was clear that both sides had made concessions. Paul had agreed to have his Gentile Christians refrain from eating meat that was not kosher, that is, that had been slaughtered not by an accredited priest or rabbi but had been killed in a pagan Temple. At the same time, the other leaders sent Paul into the world to continue his mission for Christ, and they certified that the same spirit that worked in them worked also in him. Each contending side had come away from this agreement feeling satisfied with the result, but Paul had won two major victories through it. The first victory was for his mission: he had seen it validated and that was important to him. The other victory was for the church: Paul had not cast aside its authority but had asserted its unity and worked out this problem in concert with the other acknowledged leaders. Paul was a churchman of the first order, and his concern for the unity of the church was expressed both in his practice and his writings.

Paul's theology also reflected his pastoral concerns. He did not deal with people in masses: he dealt with them individually as persons. Even of people he called by name in his letters was impressive: Euodia, Syntyche, and Epaphroditus from the Philippian church; Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus from Corinth; Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junias, Ampliatus, Urban, Rufus, Phlegon, Hermes, Hermas and many others in Ephesus. He worked in close comradeship with Timothy, Barnabas, Demas, Mark, and Luke. He carried in his heart the plight of the poverty-stricken Christians in Jerusalem, the slave status of Onesimus, and the working-class people in Corinth who came to share the Lord's Supper only to find that the more affluent members of the community had already eaten all the food. Paul's concerns for the persons he knew in his congregations caused him joy and anguish and his feelings filled the pages of his letters.

He was also a martyr for his faith, though he was not the first of this line. Jesus himself was the first; he had died for his faith in God. Paul was not even the second; Stephen, the deacon, could claim that position in the Christian faith, and Paul was one who had looked on while Stephen died. Nor was Paul even the third or fourth: James and some of his company in Jerusalem had already died for their Christian beliefs, and Simon Peter and others were about to do so. But Paul was in that glorious company: he too not only lived for the Christ but he died for him, and his latest writings express the

concerned serenity with which he faced that prospect. There is something solemn and awesome about that person who is willing to die for what he believes, and Paul's martyrdom proved fundamental to his witness for Jesus Christ.

II.

It is no easy task to describe the theology of Paul. In his many letters he tends to emphasize first one thing and then another, and consequently his theology has to be described in various ways.

The simplest way is to see his as a theology of the activity of God and the response of humankind to God's actions. This pattern follows the basic outline of his letters which usually began with a section on theology and then proceeded to a section on ethics. In other words, he would describe in detail what God was doing in human life and then point out how we might act in response to what God is doing. This substructure to his thinking offers the first and fundamental way of coming to grips with his theology: God acts, especially in Jesus Christ, and it is our responsibility to react to that.

His was also a theology of Christian experience and as such it was based on his own experience of Jesus Christ.

Paul had never met Christ in the days of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee and Judea, but, according to Paul, the resurrected Christ met him on the Damascus Road. The Book of Acts gives the account in three different places with some of the details slightly emended from telling to telling. The basic description portrays Paul walking along the road to the Syrian city breathing fire against the Christian church when he was suddenly overwhelmed with a great light. A voice came from the light to ask, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" Blinded by the light, Saul could only thrash around in his anguish. He was told to seek a particular house in Damascus, which he did. There his sight was restored to him, and he was told that his encounter had been with Jesus Christ. From this encounter he ceased being a persecutor of the church and after a decade and more of reflection, prayer, and of taking his first reincarnation steps toward Christian ministry, Paul became instead its foremost spokesman.

When Paul described the experience in his own letters, especially in what is now Galatians 1:15-16, he dealt with it somewhat differently. There he wrote: "And he who called me by his grace and set me apart from my birth chose to reveal his son in me that I might preach him to the Gentiles." In this compressed statement, Paul gave the inner meaning of his experience with Jesus Christ.

Part of his experience was theological. He had a major question about Jesus which had to be resolved: how could a Messiah die? His Jewish rabbinic training had told him

that the Messiah was to come to usher in God's new age and would do so in a triumphal manner. But Jesus' triumph was his cross; and Paul was having trouble squaring that with his understanding of God. Then, in pouring over the Scriptures, the truth occurred to him. Christ had gone to the cross in order to become a curse in God's sight so that through that act he could cancel out the curse under which all humankind was living. If that statement sounds obscure, it is, for Paul was reasoning like a Pharisee and, as he worked out this belief in chapter 3 of Galatians, he was following the convoluted Pharisaic method of reading Scripture: when Christ was hanged upon the tree, Paul came to believe, the curse he accepted by being there cancelled out the curse God had pronounced on all humankind. Now we are free to receive the salvation of God. How could a messiah die, Paul had asked? Now he answered: he had to die. Only in this way could the curse of sin and death, which we deserve because of our own sins and those of our fathers, be so nullified that we are free to live our lives with God.

The second part of Paul's experience was personal. When "Christ was revealed in him," he saw his life in a new perspective.

Unquestionably, Paul had wondered why he had the particular abilities and upbringing that he had. He had a keen mind, sharp and penetrating; a Pharisee's training, which constituted the most thorough training in Jewish Scriptures available at the time; he was a Roman citizen who was unencumbered by family responsibilities and he had a trade by which he could sustain himself; he had an unquenchable curiosity about the Hellenistic world and wanted to visit every corner of it; he had vitality of spirit and strength of body. What was the meaning of these unique gifts?

Paul came to see the answer. He had been given all this that he might be properly fitted for service to Christ. He was a Jew because from that race and religion God was about to do this new thing for the world. With his Pharisaic training he was able to search the Scriptures diligently to understand what God was doing in human life. He was a Roman citizen, because this citizenship would open doors to him that no other Christian could walk through. Because he had no family responsibilities, he was free to travel whenever he chose. With his searching mind and spirit, he was open to the new truth of God in Jesus Christ. So, when Paul wrote of his experience with Christ, he not only said that "God revealed his son in me," but he added, "he set me apart from my birth." The gifts that God had given him had meaning and purpose in the light of what God was going to do with him through the spirit of Jesus Christ.

God had in mind that Paul should preach Christ to the Gentiles; this was the vocational side of his experience. The Gentiles were being prepared to receive the message of Christ by the way they were clinging to the synagogues, but who would bring them the message? He who was uniquely qualified to do so, was Paul's answer; he would do it

himself. This task would use every one of his skills and abilities and demand also an extraordinary commitment of heart, will, and spirit. When God was pleased to reveal Christ to Paul, that act brought together in one meaningful moment Paul's past, present, and future; and his experience with Jesus Christ has remained the paradigm for the personal experience Christians have had with the spirit of Christ.

A third way to view Paul's theology is to see him as the theologian of justification. "I have been justified by faith through grace" was Paul's classic statement: each of those terms requires definition.

"Justified" was a term drawn from the legal practice of the time. It was roughly equivalent to our term "acquittal" and provided an answer for Paul's basic religious question: how can I, who know myself guilty before God, be accepted by him? Paul's guilt consisted in nearly equal parts of his persecution of the Christian church, of the laws of Judaism he could not keep, and of the passions within himself that were at war with his best self. If God is just, how can he accept such a person as I. The answer to which Paul came was this: the just God has acquitted me. Justification meant "accounted just, reckoned to be righteous," not because the evidence supported the verdict but because the judge declared him so and acquitted the accused. God considered all the evidence against Paul and God acquitted him.

God did this because God was merciful as well as just. This is the meaning of the term "by grace." The simplest definition of grace is "to be treated in a way better than we deserve," and this described precisely Paul's thinking about God. God had treated him better than he deserved because, after considering the damning evidence against him, God had acquitted rather than condemned him. There was no justifiable reason for God's action, except that God is gracious and his sentence upon humankind is not condemnation but justification—acquittal.

This we know through faith. This is a shorthand word in Paul's lexicon of theological terms, and it means "our faithful response to the faithfulness of God that we have experienced in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." Faith begins not with ourselves but in the faithfulness of God. In reading Scripture, Paul had come to a new appreciation of God's faithfulness to God's people. God had called Israel through Abraham, given them the Law through Moses, condemned them by the precepts of the Law and the mouths of the prophets, and then restored them in Jesus Christ. Though God's people might turn their backs on him, God would never do the same to them, and this is God's faithfulness. This faithfulness had surfaced in Jesus of Nazareth. God had sent Christ to call the people back to right terms with God and nothing would deter Christ from this mission, even death itself: "he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, even unto death, a death on the cross." It was human faithfulness that Christ showed; he was faithful to God's call and no human frailty

could bend him from that path. But divine faithfulness was also shown in Christ: God sent Christ into the world and continued with him in his mission. This brings the matter of faithfulness to us: faithfulness has to be fulfilled by our faithful response to the faithfulness of God. Faithful response on our part means to live as if we have been acquitted rather than condemned; as one whom God loves; as one whom Christ has freed; as one who is fully faithful to the God who was faithful to us in Jesus Christ. This is the heart of Paul's theology: we are justified by grace through faith.

His was also a theology of the church. Paul explored in depth the nature of the Christian community that he knew so well in his missionary travels and his pastoral work, and he came to think of the church in many and varied ways.

He saw it as the body of Christ. This metaphor had many meanings. It meant that the church is the eyes, hands, ears, feet of the resurrected Christ. Note Paul did not say "head"; the spirit of Christ alone is the head of the church, providing its direction and will. When one part of the body suffers, all suffer; when one part rejoices, all rejoice; each part is to respect the unique gift of the other part. The body with which the resurrected Christ is operative in the world is his church.

The church is also the community that has life in the spirit. The spirit of God in Jesus Christ animates the church. The church is the community that incorporates the spirit, depends upon it for its own inner life and extends this spirit to others.

The church is the new creation of God in Christ: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come." Being the new creation meant that the church is the successor of the Old Israel. The new creation emerged from the grave of the resurrection just as the old Israel emerged from the dead loins of Abraham and the dead womb of Sarah; from the living death in Egypt; from the exile in Babylon. So, the church; when Christ lay dead in his tomb, the community was scattered and lost; when he emerged from the grave, the community was gathered and sent on its mission. In the truest sense possible, the church is the new creation of God in Christ.

It is the people of God. God's people, as Paul saw the matter, had their call in Abraham, their structure given to them in the covenant under Moses, their life as a nation under David and his successors in the twelve tribes. These tribes had been scattered and lost. But Jesus, when he came, called twelve disciples and so reconstituted the people of God. Now this people consists of all who respond to God in Christ. As such, it is the heir of the promises given by God to the old Israel, but it is a people drawn not from one ancestor but from every nation and race on the face of the earth. It lives by the new law of Christ: "you shall love the Lord your God with heart,

soul, mind, and strength; and your neighbor as yourself--love one another as I have loved you--in this is the whole law of Christ, that we bear one another's burdens."

Paul's thinking also emphasizes baptism and the Lord's Supper as the rites of the new people of God. Baptism provides the means of entrance into the community; just as the Israelites of old became the people of God by their baptism at the Red Sea, so the new people is gathered of those who undergo the act of baptism. As the people of old found their primary ritual identity in the Passover meal, so the new people of God gather together in the Lord's Supper when Christ himself meets with his beloved community. These rites take their significance from the presence of Christ in them and give identity to this new people, the Christian community, Christ's church.

These are suggestive of Paul's thinking about the Christian community and not exhaustive since he employed other metaphors as well; and other theologians of the church were to add other thoughts to its richness. The Christian community was important to Paul. In its behalf he travelled the length and breadth of the empire and suffered hardship, floggings, shipwreck, dangers by river, dangers by water, danger from robbers; he thought deeply about it and made us the beneficiaries of his reflection.

Underlying everything Paul was to write about the Christian faith, however, is this: to Paul, Christianity was Jesus Christ; the uniqueness of the message was to be found in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Paul tried to express this uniqueness in ways that would communicate itself to the people of his time. God acted in Christ, said Paul; and we have to shape our behavior in response to that activity. God comes in Christ, and gives us a new past, new present, new future. God forgives us in Christ; we are to live as forgiven men and women, not condemned but acquitted by God. God reaches us in the community which centers itself around the spirit of Christ; and we share the spirit of God in Christ as we participate in the on-going life of this community. The center of Paul's theological thinking was Jesus Christ; how to express this meaningfully in his life and in the lives of those who heard his message became the missionary task of the apostle Paul.

With these writings of Paul, a new thing began to happen in the Christian churches. Not only did Paul supply his churches with a theological structure on which their own life and thought could be built but he provided them with the rudiments of a new Scripture to be added to the Scriptures that they had inherited from Israel. These letters, written for use in the churches to which they were addressed, came to be considered authoritative for the faith of those Christian congregations, and they became the nucleus around which other writings were gathered to become "the New Testament of Jesus Christ."