

Paul for Today

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Paul has always been an uncomfortable figure within the traditions of Christianity. His letters contain too much which sits awkwardly with other NT writings, not to mention later Christian doctrines and practices. Already within two generations of Paul, the author of 2 Peter laments that 'there are some things in them (the letters of our beloved brother Paul) hard to understand, which (an ominous note) the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction' (2 Pet. 3.15-16). And in the second and third Christian centuries the Gnostics were able to make so much capital out of things said by Paul that Tertullian called him 'the apostle of the heretics' (*adv. Marc.* III.5).

It is true that the influence of Paul on such great church theologians as Irenaeus and Augustine was very deep and profound, and that early Catholic tradition regarded Paul as co-equal founder with Peter of the church of Rome. On the other hand, as an earlier lecturer in this series has noted, the church of St Paul in Rome, however magnificent, is still St Paul without the Walls, and cannot begin to be compared with the splendour and significance of St Peter's. And a Catholic liturgy where the homily is almost always from the Gospel and rarely from the Epistle continues to leave Paul in the shade - still rather too 'hard to understand'.

It is also true, of course, that Paul's theology was very much at the root of the theologies of Luther and Calvin and the basis for the Reformation confessions. But it was also Protestantism which produced the 19th century Liberalism, which regarded Paul as the first corrupter of the prophetic moralism of Jesus, turning his love ethic into a religion of propitiation and redemption. In the words of William Wrede at the beginning of the present century, Paul was 'the second founder of Christianity' who has 'exercised beyond all doubt the stronger - not the better - influence' than the first (*Paul* p.180). And though great 20th century theologians like Barth and Bultmann have laboured long to enable the words of Paul to be heard again in the present age, the dominant impression still persists of a Paul far out of touch with modern concerns, the

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authoritarian spokesman of a male-dominated paternalism which grates with the values and aspirations of the late 20th century.

To Jews, an apostate. To many Christians, a perverter of the simple majesty of Jesus' message. To churchmen, an uncomfortable troublemaker. To the outsider, an obscure

theologian. So, what price 'Paul for Today'? Does he still have something to say to the contemporary church and world? Does Paul still translate across the centuries? Or is his message so inextricably tied to outmoded world views and social ideals that such attempts at translation are bound to fail?

As the title suggests, I want to give a positive answer to such questions. I continue to cherish confidence that, despite all the problems alluded to above, despite the immense problems of interpreting across nearly twenty centuries, which specialists in the theory of hermeneutics seem to be constantly dinning into our ears at present, nevertheless Paul can continue to speak to today. To address the challenge adequately would, of course, require a whole series of lectures. In a single lecture I can only hope to illustrate the claim and the supporting arguments. But I hope, in the circumstances, that the more modest endeavour will be regarded as sufficient.

In order to maintain some coherence for the lecture I will link my illustrations to a common theme - Paul's understanding of the human condition, his anthropology, if you like. It is my contention that his teaching on this theme and developed from this theme contains important insights which have considerable potential to inform human and particularly Christian self-understanding, both at an individual and at a corporate level. The decision to tackle a linked theme also means, unfortunately, that I will be unable to take up all the exciting challenges which Paul's gospel and theology pose to individual and church today. Suffice to say that I hope to address the larger task at book length in a future publication. But to our present task.

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1. Paul's understanding of the human person

It is a simple fact, well known to students of Paul, that he uses a number of words to describe the human person - the most important being flesh, body, mind, heart, soul and spirit. My observation here begins from the fact that these words fall quite naturally into pairs - flesh and body, mind and heart, soul and spirit. There is something of significance, I want to suggest to you, both in the fact of the pairings and in the way each member of the pairings complements the other.

We start with the most interesting pair - flesh and body. These are the most frequently recurring of the six terms. 'Flesh' (*sarx*) occurs 91 times in the Pauline corpus (72 times in the undisputed Paulines), and 'body' (*soma*) likewise occurs 91 times in the Pauline letters (74 times in the undisputed Paulines).

What is of immediate interest for us is the way Paul distinguishes these words in their meaning and reference. This is significant because it lacks clear parallel at the time. Hebrew did not have an immediate equivalent to *soma*, and the Greek OT (LXX) regularly uses *soma* to translate the Hebrew *basar*, which usually means 'flesh'. This reflects the fact that in Greek thought *soma* and *sarx*, body and flesh are much closer synonyms than in Paul. But Paul used the two words in a way which shows that he clearly distinguished their respective ranges of meaning and that this distinction was theologically significant. Let me try to explain.

It is clear that Paul regularly uses the word 'flesh' with a strong negative connotation. 'While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions ... were at work in our members to bear fruit for death' (Rom. 7.5); 'I am fleshy, sold under sin' (7.14). Flesh is evidently the arena where the power of sin holds sway - an aspect of Paul's analysis of the human condition to which we will return. Or again, 'God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do' (Rom. 8.3). 'To set the mind on the flesh is death ...

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For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; ... and those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (8.6-8). Hence the negative force of such phrases as 'the desires of the flesh' (Gal. 5.16) and 'boasting in the flesh' (6.13).

In contrast 'body' is a much more neutral term in Paul. To give it the same negative force he usually has to add a qualifying adjective - 'body of sin' (Rom. 6.6), 'mortal body' (8.11), or, significantly, 'body of flesh' (Col. 1.22; 2.11; the letter is attributed by some to a close disciple of Paul) - the more negative 'flesh' qualifying the more neutral 'body'. Perhaps most significant of all, when Paul talks about the resurrection of believers, it is clear that 'flesh' is disqualified - 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor. 15.50); but 'body' is not - Paul's hope is precisely for the resurrection of the body (15.44).

The point could be illustrated by two overlapping ellipses: the Pauline words 'body' and 'flesh' overlap in meaning, but the weight of meaning is different in each case - flesh the more characteristically negative, body the more characteristically neutral in significance.

What was Paul doing in all this? The answer seems to be that he was combining key features of Greek and Hebrew anthropology in a new synthesis. A strong and fundamental strand of Greek thought regarded flesh and body in negative terms. In a system influenced by the thought of Plato, the material, physical world was essentially flawed, imperfect. In subsequent Gnosticism the antithesis between spiritual/rational and material/physical deepened - the body a prison from which the true self needed to escape. But the antithesis itself was already rooted in the well established Greek pun, *soma sema*, the body as a mere 'tomb'. What Paul does, we might say then, is to take all this negative weight of such typically Greek thinking on body and flesh, and load it on to the one word, *flesh* - adding in a still stronger note of moral disapproval ('to live according to the flesh'), and thus reinforcing its primarily negative force.

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In contrast, Paul's use of body reflects the more wholistic Hebrew thought. Whereas in Greek thought the body was a part of me, separable from the true person, in Hebrew thinking it would be more accurate to speak of an embodied person. So in Paul's anthropology the body is the means by which I live in and experience a particular environment. In a physical environment that means a physical body; whereas in the spiritual environment of the resurrection that will mean a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15.44-46). The point can sometimes be grasped by putting it thus: it would be more true of Pauline thought to say 'I am a body', rather than 'I have a body'; just as it would be more accurate to say, 'I am a Scotsman' or 'I am a Methodist'. 'Body' denotes me in relation, not just a part of me separate from me.

This is presumably why Paul never uses *soma* in the sense 'corpse', even though this was a very well established meaning in Greek usage - which has even influenced the Greek OT - since the living I is always an embodied I. And when Paul warns his readers to avoid prostitutes, it is precisely because the individual cannot separate his bodily functions from himself; he is defined by his bodily relationships (1 Cor. 6.12-20). Or again, when Paul urges his readers to 'hand over your bodies as a living sacrifice' (Rom. 12.1), he is not calling on them to present as it were an arm or leg to God; rather the call is to present themselves to God, in their everyday bodily relationships.

In short, by pulling apart these two words, so closely synonymous in the Greek thought of his time, Paul seems deliberately to have attempted to hold together the positive, wholistic Hebrew appreciation of creation, with the more negative Greek evaluation of the merely material. For Paul, body, that is, even human or individual body, is simply the quality of createdness, the character of God-given existence. Flesh, in contrast, denotes that dimension of human existence vulnerable to the forces of decay and corruption, the medium of selfish passion and pride.

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What is the relevance of all this? How does Paul still speak to today at this point? Simply in that he gives Christians a theological means and tool to hold together the character of human createdness and the reality of human fallenness - a means and tool which we have not always recognized or exploited. The point can be easily illustrated in relation to traditional Christian attitudes to human sexuality.

It is an oversimplification but true enough to say that as Christianity spread more widely throughout the eastern Roman Empire it had to come to terms with Greek thought still more than had Paul. One consequence was that the careful distinction which Paul had maintained at the level of anthropology between body and flesh was lost sight of. In particular, the Pauline distinction between a flesh which could not inherit the kingdom of God and the resurrection body was set aside; thus already with Ignatius in early second century we find the insistence that it was the flesh of Jesus which was resurrected (*Smyrn.* 3). To be sure this was itself an attempt to counter a Gnostic-type dualism between flesh and spirit and its consequent hostility to the material. But the Pauline distinction between body and flesh once lost was hard to retrieve fully, and in leaving that distinction behind Christian thought was actually conceding ground to Gnostic dualism and losing sight of the Hebraic sense of the wholeness of creation. The result was that in Christian thought the negative sign began to extend once again over body as well as flesh, so that even created bodiliness was thought to share in the fallenness of fleshliness.

The worst expression of this in mainline Christianity is the strong antipathy against sexuality and its expression which was a feature of Christian theology in late antiquity. Concupiscence, sexual desire, came to be regarded by definition as wicked. Virginity came to be exalted above other human conditions. Mary must therefore have been perpetual virgin. Original sin is transmitted through human procreation. And so on. In contrast, Paul's distinction between body and flesh, had it been maintained,

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would have seen sufficient in itself to provide a counter to that denigration of sexuality which has been such a negative feature of Christian history, and whose consequences are still with us today. Paul for today is one who encourages and enables us once again to affirm the positiveness and wholeness of human createdness, while at the same time recognizing the weakness and corruptibility of the flesh. It is a balance worth striving to restate in modern terms. In an age of greater sensitivity to ecological and sexual issues Paul can prove to be an unexpected ally.

Had I sufficient time I would have wished to say more on the other two pairings in Pauline anthropology - mind and heart, soul and spirit: It must suffice to note that while 'mind', as today, denotes humanity's capacity for rational thought, 'heart' is the larger concept, including rationality and volition as well as emotion - what we might call the 'experiencing I'. It maybe significant, then, that Paul uses the latter (heart) two or three times as frequently as the former (mind). He thus refuses, we might say, to reduce the wholeness of the person to rationality, but seeks once again to maintain a balance between the rational, and emotional and the volitional. Here too Paul provides some precedent for a western European culture which holds the traditions of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic Revival in uneasy tension.

Similarly significant may be the pairing of soul and spirit, *psuche* and *pneuma*. In an age when we are all children of Freud, to the extent that we now recognize that there are psychological depths to the human personality, it is important that we do not rest content there, as though the dimension of the psyche would reveal everything of importance about the inner life of a person. Paul, again in line with his Jewish tradition, also speaks of the human spirit, a still deeper depth or higher reality of the person. Here too Paul for today signals to us that the human person is a richer reality than has often been realised, again with important implications for our self-understanding and relationships.

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2. Paul's understanding of cosmic realities

A second feature of Paul's understanding of the human condition is summed up in the phrase 'principalities and powers'. So for example the famous climax to Romans 8 –

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8.38-39)

The later Paulines speak with equal eloquence of 'thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities' (Col. 1.16) and assure believers that Christ 'disarmed the principalities and powers, and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross' (2.15). Or in the equally well known words of Ephesians –

We are contending not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (6.12).

It is sufficiently clear from the last of these references in particular that we are confronted here with an ancient way of looking at reality. In simple terms Paul seems to have conceived of a sequence of heavens suspended above the earth. This was a very common world view at the time - as was the idea that it was possible to be taken, whether by an angel or in mystic vision, on a heavenly journey, to go visiting as it were (in theatrical terms) from the stalls to the 'gods' by way of the intervening circles. Paul himself testifies to his own experience of such a heavenly journey when he was 'caught up to the third heaven', whether 'in the body or out of the body' he could not tell (2 Cor. 12.2).

In this understanding of heavenly reality it would appear that the principalities and powers 'in the heavenly places' were located in

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the lower circles of heaven. From this vantage point they were able both to control human affairs to a considerable extent and to hinder or block access to the higher heavens where God dwelt. They thus constituted a very threatening factor in the situation of those on earth and it is no wonder that Paul should hasten to reassure his readers that their power had been broken by Christ.

But all this simply underlines how strange and foreign such a conception of reality is to us today. This is all prescientific cosmology, what scholars often describe as a mythological world view. A Pauline theology which assumes such a world view and offers a gospel in its terms is hardly Paul for today, is it? However, such a judgment would be too hasty.

One way of pointing up the continuing relevance of Paul's understanding of cosmic realities would be to note that ancient views have not actually been left behind, even by so-called 'modern scientific man'. For example, Paul's letters speak in several places of the 'elemental forces' which enslave people (Gal. 4.3, 9; Col. 2.8, 20). The reference of the phrase 'elemental forces' is disputed, but Paul probably had in mind the popular understanding of his own day that the fundamental stuff of the cosmos, including not least the stars, could and did exercise often baleful influence on individual and society. The parallel with today is immediate, and I need hardly remind you of how prominent a feature is the star chart and horoscope in our own popular press. Paul's warnings to the Galatians against succumbing to such slavery and his urging of them to realize that such slavery belongs to a period of a people's immaturity and childhood may have a more timeless relevance than was at first obvious. What is the maturity of the Spirit of Christ to which he pointed his readers? And how does it translate in reference to such issues of the present? Here again Paul may have something to say to today.

Another way of approaching the question of the modern relevance of Paul's cosmology has been to ask whether Paul's use of such

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language in relation to earthly governments is significant. In Rom. 13.1-7 Paul uses the same term, which can be translated either 'powers' or 'authorities', in calling on the Roman

Christians to be subject to the governing authorities, 'for there is no authority except given by God'. Likewise in 1 Cor. 2.6-8 he claims that 'the rulers of this age' failed to understand the wisdom of God's purpose in the crucifixion of Christ. By 'rulers of this age' does he mean angelic beings, or rulers like Pilate and Herod? Or does he imply that there are spiritual powers and heavenly forces behind such earthly rulers? The thought is obviously similar to that in 2 Cor. 4.4 which speaks of minds blinded to the significance of Christ by 'the god of this age'.

Here again it may not be so difficult to translate such language into the modern recognition that there are forces loose in contemporary society which can be said to have a demonic character and which no one seems able to control. If I were to speak today of demonic forces of nationalism causing former Yugoslavia to tear itself to bits, not many, I suspect, would jib at such language. And what of the forces which have been rocking and rending our own western European monetary systems? Would it be so far from the mark to speak of spirits of greed and aggrandisement out of control and cumulatively exercising a power which even national governments cannot stand against? Perhaps then Paul's vision of individuals captivated by a different model of society, of a people inspired by a different spirit still has something to say after all.

The feature of Paul's understanding of cosmic realities which has caught my attention most of all, however, is the fact that he says so little by way of description of these principalities and powers. It is almost as though much of what he says at this point is *ad hominem*, that is, deliberately addressed to people in the terms they themselves use. As though Paul was saying to his readers: these principalities and powers, whatever they actually are, whatever you think they are, you need not fear them; the gospel of Christ provides a decisive counter to them.

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In fact, however, Paul does spend quite a lot of time talking about two powers in particular - the powers of sin and death. He never calls them 'principalities and powers' as such, but it is clear from his treatment of them that they constitute the powers which he considers to have the most serious and effective say in human lives. Here again we may properly deduce that he did not feel the need to speculate about the reality and character of the principalities and powers so called, for the powers that really mattered were sin and death. If this line of thought is justified, then we could even say that Paul himself de-mythologised the ancient world view of heavenly beings located in the lower reaches of the heavens and exercising baleful influence on humans. Since the gospel dealt with the all too real and pressing powers of sin and death, his readers could be still more confident that it dealt also with the more shadowy principalities and powers.

But what are these powers? The latter, death, is all too familiar to all human conditions. And though the former, sin, has an outmoded ring to it, it is not too hard to recognize the reality of what Paul terms 'sin'. What is also interesting for us, given our starting point in Pauline anthropology, is the way in which the two combine in Paul's analysis of the human condition with the weakness of the flesh. Here again, time does not permit a full analysis. But particularly his letter to the Romans, where Paul makes a point of speaking of both sin and death in personified terms, repays careful study.

In brief, by 'sin' Paul evidently means that power which turns individuals in upon themselves, that power which makes them forget their creatureliness and captivates them with the delusion that they are independent beings, able to stand on their own feet, whose significance lies in the things, and people, over which they can exercise control. It is that power which makes them forget their limitedness, makes them think they are like gods, despite the fact that they themselves worship mere things. It is that power which, as we might say, in terms of our first point, turns our

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bodiliness into fleshliness, which comes to expression in desire and turns desire to lust, which in the end corrupts freedom into freedom for self-indulgence, which is the power that corrupts. It is that power which comes to expression not least in religion, in false religiosity, which turns boasting in God into boasting in one's religion, in one's nation, in one's race.

Is this a power which needs to be demythologized? I think not. We may have all sorts of disagreements as to the factors involved in the ways this power comes to concrete manifestation; we may want to dispute the different influences of individual inheritance and social conditioning. Paul's own analysis in fact includes both individual and social factors - the experience of envy and greed, the experience also of pride and presumption in national and religious identity. But the effect and product in each case is clear, and what Paul calls 'sin' needs to be recognized for the reality it is, whatever name we may now prefer to call it.

The other power to which Paul gives much thought in Romans is death. Here is a word which needs no translation across the centuries - as meaningful now as ever it was. Death is the end of the line for every journey of life on this earth, the grim reaper whose scythe misses no stalk, the grim-faced official to whose authority we must all bow at the last exit. Any philosophy or science or social system which fails to take account of death is thereby rendered unrealistic and unreal. Any religion which does not make sense of death is thereby rendered finally ineffectual. Death is a power none of us can ever escape, however clever and far-sighted our planning, however deep and extensive our resources. Death is the last enemy.

What is interesting for us, however, is the way Paul relates these two powers, sin and death, how he sees death as the ally of sin, how indeed he understands the fearful power of death to be a consequence of sin. 'Sin entered into the world and through sin, death - and so death came to all, in that all sinned' (Rom. 5.12); 'sin

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reigned in death' (5.20); 'the wages of sin is death' (6.23); 'sin deceived me and ... killed me' (7.11); 'the sting of death is sin' (1 Cor. 15.56).

The point seems to be that the fearfulness of death is a direct consequence of the power of sin. It is the life turned in upon itself, the life that focuses meaning and significance in itself, which regards death as failure and defeat. Since flesh cannot transcend this world, the success of sin in turning bodyliness into fleshliness finds its triumph in death; for death is the final destruction of all flesh and therefore of all life lived on the level of the flesh. Sin gives death

its sting simply because for the self-indulgence and pride which sin provoked death is the final, inescapable confrontation with harsh reality.

In short, Paul talks a fair amount about principalities and powers without shedding much light on what he thought these were. Consequently his assurance of Christ's triumph over these powers is difficult to unpack and difficult to translate into terms more meaningful to today. But when he does go into detail, the powers he speaks of are two in particular, sin and death. And these are powers which do not need very much translating since they speak of realities all too familiar for the 20th century individual and society. At this point Paul is dealing with fundamental features of human existence, as relevant today as at all times. His gospel of a power that is stronger than the power of sin, a power that outlasts the power of death is one therefore which calls for fresh attention today.

3 Paul's sense of inner contradiction

A third aspect of Paul's theology worth a brief exploration ties in to the previous two. We have already alluded to Paul's description of the devastating interaction of the power of sin with the weakness of the flesh, particularly in Rom. 7.5 – 'while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions... were at work in our members to bear

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fruit for death'. What calls for attention now is the fact that for Paul this frightening interaction is also present in the experience of the person of good will. One of the most poignant passages in all of Paul's letters is where he describes in vivid, first person terms the resulting sense of inner contradiction - in the second half of Romans 7.

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am fleshy, sold under sin. For I do not know what I do. For that which I commit is not what I want; but what I hate, I do.... For I know that there dwells in me, that is, in my flesh, no good thing; for the willing lies ready to hand, but not the doing of what is admirable. For I fail to do good as I wish, but evil which I do not wish is what I commit.... For I rejoice in the law of God, so far as the inner man is concerned, but I see another law in my constituent parts at war with the law of my mind, and making me prisoner to the law of sin which is in my constituent parts. Wretched man am I! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? (7.14-24).

Particularly poignant here is Paul's sense that the contradiction reaches to the very heart of his own self-understanding. The 'I' itself is split: it is what T want to do that T, the same T, fail to do; it is what 'I' hate that 'I', the same 'I', go on to commit. Paul, speaking in first person terms, finds himself the battleground of warring impulses, confesses that he himself belongs to both camps, a traitor to himself twice over. 'Wretched man' indeed.

Such a sense of inner contradiction and resulting frustration is hardly distinctive of Paul, of course, though few if any achieve the same intensity of existential anguish. His near contemporaries, Epictetus and Ovid, for example, both attest a similar bewilderment at human inability to follow what is applauded as good and to avoid what is denigrated as bad. 'What he wishes he does not do, and what he does not wish he does', says Epictetus (2.26.4). 'I see the

better and approve it, but I follow the worse', confesses Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 7.20-21). But examples like these are simply

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further illustration of what no one would dispute anyway: that a sense of inner contradiction, of spirit willing (or unwilling) but flesh weak, is an experience common to humankind wherever there is any aspiration after values and goals higher than those, merely of the flesh.

Paul's anthropological insights already discussed in the first two sections also shed light here. For one thing, it follows from Paul's understanding of the human condition that such an experience of inner contradiction is simply and inevitably a consequence of that all too human condition, a consequence, that is to say, of the same body/flesh dichotomy. If Paul is right, the human species is body, created for and as such capable of the highest relationships. But it is also flesh, wholly capable of living solely on the level of its merely human appetites and instincts, at the level simply of the brute beast. There is, therefore, bound to be a tension in human living - the body always tending to succumb to flesh, higher aspirations always being frustrated in greater or less degree by mere sensuality. It is precisely that feature, of being dominated and enslaved through a form of human weakness, which is what makes it all not merely frustrating but also embarrassing for those who cherish a higher ideal of their humanity - and which of us does not acknowledge, at least in our innermost hearts, at least in moments of more honest self-awareness, some such frustration and such embarrassment?

It also follows from what was said above that this experience of inner contradiction is a consequence of the domination not only of sin but also of death. That is to say, it is a condition of human experience which cannot be escaped till death has done its worst, till 'the body of death' has died. Which is also to say that it is not simply the experience of the individual as individual. Rather it is the shared experience of a whole cosmos 'subjected' as Paul says 'to futility' (Rom. 8.20), or as we might say today, subjected to entropy. In other terms, it is the experience of transitoriness, of a life of seeming significance and influence forgotten within a few

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weeks or months, the experience captured so unforgettably by Shakespeare:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

An important corollary follows at once for the religious person, the Christian included. For if Paul is right, then there is no escape from this experience of inner contradiction so long as life in this body lasts - not this side of death anyway. The religion which promises resolution to or escape from such frustration is self-deluding. In Paul's book, however, religion is not a panacea, faith provides no easy solution to frustration of high aspiration, belief in Christ is no doorway to a primrose path of untrammelled days and dreamless nights.

Of course, it would be an enticing gospel to be able to proclaim: accept this message, follow this practice and the experience of anguished impotence, of the good ineffectually aspired to and the evil ineffectually resisted will be yours. And in the history of religion many have indeed been beguiled by such a gospel - some through ascetic practices, others through mystical experiences, others again through a second blessing which, or so it may be claimed, moves one on to a higher plane, free from the debilitating weakness of the flesh, liberated once and for all from the power of sin. But it is all fanciful, a pipe dream, doomed to crushing and sometimes humiliating rebuttal. Paul for today warns us against just such a flight from reality with a sober and sobering realism. He himself, who might have defined the essence of his religion in terms of mystical revelations, such as the one which transported him to the third heaven, learned instead from his experience of the 'thorn in the flesh' that God's grace reaches its fullest and most powerful expression in his all too human weakness (2 Cor. 12.1-10).

What difference then did Paul think his gospel made? What difference did the coming of the Spirit of God into a human life make? No easy or immediate solution to the experience of inner contradiction, as we have seen. On the contrary, in Paul's understanding, the effect of the Spirit in a believer's life was to intensify the inward conflict rather than to end it. He expresses this conviction very clearly in another of his writings when he urges his readers to 'walk by the Spirit, and not to gratify the desires of the flesh', and continues:

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would (Gal. 5.16-17).

In short, an experience of inner warfare between flesh and Spirit is itself a feature of the experience of Christian discipleship.

This in turn points up two pastoral corollaries - and in expounding Paul's theology for today pastoral corollaries can hardly be avoided. One is that a continuing sense of inner contradiction should be no cause of despair for the one who believes in Paul's gospel. A cause of frustration, yes; but of despair, no! For in fact the inner contradiction is itself a sign of hope. Where there is desire for better things, aspiration to do what God wills, there is life; without such desire and aspiration there would be no sign of life. The presence of that tension, not its absence, is the sign of spiritual vitality. Indeed, even defeat and failure in the warfare between flesh and Spirit need not be a cause for despair, so long as it is experienced as defeat and failure. In Pauline terms, the Spirit is absent when we stop fighting, not when we lose.

Here again, then, Paul has much of relevance to say for today. His sober realism prevents religion from raising false hopes. His honesty ensures that his gospel can speak to human experience of every age. And his confidence in the power of God's Spirit to

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win out in the long haul of life, over the power of sin and death and the weakness of the flesh, is a ground of firm hope for those who seek to live by his gospel.

4. Paul's sense of the church's corporate identity

There is one further extension of Paul's anthropological emphases which we should not ignore. For Paul does not confine his 'body language' to individuals – 'Remember that your body is a temple of the Holy spirit within you' (1 Cor. 6.19), and so on. He, of course, also speaks of the body of Christ in corporate terms.

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Rom. 12.4-5).

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... For the body does not consist of one member, but of many ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor. 12.12-14, 27).

It is important to remember that in these passages Paul is addressing individual congregations, in Rome and Corinth, and that it is these congregations which he describes as 'the body of Christ'. Just as, in the same way, he always speaks of individual churches - the churches of Judea, or of Galatia, or of Asia (1 Cor. 16.1, 19; Gal. 1.2, 22; 1 Thess. 2.14), the church in Corinth, the church of the Thessalonians (1 Cor. 1.2; 1 Thess 1.1), the church in the house of Prisca and Aquila or in the house of Nympha (Rom. 16.5; 1 Cor. 16.19; Col. 4.15), and so on. So far as we can tell, Paul had no concept of a universal 'church' as such. 'Church' referring to the church universal first appears in the Pauline letters in Ephesians, which most scholars regard as written by one of his disciples. So too, when Paul speaks of the body of Christ he was evidently not

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thinking of a kind of cosmic body, of which the church in Corinth was an arm, and the churches in Rome a leg and toes, as it were. When he says to the Corinthians, 'You are the body of Christ and individually members of it', he means, you Corinthian believers are the body of Christ in Corinth. By extension, each church in each place is the body of Christ in that place, each church in each district is the body of Christ in that district.

There are a number of interesting theological consequences which follow even from this basic insight, not least for those with ecumenical concerns. And even more if we were to take up the significance of the the use of the human body as a model for a congregation's or community's corporate identity. For example, the body metaphor as indicating the mutual interdependence of the individual members on the whole and of the whole upon each individual member. Unity not as threatened by the diversity of membership and function, but precisely as consisting in that diversity - 'all the members of the body, (precisely as) being many, constitute the body as one' (1 Cor. 12.12 paraphrased). The church as body, not just as a political or social entity, but fundamentally as the body of Christ. Or again, Paul's identification of the functions of each organ or part of the body of Christ with different gifts of ministry, each member having his or her ministry to exercise for the good of the whole. His concept of all such ministry in service of the gospel or of the church as having a priestly character. And so on.

But here, where we are limiting ourselves to the implications of Paul's anthropology, a different, though admittedly more speculative line of exposition may perhaps be appropriate. My suggestion is that the theology Paul expresses regarding the individual Christian's bodily existence can be extended quite properly to the Christians' corporate existence, that is, to the church's bodily existence. What does Paul's theology of body and flesh, of sin and death, of the continuing Christian experience of inner contradiction say about the body of Christ?

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For one thing it would mean that the church's corporate existence should be recognized as a necessary feature of its existence in this world. If at the individual level, body is not to be confused with flesh, and physicality is not to be disparaged as something essentially negative, then Christians as a group need to recognize the necessity for corporate structures, that coming together and functioning corporately as church is itself good and desirable and not a falling short of some ideal of spirituality.

At the same time, it would mean recognizing that the body of the present is not the same as the resurrection body. That is to say, as the individual's natural body needs to be redeemed and transformed in order to become the resurrection body, so the church's corporate existence needs to be redeemed and renewed. Paul's theology affirms what our own experience tells us all too plainly anyway, that the church is not a perfect corporate body; on the contrary, it shares in creation's subjection to decay and corruption. What Paul says of the Christian's bodily existence – that 'our outer humanity is wasting away, yet day by day we are being inwardly renewed' (2 Cor. 4.16) - can be said also of the body of Christ. In any healthy body there has to be a dying away, a sloughing off of dead cells and tissues, in order that new cells might appear, in order that organs might be renewed, in order for life to flourish. How much more must the life of the church be a process of dying as well as of life, of old organisations and traditions whose function is at an end giving way to the cells of new and more vigorous life. According to Paul, without the process of wasting away, the hope of final transformation (glorification Paul calls it) will never be realized.

Moreover the power of sin can affect the body corporate as well as batten on the weakness of individual flesh. As the power of sin can so easily corrupt human bodiliness into human fleshliness, so the church can easily allow its corporate existence to become the playground for the passions of the flesh. Where

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desire to serve becomes transformed by easy stages into lust for power and privilege. Or where boasting in God becomes a frightened attempt to preserve national, or denominational or traditional distinctiveness as though that were the matter of first importance. Paul's warning to the Roman Christians is just as appropriate to the corporate life of the church: 'if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are God's children' (Rom. 8.13-14).

The other point of application which follows from our earlier explorations into Paul's anthropology relates to the sense of inner contradiction about which Paul wrote so poignantly. Here again we may simply note the parallel. As the individual believer should expect the sense of inner contradiction to be heightened rather than resolved by the experience of faith, so the church corporate should not be regarded as a means of escape from such inner turmoil and frustration. On the contrary, such inner contradiction in this case also can be a sign of life and hope. The frustration with church structures so common among Christians today is only to be expected on Paul's scheme of things. The frustration at repeated failure in ecumenical rapprochement is itself a sign of the slow spiritual transformation of a corporate inner life even while the outward framework is in decay. Or to put the same point from another angle, the friction between body of Christ and body politic could not be other than it is.

In other words, such frustrations of the church are by no means a cause for despair. Rather it is the church which is wholly at ease in its existence as part of the present world which should be alarmed. It is the church which has no nagging doubts, no cries of frustration in its corporate existence within society, which bears the marks of death without the signs of inward renewal. Whereas if Paul is right, and if Paul is for today on this subject as well, the body of Christ in this world will always know dissatisfaction, failure, inadequacy, frustration. For 'if we are children, then heirs,

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heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him' (Rom. 8.17). In short, the church which does not groan with creation in its bondage to decay and sense of futility is not the church of the Spirit (Rom. 8.20-23), is not after all the body of Christ.

Conclusion

it will be evident, then, that I continue to think that the Paul who wrote his letters nearly nineteen-and-a-half centuries ago, and whose theology has been of such fundamental significance in shaping Christian thought, still speaks with some force to the very different circumstances of today, or at least to those seeking to understand themselves and their world, including Christians. There are, of course, large tracts of Paul's thought and teaching which I have not attempted to cover; what we have dealt with today I can offer only as a kind of sample. It is also possible that some may think the enterprise as a whole has been wrong-headed or pursued at too superficial a level; I am happy to engage in further discussion on such issues. On the other hand, it should occasion no surprise that the lecture has at times verged on the sermonic and even evangelistic. For Paul's theology is through and through gospel, and Paul the theologian is also Paul the apostle and pastor. An attempt to let Paul speak across the centuries could hardly fail to have such features, or at best would have reduced the enterprise to a clinical dissection of an interesting cadaver.

In sum, the Paul whose mouthpiece I have attempted all inadequately to be today, is one whose understanding of the human person contains insights the rediscovery of which could help Christianity surmount its present crisis regarding human physicality and sexuality, whose understanding of cosmic realities helps bring into sharper focus the powers which continue to

oppress human existence and points to an answer to them, whose sense of inner contradiction resonates with the all too human

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experience of high aspirations constantly frustrated and provides strong pastoral encouragement to those who might in consequence be thrown into despair, and whose sense of the church's corporate identity can provide not a few powerful lessons for the body of Christ today. This is a Paul I am happy to speak for, with his gospel of sober realism suffused with confident hope. This is a Paul for Today.

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