

Christ is the Answer, but What is the Question?

Some Recent Writing on Paul.

In the present and in an imminent issue we publish two important articles on the theology of Romans. This one, by **Dr John Proctor** of Westminster College, Cambridge, offers a way of reading the epistle *as a whole*, and makes some telling and timely applications.

This article aims to summarise, pointedly and concisely, some of the significant academic writing on Pauline theology of the last decade or so. It does not attempt to focus a discussion on particular areas of controversy although the four scholars surveyed certainly do not see eye to eye at all points. The aim is rather to be descriptive of the arguments and conclusions, and then to seek to apply these to the life of the Church. For insofar as these authors have heard Paul correctly, they have guidance to give us concerning our own Christian thinking and practice. Four specific applications are drawn out in the concluding section of the article.

A. Protestant Reading of Paul

At the outset, it will be useful to set down a few of the assumptions and assertions commonly made in Protestant reading of St Paul, and in particular of the Epistle to the Romans.

1. Romans is the plainest and most thorough exposition of Paul's theological system available to us. It is a deliberate and ordered account of his theological views, and allows us to perceive how his mind worked theologically. Some readers go further, and argue that his theology actually developed in the order in which it is now available to us in Romans; he perceived the universality of human sin (Ch. 1), and the impartiality of divine judgment (Ch. 2), before he understood about the atoning blood of Christ (Ch. 3), and so on.

2. At his conversion, Paul had emerged from a background of Jewish legalism, in which salvation was attained by due performance of the works of the law. This was the character of Judaism in that period. And Paul's writings reveal his wholehearted repudiation of this legalistic religion, notably in Romans 7.

3. The primary message of Romans is justification through faith. We are confronted with the human plight, universal guilt in the face of divine judgment, in the early chapters. Then we hear of God's saving provision through the sacrifice of Christ, and of faith as the means by which this salvation may be grasped, in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapters 5 to 8 spell out the consequences of being justified, as a guiltless relationship with God (5), new life in Christ and freedom from the power of sin (6), liberation from the crippling legalism Paul had known so well (7), and, in glorious climax, the life of the Spirit, leading on to absolute eternal security (8).

We have not always addressed the exegesis of Romans 9 to 11 with the same energy we have applied to the first half of the Epistle. Some sceptics have seen these three chapters as little more than sentiment – despite his good Christian theology, Paul is still quite unable to shake the Jewish blood out of his veins.

Able scholars have labelled this portion of the argument as a gigantic parenthesis. And many preachers will have found comparatively little here to meet the concerns and needs of their exclusively Gentile congregations. For a variety of reasons, we have almost ignored this section. The 'therefore' in 12.1 has been read as picking up an argument that ended at 8.39. And, perhaps not surprisingly after our sidelining of three chapters, we have not very readily seen a coherence about the whole Epistle. Chapters 12 to 16 have sometimes been handled as if they were a miscellany of ethical specifics and personalia, and Romans has, in effect, been truncated at its mid-point. Protestantism, which owes its existence to the message it has seen in Romans 1 to 8, has done comparatively little with Romans 9 to 16.

4. We have tended sometimes to speak of the salvation described in Romans as a very individual thing. Being lost, getting saved, and living out that salvation have been perceived as very personal issues, without any strong sense of a communal frame of reference within which the individual experience belongs.

B. Sanders and Soteriology

Some of the points noted above have been sharply and persuasively challenged by the work of E. P. Sanders. With two books, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), and *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, (1983), he has stimulated discussion among Pauline scholars, and influenced the opinions of many. His more important claims may be outlined as follows:–

1. Judaism was not legalistic. Sanders reviews at great length the theological outlook reflected in a variety of Jewish writings. Rabbinic material, apocalyptic works, and the Qumran scrolls all get substantial treatment. And Sanders finds, as the fundamental structure of Palestinian Judaism in the first century, what he calls 'Covenantal nomism'. The meaning of this term is well explained by a quotation (*PPJ*, p.180):

The overall pattern of Rabbinic religion as it applied to the Israelites . . . is this: God has chosen Israel and Israel has accepted the election . . . As long as he (the Israelite) maintains his desire to stay in the covenant, he has a share in God's covenantal promises, including life in the world to come. The intention and effort to be obedient constitute the condition for remaining in the covenant, but they do not earn it.

That is to say, Torah is a response to covenant grace, a practical means of living within that grace, of signifying, acknowledging and maintaining one's position within the covenant, but not a means of earning or attaining such a position, for that position has already been freely and graciously given by God.

2. Paul saw the solution to the human plight before he analysed the plight itself. He did not begin with the questions confronted

in Romans 1.18–3.20. His first Christian perception was that God had provided a Saviour, Jesus Christ. God had acted savingly in Christ, and this salvation was meant for all, Jew and Gentile. And he, Paul, had been sent with a special apostleship, to go to the Gentiles. The main theme of his gospel would be the saving action of God in Jesus Christ, and how his hearers might be involved in that action. Only after grasping all this, did it occur to him to enquire why such salvation might have been necessary, and what was the plight from which people needed to be saved.

3. In Paul's exposition of his gospel two kinds of soteriological language are used: the juristic; and the participatory. The juristic terminology is centred on an understanding of the cross as 'Christ died for our sins'. Terms such as condemnation, expiation, and justification figure in the exposition. The background plight from which this salvation rescues is one of sin as transgression, an act that leads to guilt and requires atonement.

By contrast, in the participatory framework the need is not atonement *for* sin, but release *from* it; here sin is a power, another lordship alternative to that of Christ. And salvation is variously described as being in Christ, dying and rising with Christ, living in the Spirit – all these being 'participatory' sorts of description.

Sanders argues that the real heartbeat of Pauline theology lies in the second set of ideas. The Christian is united with Christ, shares in the life of Christ, dies with Christ to the power of sin, rises with Christ to new life and looks forward to the prospect of final resurrection in Christ. Here is the real emphasis. The first, juristic set of ideas represents the pre-Pauline 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor. 15.3); and while Paul does not hesitate to repeat this formula, this way of looking at things is not fully worked out in his writing – for example he has no word for 'guilt'. Within the structures of Pauline thought these juristic ideas are only servant, and ultimately subordinate, to the central, participatory thrust of his theology.

4. Paul worked backwards from his initial insights, in formulating his theological argument, something like this. If God has provided a Saviour for all, then all must need saving. And they must need saving from something, some prior plight must be involved. If the saved are to be brought under the lordship of Christ, then they must be under some other lordship at the moment, the dominion of someone or something else. And that master must be sin. So Romans 1.18–3.20 represents, not an empirical conclusion based on Paul's observation of the world, but the results of a backwards-moving process of theological reasoning. Everyone must be shown to be subject to sin, in order that it may be possible to explain why Jesus is Saviour for all. Within the letter to the Romans juristic ideas and language are used, in relation to the cross; but the climax of the argument, and characterisation of the Christian life, is in Romans 6 and 8, as participation in the life of Christ. Here is the real Pauline emphasis.

Hence the title of the article. According to Sanders, Paul realised first that Christ was the answer. And then he had to work out what the question had been. His theology, as Romans expounds it, is the result of: (a) a basic and central conviction that he himself was involved in the saving action of God, in Christ, and was called to summon others to share that participation; (b) a theological logic that posed the human plight as the inverse of what he already saw the solution to be; and (c) a using of the pre-Pauline 'Christ for us' as an intermediate and servant step in the argument.

5. Now we look at how Paul saw the Jewish law. Since Christ is the Saviour of all, Jew and Gentile, the law cannot be a means of conferring salvation. For salvation must be available to Gentiles on the same ground as to Jews. And the law is an emblem and expression of Jewish election and Jewish exclusivism; it is not universal, it does not involve the Gentiles. Nor does it involve Christ; it is part of a scheme of religion (covenantal nomism) in which Christ has no place. Hence again Paul is arguing backwards from the solution. His soteriology is universal (for the Gentiles, too) and exclusive (only through Christ). On both these counts the law fails to satisfy him. For these two reasons the law is dethroned, and it is these that lead Paul to argue to a negative position on the law. He is working back from his soteriological insights. He does not attack the law as legalistic; it was not legalistic, and Paul knew that. He attacks it as the emblem of a nationalistic salvation that bypasses Jesus Christ.

Sanders' work has certainly stirred up the dust of controversy in Pauline studies. And a decade after his earlier book appeared that dust shows no immediate sign of settling; his work has been widely influential, and has occasioned much, and varied, reaction. We go on to consider three authors who approach Paul rather differently. Sanders has seen soteriology as Paul's basic insight, and moved out from there to consider Paul's writing on the human plight, the role of the law, and the church's relation to Israel. By contrast, N. T. Wright structures his analysis of Paul's thinking around Christology, the recognition of Jesus as Israel's Messiah; J. C. Beker regards an apocalyptic eschatology as the key to understanding Paul; and S. Kim looks at the extent to which Paul's theological thought may have arisen from his conversion experience. We look at Kim next.

C. Kim and Paul's Conversion

In a long and closely argued work, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (1981), Kim seeks to take seriously Paul's own insistence that he received his gospel through 'a revelation of Jesus Christ' (Gal. 1.12) on the road to Damascus.

1. In Paul's vision of Jesus Christ came his Christology, his understanding of Jesus as risen and ascended Lord, ready to return to earth in judgment and redemption. At Damascus came the insight into Christ's Person that led Paul to write later of Christ as the image of God, the one who reflects God's glory, the new Adam, and so the archetype of a new humanity. From then on Paul sought and proclaimed salvation as something to be found within the sphere of Christ's Lordship. And the Damascus revelation was for Paul a preview of the final, glorious, and triumphant appearance of Christ, when salvation would be consummated.

2. The law was superseded as the medium of God's salvation and the basis of righteousness. Paul had been zealous for Torah, and in his zeal had persecuted the followers of a crucified carpenter. Such a man the law cursed, for the very fact of his having hung on a tree. And the followers of this Jesus seemed to be attacking the validity of the law in their preaching and practice. Paul perceived, even before his conversion, a sharp antithesis between discipleship of Jesus and the religion of Torah. And so the Damascus experience, revealing the cursed one to be God's Son and Israel's Christ, turned Paul right around. His law-focussed zeal was shown to be misdirected; and now his mind and his zeal were massively redirected. His view of the value and validity of Torah was radically transformed. It had cursed Jesus, and had been wrong. Christians had criticised the law in the name of Jesus; and Jesus was now revealed as Lord. Never again could the

law be central for Paul. Later he would ask, 'Why then did God give the law?' and his answer would be complex and, in part, positive. But as medium of salvation, as means of approach to God, it was radically and utterly replaced, by Jesus Christ.

3. Justification, being right with God, must then centre on Christ. The curse verdict borne by Jesus was borne by him as representative and substitute for others. And by faith – acceptance of this message – the Christian is identified with, united with, and incorporated into, Christ, so experiencing the benefits of his saving work and finding justification. This faith-union with Christ is strikingly demonstrated and dramatised by Christian baptism. The two strands of salvation language – what Christ has done for us, and what we become in him – belong together. What he has done *for* us becomes ours, and we enter into it, by faith, through which a right relationship with God is mediated, and from which baptism should be inseparable.

4. Paul's ecclesiology, too, received much of its substance from the Damascus experience. Jesus had been perceived to be the Messiah of the new Israel, the Adam of the new humanity. New life, then, meant sharing his life, being in solidarity with him. For this reason Paul wrote of Christians as being 'in Christ'. Alongside this understanding, which we have traced from the vision, should be set the effect of hearing the voice, 'Saul, why do you persecute me?' Christ identifies himself with his Church. We are not very far away from the 'body of Christ' description.

Kim does not claim that all this was immediately apparent to Paul at Damascus. But he does suggest that these very substantial and central elements of Paul's theology represent a logical and proper outworking of what Paul saw there. The Damascus experience contained within it the seeds of Paul's understanding: of Christ as both substitute and representative; of faith in him as the means of entering his lordship and finding salvation; and of the Church as the community of those who belong, organically, to Christ.

5. More directly and forcefully revealed in the very Damascus event was Paul's own calling to carry the Christian gospel to the Gentiles. The universality of the gospel, its availability to Gentile as to Jew, might logically have followed from the displacement of the law. Yet here there seems to be a directness about the revelation. Paul's personal involvement in the spreading of the Christian message seems to have sprung from the actual experience, in a way that dramatically short-circuited any patient outworking of what might have been implied by the Damascus Christology. Paul was confronted, directly and forcefully, by the Christological vision and by his own missionary summons; the two belonged together, but neither Christology nor apostleship was he required to deduce from the other. God revealed his Son; and at the same time God called Paul to be a missionary. Paul saw; and he obeyed.

Certainly Paul's mature theology will reflect sustained meditation on his initial insights. He will have used the tradition of the pre-Pauline church as vehicle for expressing the content of his own Christian understanding – so far as he could. And his beliefs will have been tested and developed in his own missionary and pastoral experience. Yet these basic points – Christology; the displacement of the law; justification through faith; the Church's solidarity in Christ; and his own Gentile mission – may be traced back to the Damascus road. Paul tells us that there he received his gospel, and it seems possible to take this claim seriously. Such is Kim's case.

D. Beker and Apocalyptic

J. C. Beker has published two recent works on Paul. *Paul the Apostle* (1980) is a substantial and scholarly, though not impossibly technical, account of Paul's theological thought and writing. Then *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel* (1982) is a much slimmer volume, summarising some of the insights of the earlier book, and arguing for the relevance of Beker's reading of Paul to present-day theology.

1. Beker tells us that 'Paul's conversion experience is not the entrance to his thought' (PtA, p.10). In this his view is not so diametrically opposed to Kim's as first appears. He argues that Paul is not concerned with the experience as such, in an introverted and biographical way. Rather Paul stresses that to which the experience has led, his own call to the apostolate, as service to the world and involvement in the purpose of God. The experience is valuable for its function in, and Paul's absorption into, God's plan for the world.

2. For Beker, Paul is using the language and world-view of Jewish apocalyptic – he looks forward to the final, decisive and triumphant intervention of God in the world's affairs – as carrier, as vehicle of understanding, for the experience that has launched his own apostolate. This apocalyptic perspective and language was part of the outlook of his own Pharisaic religious past. What is new, for the Christian Paul, is the place of Jesus in this perception. By his conversion, Paul has come to see the death and resurrection of Christ as initiating a new era, as foretaste and beachhead of God's final saving victory.

The Christ-event is anticipation, and anticipatory fulfilment, of God's complete triumph, of his redemptive purpose for his whole creation. And Paul's apostolic call to evangelise the Gentiles is preparation for this triumph. He is the man of the hour, appointed to undertake God's mission in the last hours of world history, enlarging in this world the dominion of God's coming new world, preparing the world for the imminent dawn of God's glory. He is the apostle of the last days, whose ministry bridges the gap between the resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection of the dead. And, as Paul proclaims the gospel, the risen Christ is actually present in it.

3. Beker then seeks to understand Paul's writings by the twin concepts of coherence and contingency. The coherent centre of Paul's gospel is the final triumph of God, focussed in anticipation on Christ, and announced in Paul's own apostolate. That is the core. And then there is a marvellous flexibility, a contingency, about the targeting of that core insight to the varied pastoral needs of Paul's churches. Paul is certainly not handling a rigid body of religious dogma; but neither is he a complete opportunist. There is a coherent, and constant, core, which becomes incarnate, the abstract becomes concrete, in its varied contingent applications.

A coherent core, consisting of the coming triumph of God, anticipated by what God has done in Christ, with Paul himself having a key role in its preparation and contingent application of that rather abstract centre to the diverse and specific pastoral demands that confronted Paul: this is Beker's exposition of Paul's apocalyptic gospel.

E. Wright, Covenant and Christology

Beker expounds Paul as a forward-looking thinker, taking his place in God's worldwide plan of salvation, and pressing on towards God's final and complete victory. Wright illuminates the nature of the continuity Paul traces between present and past,

between the spreading of the Christian gospel in Paul's own day, and the past history of God's Old Testament people, Israel. He sees Paul, as Becker does, against a Jewish background, but regards a covenantal, rather than apocalyptic, perception as the most helpful for understanding Paul's Christian writing. Paul's primary insight was his recognition of the crucified and risen Jesus as Israel's Messiah; and this led to a radical reworking and reshaping of his ancient faith. Judaism was reconstituted by Christology.

1. The children of Abraham had been called by God to be the focus and channel of his saving work in the world. His covenant was with them, through them he would undo the consequences of Adam's fall. Yet Israel failed. And, as a result, Israel was no longer the vehicle of God's salvation, but was itself needing to be saved; and what Israel had been called to do would now be accomplished by one who himself represented Israel, the Messiah. The Christ-event, the coming, crucifixion and rising of Jesus, was then the focal point of God's work through Israel and of his covenant with Israel. In Jesus Christ, the representative Israelite, the ancient covenant was fulfilled, brought to its proper completion, and so faith in him was the fulfilment, for Israel, of the purpose of Torah.

2. And yet, just as he represented the ancient covenant community in his racial pedigree, so Jesus inaugurated, as risen Son of God and new Adam, the community of the new covenant, the new humanity. The old is continued as it is completed in the Messiah, and in him it becomes the new. He is the pivot of the whole saving history. Via the Messiah, with him as agent and vehicle of the process, all the privileges and responsibilities of historical Israel are transferred, passed over, to the new Messianic people that is the Christian church. It is those who have faith in him who receive the benefits of his saving work, who take their place as children of Abraham within the covenant of Israel's God. Israel is reconstituted, no longer defined according to the flesh, but in relation to the revealed Messiah, Jesus. And though there is continuity in this, it is not fundamentally a racial continuity. Jews are there – Paul was one himself – but not all Jews; and salvation is accessible to Gentiles too. And as Gentiles are brought in, Jesus is (what Israel was always meant to be) the channel of God's salvation to the world, the one in whom Adam's failure is redeemed.

There is thus a real continuity between old and new. Christendom has not repudiated its heritage in Israel. Even though Israel after the flesh, racial Israel, largely fails – at time of writing – to acknowledge its Messiah, Paul still rejoices to affirm that what God is doing in Israel's Christ is integrally related to what God has been doing in Israel for centuries past.

3. This exposition of Paul, giving prominence to the idea of covenant, enables Wright to draw together the ideas of justification and of participation in Christ. He understands justification against a forensic background, as the judge's *declaration* that the person before him is in the right, that he has gained the favourable verdict of the court. Within a religious setting this becomes God's declaration that the believer is in a proper standing within his covenant people, is in the right vis-a-vis the covenant, and stands within God's favour.

And, as the Messiah represents in himself the whole people of God, it is precisely those who belong within the covenant who may be described as being 'in Christ'. Justification and participation do not belong to quite separate modes of religious percep-

tion; they belong together, corresponding in different ways to one fundamental idea. The one who is within the covenant is thereby in solidarity, in union, with the Messiah – this is participation; and justification, too, is a covenantal term, God's declaration that the one who has faith in Jesus stands within the covenant, as a member of the Messianic community that is the new Israel.

F. Return to Romans

We may draw from the work of these writers, and in particular from Wright, some illumination as to the meaning and overall coherence of the letter to the Romans. It is not just about justification by faith. There is attention given to this theme in the early chapters, leading up to Ch. 4, where people of faith are argued to be the true children of Abraham; it is they whom God declares to be within his covenant. Within this exposition the pre-Pauline 'Christ died for our sins' tradition is used, a theme which had a primary (1 Cor. 15.3) place in Paul's own message. And, at the same time as faith is shown to be the ground of justification, the inadequacy of nationality as a delimiter of covenant privilege is exposed; God's favour does not depend on, or necessarily attach to, being Jewish.

Paul then goes on to describe the people of the Messiah as the new humanity, as Jesus is the new Adam. In Christ, his people inherit the true humanity that was racial Israel's longed-for glory. They have salvation, in them sin is being dealt with by grace, they live the life of the Spirit, they are God's children, and through them God's plan of cosmic redemption is being worked out. The conclusion to this section (Chapters 5–8) speaks emphatically of the assurance the new covenant people may have as they contemplate God's final judgment. God justifies now, and the final verdict will accord with the present one.

This raises acutely the question of racial Israel. If the privileges of God's election have been inherited by the new people of the Messiah, the Christians, what is to become of God's ancient people, the Jews? Have they been arbitrarily and irrevocably cast away? Not so, says Paul. They have fallen away from God, yet, through their fall, God is working redemptively among the Gentiles. And beyond their fall lie the possibility and hope of rising again. Paul continues to offer salvation to Jews; people of the old covenant may still come to a glorious destiny, as they find their proper relationship to Israel's Christ. Racial Israel may have stumbled in unbelief: but let none pronounce 'Ichabod' over the Jews; and let there be no anti-Semitism among Paul's readers. The gospel offer remains for Jew as well as Gentile; natural branches will be grafted back into the tree. This is the thrust of Romans 9–11.

Chapters 12–16 then make sense as the practical outworking of this theology. They address ethically the particular pastoral situation in Rome, affirming the Church's unity as one body in Christ, and urging all to sustain that unity in mutual honour and love. The 'therefore' of 12.1 rests more heavily than is sometimes realised on what immediately precedes it – for the relation of Jew and Gentile in the Messianic community, expounded theologically in 9–11, appears to be addressed pastorally in 12–14. Then the last section of the letter before the personal greetings speaks of Paul's forward-looking apostolic service, carrying the purposes of God forward into the future, spreading the news of Christ's work and calling Gentiles to come to Abraham's God, through faith in Israel's Christ.

There is justification through faith in Romans, and it should not

be pushed away to the sidelines. But there is a stronger unity about the Epistle as a whole than has sometimes been perceived. It is about the nature of God's new covenant people: justified, declared to belong, through their faith in Israel's Messiah; living the life of the new humanity in union with him; inheriting Israel's ancient privileges, yet holding the offer of salvation open to racial Israel as well as to Gentiles; living in the Christian unity and love that witness to God's grafting together of Jew and Gentile; and growing as the obedience of faith (1.5, 16.26) is brought about among the nations through the proclamation of Israel's Christ.

This tracing of the argument of Romans (and it is heavily, though not wholly, indebted to Wright's work) raises a variety of theological issues, one of which will be explored in the final paragraphs of this article. But also it reminds us, if reminder we need, that Romans 9–16 and not just Romans 1–8, belong in the canon of Holy Scripture.

G. Hearing Paul for Today

No theological author can expect to meet with universal and uncritical approval from his readers. But insofar as any writer clarifies our understanding of the Bible, we may properly consider what guidance that fresh understanding provides for our own Christian faith and practice. There is plenty of scope for reflection on what the four writers reviewed above have told us about Paul.

1. Covenantal Nomism

According to Sanders, Paul objected to the Jewish law, not because it was the instrument of a legalistic salvation, but because it was the emblem of a nationally limited salvation. It served as marker, as boundary definer, of an exclusive and excluding covenant community. And the very boundary it defined obscured other people's view of God, and presented salvation as something that could never reach beyond the law-observing community. Covenantal nomism allowed that grace got you into the covenant community; but the law kept you in. Law was the means by which you affirmed that you belonged.

Do we, readily and clearly, proclaim a religion that is grace from beginning to end? Or do we sometimes develop a Christian kind of covenantal nomism, with a series of rituals that allow us to affirm our belonging to Christ? Do we create visible barriers that appear to exclude all who do not conform, and so narrow other people's perception of God's grace? For example:

- when we worship, do we trust in the grace of God, or in our own regular worship, as that which sustains our status in God's family; and do we live in such a way that our next-door neighbour perceives what is the real object of our trust?
- how much of our ethics is lived as response to God's grace and commands, and how much as mere Christian conformity; for example, if we are teetotal, do we know why we are, or is it just that our Christian acquaintances are?
- how much of our activity, our reading matter, our jargon, our routine of meetings, is just Christian sub-culture, a cultural environment that allows us to perceive ourselves as people who belong to the divine in-crowd?
- how much of our life is the means by which we maintain our status within God's grace, the 'covenantal nomism' of Christianity, which clouds our view of the power and love of God, degenerates so quickly into legalism and makes it harder for

our neighbour to come to Christ? Was not this (at least a part of) what Paul objected to in the Judaism of his own day?

2. Religious Experience

Paul was profoundly affected by a particular religious experience, the Damascus road event. But for Paul the important thing was not the event in itself, but what it taught him about God, and the way in which it drew him to serve God in a new way. So both Kim and Beker, even though their angles of exposition differ considerably.

There is an element of risk in attaching a positive value to religious experience. For there is always something beyond our control about an experience of God, and something inaccessible and inscrutable to us about another person's claimed experience. Yet, for Paul, an experience he had not controlled, and which no-one else had really shared with him, supplied the mainspring of his whole later life.

So we should not denigrate experience as such. But, following Paul, we should value religious experience primarily for the theology it teaches and the Christian service it enables. We should be suspicious when a person endlessly narrates a now-distant past experience; we should rejoice when people plainly advance in their knowledge of God as a result of particular experiences. We should expect that alongside such advancing knowledge new spheres of service will open up. There is no place for the mere 'spiritual trip', the experience that passes, having taught no theology and leaving mind and heart unchanged.

And – as Paul shared his understanding of the gospel with the church at Jerusalem – we should encourage those whose faith has been transformed by experience to test their new insights, and seek to express their fresh faith, in relation to the historic understanding held by their brothers and sisters in Christ.

3. Future Hope

We may wonder about the prominence Beker thinks Paul claimed for himself, and question the suggestion that Paul's self-understanding rested on a chronologically very near perception of the Second Coming.

But Beker's work surely reminds us that the purposes of God are linear rather than circular, active and powerful, certainly not just drifting along. If we feel ourselves to be drifting through the motions of a routine ministry, it behoves us to recall God's active purposes, due to be drawn together conclusively in the final triumph of Christ, and to remember that our own ministry has a place in these. The Church is called to be going somewhere with God, not just keeping going.

4. Continuity

Wright draws our attention to the substantial continuity highlighted by Paul's writing, continuity between the Christian message of Paul's own day and the historical saving purposes of God. The new covenant was the completion of the old. God had not repudiated what he had done in the past. And even though many in racial Israel had, in Paul's view, turned aside from God's ways, Paul did not repudiate his own place in Israel. He believed that God had not abandoned the people in whom he had worked so long; they had stumbled and fallen, yet the gospel call was to them too, as the fulfilment of all their past. Paul wanted what God was doing in the present, among Jews and Gentiles, to be recognised as belonging to what God had done in the past among the Jews; it was grafted in and should be seen as such.

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It has been said that every schism is a consequence of the Church's neglect of an important truth. Perhaps a common feature in accounting for many schisms is neglect of this particular aspect of biblical teaching, of the continuity that runs through God's saving purposes.

We live in a time when many new churches are being formed, under the call to 'Restoration'. Those who lead these churches are accountable to God – as each of us must be – and I make no claim to judge the wisdom of what they are doing. But those of us who call ourselves Protestant, and especially those who (like me) inherit a Dissenting or Nonconformist tradition, will always be particularly susceptible to schism and secession, whether wisely or unwisely conceived. For there is built into our very identity, our picture of ourselves, the conviction that biblical Christianity will sometimes entail beginning again ecclesiastically, breaking out of the shell of our past in order to follow the Spirit. And, for this reason, those who invite Church members to consider secession in the name of being properly biblical, will find hearers in denominations such as ours.

It is no Christian's business to defend his own denomination without critical examination of what it is doing and how it is doing it. But we shall be better equipped to resist ill-judged secession and unhelpful schism, if we affirm more readily than we sometimes do our whole heritage – back to Abraham at least, not merely to Luther. To be properly biblical we may need to become a little better at church history, at affirming our continuity with the whole covenant purposes of God – through 4000 years, not just 400.

It is arguable, from reading of Paul's missionary activity, that schism is only an absolutely last resort. Paul did not leave the synagogues until he was physically pushed out. But even if we do not go so far as that in our understanding, let us still be careful to hear the whole Paul. The Paul of the Reformation writes of justification through faith; the Paul of nonconformity tells us much about the crown rights of the Redeemer, within and over the Church; but he is also the catholic Paul, reminding us of the continuity and unity in all God's saving purposes, past, present and future.

The future will surely bring differences within the Church, as the past has done. If these differences are not to lead to needless division, if we are to be equipped to sustain unity in the face of threatening and ill-advised fragmentation, we will do well to strengthen our acquaintance with the catholic Paul, and with the biblical, communal continuity of God's saving work.

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