

THE MISSIONARY PREACHING OF PAUL: A PROBLEM IN NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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A significant portion of our NT is dominated by Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. His epistles fill more than one-fourth of its pages. Moreover, Paul is the dominant figure in the Book of Acts. Although an immense amount of missionary activity was carried on by the apostles and the early Church in proclaiming the gospel in Syria, Arabia, India, Egypt and many other areas, only a small part of this vast missionary enterprise found a place in the NT. The title "Acts of the Apostles" is a misnomer because only two apostles—Peter and Paul—are principal characters. One can easily argue that the author included Peter primarily to demonstrate the legitimacy of Paul's apostolate to the Gentiles. The election of Matthias to replace Judas is an acknowledgement of the fact that Paul is not one of "the twelve." Yet the dramatic acts and experiences of the chief apostle, Peter, are matched one for one from the life of Paul and demonstrate that Paul is in no sense inferior. Nor is the mission to the Gentiles an innovation by Paul, since the first breakthrough was accomplished by Peter in response to divine revelation. It seems that an inordinate amount of space is devoted to Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, his imprisonment in Caesarea, and his journey to Rome. This suggests that the writer is more interested in Paul than in the expansion of Christianity. Acts is part two of the Gospel of Luke. If we add Luke-Acts to the Pauline epistles, we have accounted for more than one-half of the NT.

The extent of the influence of Paul on theological and Biblical studies is not fully disclosed by a statistical analysis of the NT documents. The Reformation has been termed a rediscovery of Paul, so that Paul can be called the apostle of Protestantism. Pauline theology has become normative. This I want to call into question.

I am sure that many would view the ascendancy of Pauline theology as an act of providence, but is it right that a small part of the early Christian movement has become definitive of the whole, and that a part of the canonical NT, admittedly a significantly large part, has been made authoritative in a way that has resulted in the neglect or suppression of a sizeable remainder? Is it right that the Gospel of Matthew and the catholic epistles—products of the Jewish-Christian segment of the Church—have been relegated to a position of secondary importance?

I do not mean to imply that I see a great variance in the theologies of the NT writers. The NT authors were a part of the same community of faith. In spite of differences in emphasis and vocabulary, they reflect the same basic doctrinal position. My thesis is this: Overconfidence

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in our ability to extract from Paul's epistles the main outlines of his theology and a false orientation to the development of theology in those epistles has led to a one-sided reconstruction of Paul's theology and to a misconception of Paul's relationship to the rest of the NT.

The approach to the theology of the NT that I want to challenge is exemplified by E. J. Carnell in his book, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*.¹ He presents five hermeneutical principles which, he contends, will guarantee Scripture its proper authority. It is the second and third of these that are most important for our present consideration.

Carnell's second principle is this: "The epistles interpret the gospels." In this way Paul is catapulted at once into a position of prominence and priority in the NT. Carnell bases his principle on Jesus' statement, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13a). From this passage Carnell concludes that full revelation is found only in the epistles. He points out a number of teachings in the gospels which, he feels, do not reflect the full import of Christian doctrine. The evangelists, however, write from a post-resurrection perspective. The most conservative dating of the gospels places their composition subsequent to many of the epistles. Moreover, redaction criticism has shown that the evangelists did more than simply preserve tradition. By the way they selected and arranged their material they presented an interpretation of Jesus' person and ministry. They formulated a theology that is intended for a post-resurrection audience. The gospels too are the product of this teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

I will return to this question later, but now I want to affirm that if the gospels are incomplete without the epistles, so also the epistles are incomplete without the gospels. And if it is true that the epistles interpret the gospels, it is even more true that the gospels provide the key to understanding the epistles. It is by no means an accident that the gospels are placed first in the NT.

Carnell's third principle is this: "The systematic passages interpret the incidental." I think the word "systematic" here reflects Carnell's own orderly mind-set and his desire to reduce the teachings of Scripture to a logical and orderly system. I am not convinced that any of the NT documents contain what can properly be called "systematic passages." There are, of course, passages that are intentionally didactic, passages in which the writer deals at length with some aspect of theology. Perhaps this is what Carnell means when he speaks of "systematic passages." But it is necessary to begin with and emphasize the subjects the authors deal with intentionally and let this form the structure for a full-orbed NT theology.² The incidental topics must then be subordinated to those topics that can be considered major from a proper appreciation of the author's purpose, and the incidental teachings (or

¹Philadelphia, 1959.

²Cf. R. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (New York, 1963) 117-120.

passages) must be interpreted in the light of the passages that are self-consciously didactic.

We get to the heart of the matter when we see what Carnell does with his third principle, for he says that

there are only two places in Scripture where justification is treated in a systematic, didactic form. These are Romans and Galatians. This does not mean that justification is concealed elsewhere, for God's Word is one. Abraham was justified by faith, even as we are. It only means that justification is *implied* in some places, while in others it is *systematically developed*. . . . John develops the plan of salvation; so does the book of Hebrews. But only Romans and Galatians make a didactic effort to connect the blessings of the covenant with the gift of God's Son. *Therefore, if the church teaches anything that offends the system of Romans and Galatians, it is cultic.*³

With one masterful stroke he thus concentrates the authority of the NT in Romans and Galatians and uses this in support of his conviction that justification is the focal doctrine in Paul's theology. The extent to which he is willing to carry the application of this principle is indicated by a further statement:

If the modes of baptism had any connection with the Abrahamic covenant, Paul would have reviewed this in Romans and Galatians. The same can be said about the Lutheran view of the real presence, the Anglican view of succession, and the Methodist view of subjective holiness.⁴

Of course, Carnell is not alone in subordinating all of the NT to Paul or in epitomizing Paul's theology with the phrase "justification by faith." This use of Romans as a standard for determining the shape of Paul's theology is defended with the assertion that it is the only systematic presentation of Paul's gospel. The contents of this epistle, it is said, were not occasioned by the circumstances of the Church at Rome. Paul wrote to introduce himself and gave the main outline of his gospel in order to enlist support for his mission to Spain.

This view is now being challenged from a number of directions. For example, Paul Minear writes:

It is my view that in their studies of the epistle many scholars have chosen wrong options, followed wrong roads and have, as a consequence, rendered Paul's meaning less accessible than it should be. To these false turnings scholars have been led by faulty conceptions of the situation in Rome, of the resulting reactions of the apostle, and thus the whole character of his letter. For example . . . it is customary to view the epistle as a treatise in systematic or dogmatic theology, moving from one doctrinal theme to another. I think it reflects a primary concern with pastoral problems and therefore presents a continuous argument designed to meet specific situations in Rome. Many readers suppose that the message is quite independent of the occasion; in principle the letter might have been sent anywhere without altering the ideas. I think Paul would have found

³Carnell, *Case*, pp. 58-59.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 59.

such an attitude inconceivable. Again it is customary to suppose that the most significant passages are to be found in the early chapters. Along with Willi Marxsen, I am convinced that 'the peculiar feature of this letter is that its main message comes at the end.' Because Paul's objectives are made clear at the end, earlier paragraphs are oriented towards the realization of those objectives.⁵

Certainly Paul was introducing himself to the Church at Rome in preparation for missionary activity in Spain. Moreover, some may wish to argue that the ecclesiastical situation addressed by the letter was not peculiar to Rome, for it involved problems Paul encountered wherever he preached the gospel in the Gentile world. But these things, if true, would not alter my basic assertion that the Epistle to the Romans is not a full and systematic presentation of Paul's theology.

Another problem with considering Romans a systematic treatment of Paul's message is the strange combination of topics that are included as well as those that are omitted. The assumption that the topics treated in Romans are those that are distinctively Pauline cannot account for the neglect of such important matters as the Lord's supper and the many aspects of eschatology. The letter must be seen as a response to specific problems in a specific situation, in order to make understandable the inclusion of the lengthy discussion in chaps. 9-11 and the rather strange selection of topics in chaps. 12-15.

William Lane writes,

Romans has always had a special attraction for systematic theologians, who have produced some of the most distinguished commentaries on the epistle. Their work has fostered the widespread opinion that Romans is essentially a theological treatise in which Paul sets forth his system of Christian doctrine.

It is true that Romans is laden with theological insights. But to the degree that the missionary character of the letter is obscured, it is false to hold that Romans is primarily a theological document. It is necessary to reiterate that Paul was always a task theologian who expressed theological truth precisely in the concrete context provided by his mission to the Gentiles.⁶

While recognizing the importance of the message of salvation in Romans—the message of righteousness or justification by faith—Lane asserts:

The context in which Paul introduces the concept of the righteousness of God is the most striking feature of his exposition. Every passage in which Paul speaks of righteousness occurs within a larger context discussing the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the one church of Christ. In each instance they illustrate the thoroughly missionary character of Romans. Paul's teaching on justification by faith is best understood as the answer to a persistent question: How is it possible for the Jew and the Gentile to stand on the same level of advantage before God? ⁷

⁵P. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith* (Chicago, 1971) ix-x.

⁶G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York, 1969) 192.

⁷Ibid., p. 194.

Paul was the great apostle to the Gentiles. This calling was his reason for existence. The relationship of Jew and Gentile to the gospel and to each other is the dominant concern of a large part of his extant writings and of his missionary activity. The massive effort that he put into the collection for the poor of Jerusalem and his willingness to die in the process of delivering it indicate the importance he placed on the unity of Jew and Gentile in one Church. This unity is the great theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians. And the Jew-Gentile question, *not* justification by faith, is the major theme in Romans.

Paul was engaged in the final stages of the collection for the poor of Jerusalem when he wrote to the Christians in Rome. He justifies his bold interference in their affairs on the basis of his apostleship to the Gentiles and his concern that the Gentile Church be in readiness to be presented to God. "To the Jew first and also to the Greek" is not a strange intrusion into the discussion; it is the basic theme.

The opening section of Romans (1:18-3:31) demonstrates that the law, rather than giving the Jew a position of advantage over against the Gentile, really brings him under greater responsibility. "Both Jew and Pagan sinned and forfeited God's glory, and both are justified through the free gift of his grace by being redeemed in Christ Jesus" (3:23-24 *JB*). Chapter four argues that the blessings promised Abraham were granted in response to faith and not because of the Jewish distinctives of law and circumcision. Chapter five affirms that as the consequences of sin affected the whole human race, even more so the blessings of salvation in Christ extend to all mankind. Chaps. 6-8 defend this doctrine against the charge of antinomianism by showing that the indwelling Spirit produces practical righteousness in the life of the believer, something the Jewish law was unable to do. Chaps. 9-11 show that the calling out by faith of a people of God composed of Jews and Gentiles is in fulfillment of God's sovereign plan and of his purpose to extend his saving power as widely as possible. Chaps. 14-15, the major portion of the ethical section, deal with tensions in the Church between Jews and Gentiles. Finally, Paul declares his concern for the Gentile Christians in Rome for whom he is responsible before God as the apostle to the Gentiles.

Romans cannot be taken as the definitive statement of Paul's theology. It is unreasonable for Carnell to assume that all important doctrinal teaching has found its way into Romans and Galatians, so that whatever has been omitted may be viewed as unrelated to the essential message of salvation.

On the contrary, the specific content of most if not all of Paul's epistles has been determined by the circumstances prevailing in the particular churches to which he wrote. As someone has suggested, if individual resurrection had not been a problem in Corinth we would not have the important teaching of 1 Corinthians 15.

The traditional position that views justification by faith as the major theme of Romans may perhaps be explained in terms of the preoccupation of Bible study with contemporary relevance in every age. What relevance does the Jew-Gentile question have for the present genera-

tion? The theme Paul had in mind for his day is not necessarily one that has immediately recognizable relevance for ours. For Paul the big issue was the incorporation of Jew and Gentile in one Church. Justification by faith is the doctrinal foundation of that unity. With the possible exception of Ephesians, every one of Paul's letters was written in response to a specific situation, and Paul did not have adequate opportunity in any of them to present his theology in full.

Olaf Moe in the second volume of his work on Paul calls attention to another error involved in any attempt to reconstruct Paul's theology from the epistles alone. The epistles represent Paul's teaching to congregations of believers and do not reveal Paul's teaching to the unevangelized.

We can illustrate this difference of approach from the Book of Acts. Summaries of Paul's missionary preaching are given in chaps. 13, 14 and 17. Though C. H. Dodd was able to isolate elements of the primitive kerygma in Paul's epistles,⁸ it is nevertheless true that Paul's preaching in Antioch bears more similarities to the other evangelistic speeches in Acts and to the general outline of Mark than it does to his epistles. On the other hand, the content of Paul's address to the elders of the Church at Ephesus (Acts 20) is very similar to Paul's epistles. Moe identifies Paul's missionary message as Paul's gospel.

Einar Molland has done a thorough study of the use of the words *euangelion* and *euangelizesthai* by Paul.⁹ He finds a range of meaning in their usage: *Euangelion* may refer to Christianity, to the act of proclamation, or to that which is proclaimed. As for the missionary message that Paul preached, Molland gleans the following essential elements from the epistles: Christ's pre-existence, his incarnation, his messianic office, his death "for our sins according to the Scriptures," his burial, his resurrection the third day according to the Scriptures, his appearances, his glorification, his enthronement, his future judging of all humanity. He states, "The essence of the Gospel is the Christological Drama of the pre-existent Christ who became man, was crucified and rose again, and has been exalted to the position of Lord."¹⁰ This is an impressive list, but it is fragmentary in nature and points to a much more complete teaching. Molland's study reinforces my contention that the full expression of Paul's theology cannot be found in his epistles alone.

Where, then, can the theology of Paul be found?

A few years ago we tried an experiment in a class in NT theology. We questioned whether it was reasonable in seeking what is normative in Paul's theology to begin with his earlier writings, as is customarily done. Perhaps a better procedure would be to begin with his later writings, where the full development of his thought would be found, and then to work back. The results were interesting.

⁸C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (Naperville, 1936) 5-18.

⁹E. Molland, *Das Paulinische Evangelion* (Oslo, 1934).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 75.

In the pastorals we discovered an intense concern for the Church as God's instrument of salvation in the world. Its primary function is the preserving and proclaiming of the truth (1 Tim 3:15-16). To keep the Church functioning in this strategic ministry, instructions are given for the corporate life of the Church, the necessity of good works is stressed, and strong warnings are given as to the dangers of departing from sound doctrine. Sound doctrine, we might assume, is the theology of Paul. Its content did not need to be repeated because his readers were fully indoctrinated in it.

Such an emphasis on orthodoxy is commonly viewed as un-Pauline. It is asserted that faith, for Paul, is a relationship of persons and not a system of doctrine. This is precisely one of the reasons set forth for denying that the pastorals were written by Paul.

Working our way back through the epistles, we were amazed to discover in many of the other epistles a much greater emphasis on the importance of correct doctrine and of good works than we had expected.

The purpose for the polemic in Colossians is summarized in 1:23: "... provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." The great Christological passages in Colossians appear to be directed against a doctrine of super-spirituality that may have been some form of gnosticism. A large portion of the epistle is devoted to proper conduct—i. e., to works—because Paul views beliefs and conduct as inseparable. Faith that centers in Christ, the all-sufficient One, must produce a Christlike life. False doctrine not only threatens to undermine proper conduct; it also menaces the very salvation of the Colossians. Paul urges these Christians to remain true to the gospel that was preached to them, and he assumes it is the same gospel that has been proclaimed everywhere. Their manner of living should issue from that faith: "As therefore you have received (*paralambanō*) Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him" (Col 2:6). *Paralambanō* is often used in a technical sense for the receiving of tradition. Consequently the verse may be paraphrased as follows: "As you have received the authoritative tradition that Jesus is Lord, so now live a life that is consistent with this truth."

When we come to the undisputed epistles, we find that almost all of 1 Corinthians deals with Church life and personal ethics. In Galatians the practical aspects of love are spelled out, and in Romans Paul emphasizes that the superiority of the gospel over the law is that the gospel brings the life-transforming dynamic that the law did not have.

And what about Paul's earliest correspondence—the epistles to the Thessalonians? Here are letters written to a church where Paul had been able to work only a minimal period of time. Yet when he writes, he refers to a "tradition" that he had committed to them (1 Thess 2:13; 4:1-3). From the things of which Paul wants to *remind* them, it seems clear that his missionary message urged them to maintain Christian conduct and to stand true in the face of persecution.

These evidences from Paul's epistles indicate that the fulness of his teaching, the full content of his theology, cannot be recovered from the epistles. They are all occasional letters, and their contents are determined by the accidents of the local situation. Scattered throughout his epistles are references to a fuller teaching that Paul and his companions had committed to these churches. Moreover, the epistles we possess are only a fraction of Paul's total correspondence. Acts 20:20, where Paul is reported as saying, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable," does not justify the assumption that all of his teaching is to be found in the epistles now extant. As has been stated, the epistles were written to believers and only contain hints of Paul's missionary message.

How, then, can we reconstruct Paul's theology?

Another obstacle to our quest is the prevailing notion that Paul's gospel was something more or less distinct from the gospel preached by the other apostles. Many scholars follow E. D. Burton's exposition of Galatians 1-2 and construe Paul's argument to be essentially an affirmation of his independence of the Jerusalem apostles.¹¹ But what good purpose is served by such an affirmation? Most likely Paul's isolation from the Jerusalem apostles provided ammunition for his opponents when they tried to undermine his influence in the churches of Galatia.

Paul's concern is to defend the authenticity of his gospel. He does so by affirming the divine origin of both his apostleship and of his gospel. He argues that his contacts in Jerusalem were with the most important apostles—Peter and John and James—and that the gospel he preached was confirmed by submitting it to their examination.

It is hard to understand how Burton is able to insist that the verb *historeō* can mean nothing more than "visit" when Paul uses it to describe his stay with Peter for fifteen days. In other contexts the verb means "inquire of." But Burton is confident that Paul received no instruction from Peter. Is it conceivable that Jesus would fail to dominate the conversation between two men such as Peter and Paul? Is it not far more likely that Paul went to Peter specifically to *inquire* about Jesus?

Paul's account of his visits to Jerusalem presents an interesting control for determining the extent to which the gospel message could have been transformed in the early years of the Church. He speaks of two different occasions when he compared his message with that of the chief apostles, and these were separated by from ten to fourteen years. Yet at the end of that time they found no essential disagreement between their respective versions of the gospel. Parallel development of tradition is not possible in such isolation, so that extensive changes during that period must be ruled out.

Paul submitted his gospel to the examination of the apostles around A.D. 49-51. The Gospel of Mark may have been written in its present form as early as A.D. 55. How much may we expect Mark's presenta-

¹¹E. D. Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1921) 58-61.

tion of the gospel to differ from Paul's? Or to come at the question another way: Since the evidence of a connection between Paul and the author of Luke-Acts is so strong, is it not likely that the Gospel of Luke contains the essence of Paul's missionary preaching and teaching plus additional elements that Luke gathered through his own investigation?

Here, at last, we have the necessary materials for a more nearly complete reconstruction of the theology of Paul.

Paul was an individual, and his preaching, teaching and writing exhibit his individual characteristics. But Paul was also a member of the Christian community with whom he shared a common tradition. Consequently, it is erroneous to pit Paul against the catholic epistles or against the gospels. There is sufficient evidence in his epistles to show that though he emphasized salvation by grace through faith, Paul was not indifferent to the ethical demands of the gospel. In his epistles, Paul's primary references to the incarnation are to Jesus' death and resurrection, and yet his insistence that his preaching corresponded with that of the apostles argues for his essential agreement with the gospels. This points up the error in Carnell's second principle: "The epistles interpret the gospels." The full range of Paul's theology included the essence of all that is contained in our "gospels." Paul assumes that his readers are familiar with that material, so the gospels are absolutely indispensable for a correct interpretation of the epistles.

Perhaps we have come full circle, and it is time to stop arranging the documents of the NT in a hierarchy of doctrinal authority. Rather, while fully recognizing the many diversities among the various authors, we should affirm the whole NT as essential for the development of an adequate NT theology.