

GUNTHER BORNKAMM'S PAUL: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Of the many outstanding students trained by Rudolf Bultmann, the names of a few hold particular significance for NT scholars—names such as Ernst Käsemann, Hans Conzelmann, Ernst Fuchs, Erich Dinkler and Gunther Bornkamm. Bornkamm is best known in the English-speaking world for his trilogy of books on the origins of the Christian faith: *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Early Christian Experience* and *Paul*.¹ In the foreword to *Jesus of Nazareth* Bornkamm writes, "The experience that the greatness of the subject and the limitations of our ability are out of all proportion to one another will, I hope, constitute a bond between reader and author" (p. 10). He also writes, "I cannot imagine the reading of this book without the Gospels open beside one" (p. 11). These two features—humility in approaching momentous topics, and constant monitoring of opinions with reference to the Biblical text—characterize also Bornkamm's volume on Paul.

Bornkamm brings to this work a rich and varied background. As a Lutheran churchman, Bornkamm places much emphasis on Paul's doctrine of "justification by faith alone" and shows throughout the entire work a concern to communicate this doctrine meaningfully to the present-day Church. As a former student of Bultmann, Bornkamm is well acquainted with existentialist thought. He speaks of man's condition of "lostness" before God (p. 120), of man's being "confronted by God," and of this leading the individual to "self-understanding" (p. 119) and to "authentic existence" (p. 161). The influence of Bornkamm's mentor is seen also in part two of the book, where the thematic arrangement of Paul's theology is found to be similar to that of Bultmann in his *Theology of the New Testament*.² Bornkamm acknowledges that he is indeed indebted to many scholars (pp. ix, x), and from time to time he mentions ideas gleaned from Dibelius, Barth, Stauffer, Conzelmann and Käsemann. He also makes reference to the works of Jewish scholars such as Buber, Baeck, Schoeps and Shalom ben Chorim, and he shows his acquaintance with the works of scholars even less sympathetic to Paul—notably Bloch, Nietzsche and DeLagarde. The book, however, was written for the layman as well as the professional theologian (p. ix) and for this reason lacks footnotes. Even the bibliographical data included in the German edition are lacking in the English translation. The reader is thus left to surmise the exact source from which these ideas came. Nevertheless the book bears the marks of a lifetime of scholarly enquiry and draws together some of Bornkamm's most profound reflections on the Pauline material.

In this study, attention will be focused on two areas in which Bornkamm has made a significant contribution to Pauline studies. The first of these concerns the

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¹G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper, 1960); *Early Christian Experience* (New York: Harper, 1969); *Paul* (New York: Harper, 1971).

²R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 190-352.

relative value of Acts and the Pauline epistles as sources for the life of Paul.³ Bornkamm challenges the approach that concedes the letters significance only for the teaching of Paul and that draws primarily from Acts in reconstructing an outline of his life (p. xv). He also deplores the "widespread practice of uncritically combining Acts and the letters" (p. xxi) and the use of one source to supplement the other whenever gaps become apparent in the course of events. The reasons Bornkamm adduces for the prior value of the letters are that the letters were written by Paul himself at a time contemporary with the situation with which they deal, and they thus represent "history still open to the future," whereas Acts was written by an unknown author at a time (about forty years later) when accurate memory of the events had faded, and thus represents "history seen in retrospect" (p. xvi).

Throughout the first part of his volume Bornkamm expresses a generally negative attitude toward the Lukan portrait of Paul. The writer of Acts, he says, presents us with "stereotyped formulas," "vivid tableaux," speeches that are "compositions by the author" (p. xvii), "detailed, artistic but legendary" descriptions (p. 61), "stylized" accounts (p. 62), "material of very uneven quality" (p. 78), "scattered data, not in each case absolutely verifiable" (p. 79), "a worked up itinerary" (p. 98), "imposing pictures" (p. 101), and so on. From time to time, however, Bornkamm expresses confidence in the Acts narratives. The account of Paul's visit to Corinth (Acts 18:1-17), for example, is described as "reliable, detailed information about which there is no dispute" (p. 68). The brief list of stopping places in the account of Paul's final journey to Jerusalem, together with the account of the threat to his person and the names of his fellow travellers and their home churches—all of this information the writer obtained from "a reliable source."⁴ Bornkamm does not elaborate the criteria by which he accepts part of Acts as trustworthy and rejects another part as legendary, but an investigation of his work does throw these into relief.

In the first place it becomes clear that whenever Acts speaks of Paul in close relationship with Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Church, Bornkamm rejects the Lukan source as unhistorical. The question raised so adeptly by Van Unnik, in relation to the locale in which Paul was raised,⁵ may now be resolved. Bornkamm reasons that because Paul did not mention Jerusalem in Phil 3:5 one could assume that he was both born and raised in Tarsus. Luke has added to his "reliable information" about Paul's birthplace (Acts 22:3) details that would serve to connect Paul with Jerusalem "as closely and as early as possible" (p. 3). Luke's accounts of Paul's conversion experience demonstrate a similar tendency. They present a picture different from that found in Galatians and Philippians. Luke records that after his baptism Paul came back to Jerusalem, and it was in the Jerusalem temple that Paul experienced the vision that commissioned him for missionary work in the gentile world. Paul moved out to the gentile world as "the authorized representative of the one apostolic church" (p. 24). In reality, Born-

³Bornkamm regards Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and the pastorals as pseudo-Pauline and bases his immediate observations on the remaining letters in the Pauline corpus (*Paul*, xiv).

⁴Bornkamm also argues from Luke's silence on the issue that no church was founded by Paul at Athens (*ibid.*, 67).

⁵W. C. Van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem: The City of Paul's Youth* (tr. G. Ogg; London: Epworth, 1962).

kamm argues (on the basis of Gal 1), Paul had no contact with the Jerusalem Church from the time of his conversion up to the time of the apostolic assembly except for the short time he spent with Peter. Bornkamm therefore rejects the Acts account of Paul's conversion as being unreliable.

On the same basis Luke's account of the apostolic assembly is rejected. Galatians 2, Bornkamm argues, is "the only source of any use." Acts 15 represents the meeting as "an impressive manifestation of the one united church led by Jerusalem." This "idealized view of the church and its history" (p. 32) is a misrepresentation of the facts. Paul did not on this occasion submit himself and his mission to the authority of the Jerusalem apostles. Indeed, in Galatians 1 Paul specifically emphasizes that for seventeen years he has maintained independence from Jerusalem and the twelve. At the assembly, Bornkamm states, the Jewish and gentile churches "met on equal footing" (p. 38), and according to Galatians 2 Paul was not ready to concede to the Jerusalem Church an unrestricted authority. The "apostolic decree" with which Luke brings the assembly to a happy conclusion is a measure of which Paul evidently knows nothing, if we are to judge by his epistles (p. 42). And it should be noted that Luke is silent concerning Paul's embarrassing quarrel with Peter, probably because it was not resolved in Paul's favor (pp. 45-48).

Thus Bornkamm begins with the Pauline epistles. Here he identifies a Paul who is independent of the Jerusalem Church and who is sometimes at variance with it. If at any point the Acts narrative places a different interpretation on the situation, Acts is to be regarded as unhistorical.⁶

A second criterion by which Bornkamm assesses the relative value of the Acts material is one that related to a particular understanding of Paul in his relation to Judaism. Luke, Bornkamm maintains, regarded Pharisaism with high esteem and held to "the notoriously false idea that even as a Christian Paul remained a Pharisee down to the very end" (p. 11). Thus Bornkamm questions whether Paul was in fact taught by Gamaliel or whether this fits perhaps too well into the concept of Paul as the ideal Pharisee. But Bornkamm does not reject Luke's account of the vow Paul took prior to his arrest in Jerusalem. On this occasion Paul was true to his principle of becoming "all things to all men" as stated in 1 Cor 9:20-22. There are no reasons therefore to suspect that Luke was fabricating a narrative here to represent Paul as "the exemplary Jew" (p. 100). In his account of Paul's trial before Agrippa, however, Luke depicts Paul as still the convinced Pharisee, holding fast to the Pharisaic belief of resurrection from the dead (Acts 26:2 ff.). "The real Paul," Bornkamm maintains, "was completely different from this" (p. xviii). According to Phil 3:5 ff. Paul "abandoned his former Pharisaic zeal" when he became a Christian. From this time onward he sought salvation only in Christ.

A third criterion Bornkamm brings into play concerns Luke's literary artistry. Bornkamm is suspicious of any narrative penned with a flourish. Paul's journey to Cyprus and Asia, for example, contains "extremely vivid description" and the incidents related are "obviously legendary" (p. 45). Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Ephesus is "most questionable." The various scenes thrown into relief against one another are "so typical of Luke's narrative skill and of his view of history that we need to be very cautious indeed in using them" (p. 79). The bare out-

⁶The concept of "the offering of the Gentiles" would have served Luke's purpose well in demonstrating unity between Paul and the Jerusalem Church, but he scarcely mentions this (Acts 25:17).

line of Paul's last journey to Jerusalem is supplemented by Luke by means of "several typical tableaux on a broad canvas" (p. 98). Along with the speeches in Acts, these elaborate pictures are "obviously of the author's own invention" (p. 97). One wonders how much of Luke's gospel might fall by the same criterion.

In evaluating the respective worth of Acts and the Pauline epistles, Bornkamm has been influenced by the perspectives presented by Martin Dibelius in a series of essays published between 1923 and 1947.⁷ The skepticism that Bornkamm shows toward the historical value of the Lukan material is foreshadowed in Dibelius' work. Dibelius laid the foundations for the style-critical analysis of Acts, suggesting that an itinerary document forms a framework for the central section and that independent units of tradition have been added by the author, sometimes with considerable embellishment. In addition, Dibelius maintains, the author has utilized his creative literary skills to compose narratives and speeches that serve his theological purpose in the compiling of the book. Bornkamm's insights derive from this tradition of German scholarship. His monograph on Paul brings to the level of popular exposure the implications for the life of Paul of this approach to the book of Acts. If we lay aside Acts and its "idealized" portraits we are set free to encounter Paul as he was known to his communities. But who is the Paul whom we meet face to face in the letters that come from his hand? What does he look like when we extricate him from the imaginings and misrepresentations of the next generation of Christians? Are we shocked when we find him to be an outsider in his own time—rejected by Jewish Christians, and by Peter, and perhaps by James? Was he indeed "an apostle without legitimation and a perverter of the Christian gospel" (p. 229)? Bornkamm shakes us, as he always does, from the "safe fold of church tradition"⁸ and forces us to come to grips with the immediacy of the apostle as he confronts us in the writings that bear his name.

The abiding value of Bornkamm's work, however, will be no more meaningful than that of the presuppositions on which he builds. Dibelius is not without his critics, and his perspectives on the historical value of Acts have been widely challenged.⁹ In this volume Bornkamm does not face the underlying issues and argue them with his reader. He adopts from the first a particular approach to the Lukan material without attempting to counter the objections that many scholars have posed. This is confusing to the layman, who may be bewildered at the apparent arbitrariness of Bornkamm's opinions, and it is a disservice to the professional theologian who is left wondering how Bornkamm would counter the objections that have been raised to Dibelius' original stance. It is hard to maintain respect for a scholar who ignores or bypasses the issues.

The second area in which Bornkamm has made a significant contribution to Pauline studies concerns the challenge he offers to the present-day Church. Bornkamm deplores the fact that "a coating of dust has for centuries now lain on the holy writings like a pall" (p. xxv). The responsibility for this situation must be

⁷*Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte* (4th ed.; Göttingen, 1961); Eng. tr. *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1956).

⁸Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 16.

⁹See W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 136-305.

borne by the Church. Ecclesiastical tradition has "fossilized" the astounding truths proclaimed by the apostle so that they have become lifeless and have lost their power. Paul's doctrine of justification, for example, "is often merely a ghost eking out a sham existence in formulas protected by piety" (p. 135); it has been "banished into a catechism as a proposition or into a treatise on dogmatics as a paragraph" and is "most certainly not the doctrine as Paul knew it." As a result, Bornkamm states, "the church's proclamation now speaks only to an illusion" (p. 136).

Bornkamm reminds his readers that Paul never allowed his concerns to "harden into empty formulas" (p. xxv). Even Paul's ethical teaching does not come across as "a system of maxims and directions—as distinct from his 'theology'" (p. 200). In fact Paul's ethical teaching is surprisingly open-ended. While Paul reminds the Corinthians of Jesus' prohibition of divorce (1 Cor 7:10) he yet goes on to refer to a situation in which divorce would be permissible. While Paul refers to a saying of Jesus concerning the fact that the laborer is worthy of his hire (9:14) he yet dissociates himself from such a principle, preferring financial independence (p. 183). When advising the Corinthians on matters relating to marriage and celibacy, "Paul does not take from the individual his right to decide for himself" (p. 208). Bornkamm maintains that the hesitancy Paul expresses in his counsel is not an indication that the matters perplexed him but rather that he was unwilling to reduce to legal terms issues that would best be decided after self-examination and "in the Spirit" (1 Cor 7:40) (p. 209). It is not true, Bornkamm maintains, that "the gift of systematic thought was withheld from him" (p. 118)! The fact is that Paul consistently "appeals to his hearers' and readers' understanding"—he does not "simply proclaim and decree" (p. 204).

A further area in which there is an implied criticism of the present-day Church is that which concerns the relationship between reason and revelation. Bornkamm approaches this topic first in his treatment of Paul's conversion experience. Galatians 1 and 2 have frequently been used to substantiate the premise that Paul's experience on the Damascus road was the "one and only source and legitimation of his call and proclamation" (p. 20). This, Bornkamm argues, is incorrect and misleading. It focuses on a particular experience and turns Paul into an "enthusiast" and an "individualist" (p. 22). In fact, it is clear that Paul had entered into constant dialogue with the Hellenistic Christians in Damascus and elsewhere and that his conversion came about when the significance of Jesus' mission and death finally dawned upon him (p. 23). It is not a matter of *either* tradition *or* special revelation (p. 20); both played a significant role in Paul's call to be an apostle. Similarly, Bornkamm argues, the present-day Church has a responsibility to make the Christian message *intelligible* to modern man. He deplores the fact that some preachers use the method of "apodictic revelation." Paul himself made "vigorous use of reason, understanding and conscience." This confirms the fact that "this same man to whom liberating grace is available must also understand the paradox of God's act in the cross of Christ" (p. 119). In his assessment of Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 1-4, Bornkamm comments that "what (Paul) says about saving event and faith is not dictated by any secret delight in the absurd. He demands no 'blind' faith, and says absolutely nothing about the sacrifice of understanding and intellect" (pp. 159-160).

Finally, Bornkamm has much to say in this volume concerning Church leadership and Church worship. The Church that confronts us in the Pauline writ-

ings, Bornkamm maintains, is still in flux. The pictures of the Church to which we have access demonstrate the tremendous variety that characterized the individual manifestation of the one primitive Christian Church. Even with respect to leadership positions we have no basic model after which each congregation was to pattern itself. Titles such as "overseer" or "deacon" are used loosely and without definition of the nature of the office. Acts and the "post-Pauline Pastorals" suggest that some congregations adopted the synagogue system of "patriarchal government by elders" (p. 183) but the Pauline epistles are silent on this issue, which suggests that it was a later development.

Rather than the concept of the Church as an organized institution, Bornkamm sees in the Pauline writings the Church as a group of people assembled for worship. Clearly the manner of worship was influenced by that of the synagogue in diaspora Judaism. But the lack of formal instruction concerning rites and priestly functions and so on indicates that "by and large we have to reckon with great freedom and diversity" (p. 186). Bornkamm emphasizes that Paul is not speaking metaphorically when he uses the term "body" to describe the Christian community; "it is not something like a body, but—in a real and actual sense—it is Christ's body (I Cor 12:27, cf. 12:12), *one* body in Christ (Rom 12:5)." The Church is in fact a "tool through which Christ himself organizes his lordship and gives it effect by the Spirit." For this reason, Paul would not permit "the church's being turned into a playground and battleground for religious virtuosos, fascinating for some but depressing for others, a terrain for Spirit-inspired excursions from the earthly and historical realities of human existence into a supposedly divine world beyond." Paul stressed that the Spirit is at work in "the apparently trivial, very matter of fact duties and functions of everyday living together" (p. 194), as much as in more spectacular ways. Paul, therefore, urges church members to accept one another "each in his station, his potentialities, and his limitations, not to do violence to another or to ask too much because of an arbitrarily adopted pattern" (p. 195).

Through these comments relating to the Church Bornkamm creates disquiet, uneasiness, discomfort. Is it true that the powerful concept of justification by faith alone is today repeated as a formula but not understood as a reality? Has the present-day Church codified Paul's ethical teaching into a body of law and taken away from the individual the right to decide for himself? Do we require a person to commit himself emotionally to a set of beliefs before enabling him to understand their content? And if so, is this because an intellectual laziness has spread across the Church so that Church leaders themselves are not prepared to think through the implications of Biblical theology? Are we *unable* to make the gospel intelligible to modern man? Bultmann, Bornkamm's mentor, raised very forcibly the issue of how to communicate the gospel in the twentieth century in terms that may be understood by twentieth-century man.¹⁰ The terms Bultmann supplied were basically those of existentialist philosophy. Do such terms in fact bring twentieth-century man into meaningful encounter with God? If they do not, by what means is the Church of today to make the Pauline message intelligible? Is it enough for the Church to repeat the formula "justification by faith alone," leaving the inquirer himself to fathom the depth of its significance? Is the task of the Church the "fresh interpretation and elucidation" (p. 236) of the Paul-

¹⁰R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

ine message? And if so, is the Church able to rise to this challenge? Bornkamm's work gives us pause for thought.

Nor may we escape the implications of Bornkamm's comments relating to Church structure. Has it been too readily assumed that the NT writings give us a blueprint for Church organization? And do we interpret naively, as some kind of basic pattern, comments that at the time related only to one specific situation within the great variety of organizational structure that characterized the Pauline Church? Are we wresting from the NT a pattern of organizational structure and leadership that it never sets out to give? It could be that we too, along with the Corinthian Church, are guilty of setting up a scale of values by which the "truly spiritual person" may be judged. Do we assign leadership roles, for example, not to those who are best equipped for such responsibilities but to those who manifest certain gifts to which *we* assign a high level on our scale of values? This could be the reason why in our churches too we see "hypertrophied and atrophied members rivaling one another in contention" (p. 195).

Bornkamm's volume on Paul led the way into the 1970s with a momentous challenge. At a time when life-of-Jesus scholars were pursuing anew the question for the historical Jesus by concentrating on the primary sources, students of the life of Paul had settled into an uncritical acceptance of a secondary source and were using it as the foundation of their studies. Bornkamm's work came as a forceful reminder that Pauline scholars are in a more privileged position than those working in life-of-Jesus studies: They have at their disposal writings genuinely emanating from the hand of the apostle. Bornkamm appeals to the scholarly community to take these letters seriously as they relate to the life of Paul. At the same time Bornkamm places strong emphasis on the relevance of these letters to the Church as they relate to Christian faith and conduct. Underlying this scholarly enquiry is a challenge to the present-day Church to reevaluate its mission and structure in the light of the Pauline writings. It is not enough to reiterate the Pauline sayings, as though the formulae themselves have intrinsic power. The Church must communicate to the world the astounding truth of the Pauline message—and must do so in a way that is clearly understood.