

The Meaning of Christ and Pauline Theology

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1. Introduction

In 2 Peter 3.16 we find perhaps the earliest witness to the struggles of the early church in Pauline interpretation in the wake of Paul's missionary work and his literary legacy: ἐν [ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς Παυλοῦ] ἐστὶν δυσνόητά τινα, ἃ οἱ ἀμαθεῖς καὶ ἀστήρικτοι στρεβλοῦσιν ὡς καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς γραφὰς πρὸς τὴν ἰδίαν αὐτῶν ἀπώλειαν.¹⁾ Since at least as early as the time of 2 Peter, the task of understanding Paul has been one full of unresolved tensions and disputes among those who claimed to have understood Paul's theology. This unresolved unrest has not changed in two thousand years. In fact, contemporary interpreters critically analyze even the concept of Pauline theology.

1) "There are some things in [Paul's letters] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

Recent summary works by the members of the Society of Biblical Literature's Pauline Theology Group (such as James D.G. Dunn's "In Quest of Paul's Theology: Retrospect" and Prospect and Paul W. Meyer's "Pauline Theology: Some Thoughts for a Pause in Its Pursuit")²⁾ make clear the lack of precision and clarity when it comes to terms as seemingly simple as "Pauline theology." The frustration has reached such a high degree, that one member of that group, Steven Kraftchick, suggested a moratorium on further papers "until questions of definition and procedure are more fully agreed on."³⁾

- 2) James D. G. Dunn's paper can be found in *Society of Biblical Literature: 1995 Seminar Paper* (ed. Eugene H. Lovering, Jr.: Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 704-21. Paul Meyer's paper can be found in the same volume on pp. 688-703.
- 3) Steven J. Kraftchick, "Seeking a More Fluid Model: A Response to Jouette M. Bassler, in *1 & 2 Corinthians* (ed. David M. Hay: vol. 2 of *Pauline Theology*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 34. Cf. Wrede, who, even though he considered Paul to have taken the first elementary steps toward theological thought, doubted whether the term "Theology" was appropriate for describing what we find in Paul's letters: "Moderne Vorstellungen muß man ausdrücklich verbannen, wenn man Paulus einen Theologen nennt. Er besaß keine theologische Gelehrsamkeit in unserm Sinne und hat auch mit unserm Dogmatikern und Ethikern geringe Ähnlichkeit. Niemals hat er ein System seiner Lehre entwickeln wollen, selbst im Römerbriefe nicht. Er schreibt immer als Missionar, Organisator und Volksredner, entwickelt seine Gedanken auf gegebenen Anlaß hin, und immer nur nach einzelnen Seiten. So könnte man überhaupt irre werden, ob "Theologie" hier der rechte Name ist. Aber er ist nicht zu entbehren (Paulus [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1907], 47 ("When we call Paul a theologian we must expressly exclude modern associations of the word. He possessed no theological learning in our sense, and has very little affinity with our dogmatic and ethical writers. He never attempts--not even in the letter to the Romans--to unfold a system of doctrine. He writes always as a missionary, an organizer, a speaker to the people, is guided in the setting forth of his thoughts by the occasion given, and treats only of particular sides of his subject. We might well doubt, therefore, whether 'theology' is here the right word to use: but it cannot be

With regard to the meaning of Christ in Pauline theology, some may note a discrepancy between the meaning of Christ in Paul, that is, as we find it in Paul's mere seven letters, and the meaning of Christ *for* Paul, that is, the meaning Christ had for Paul's entire life, including the letters but obviously encompassing much more. These two can conceivably be different. What Christ meant for Paul is probably more comprehensive than what we find in Paul, that is, in the New Testament letters of Paul. All we can conjecture is based on the textual evidence, hence the meaning of Christ *for* Paul as it is mediated *in* Paul's letters. To know the meaning of Christ *for* Paul would necessitate an interview with Paul that spans all of his life from his earliest memories. And even then we would have to assess the development of Paul the individual as he was molded by his ever-changing historical contexts. That sort of knowledge lies beyond our ken. In that regard, Kraftchick's somewhat pessimistic note in the aforementioned paper is quite understandable:

Regardless of the methods of inquiry we have adopted, the full

avoided. [Translation from *Paul* (trans. Edward Lummis: Lexington: American Theological Library Association, 1962), 74]. Wrede reminded interpreters that they should move their attention away from the expressions to the experiences which arose in the development of the Christian religion as the means of understanding the expressions. For that reason he issued a warning against detailed, dogmatic examinations of words and concepts, and against those who believed that figuring out the meanings of the terms individually meant getting at the meaning of the text. Cf. Heikki Räisänen's opening words in *Paul and the Law*: "Paul never defines the content of the term νόμος" (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983, 16). Likewise is the significance of the fact especially in the light of debates about the ambiguity of the expression πίστις Χριστοῦ—that Paul never bothers to define as crucial a concept as πίστις.

recovery of Paul's thought has remained beyond our collective grasp. The complexity of this process may find its origin not in the vagaries of the letters or the murkiness of their historical origin but in the complexity of the human being who wrote them. Lamentably we have few avenues of access open to us which reveal that person.⁴⁾

I mention this issue (i.e., *in* vs. *for*) at the outset, although its ramifications run throughout this paper, not only to register my own awareness of the topic's complexity, but also to signal a suggestion that emerges from Wilhelm Dilthey's (1833-1911) view of *Erlebnis* (lived-experience) and *Nacherleben* (re-experiencing), especially with regard to written texts. As he explores hermeneutical issues, Dilthey points out and accentuates the capacity of human beings to understand others or the expressions (literature, art, music, etc.) of others that they encounter. Following Dilthey's approach to interpretation, then, I do not separate so sharply what Christ meant *for* Paul from what Christ means *in* the expressions we find in the extant letters of Paul. The distinction between the person Paul and his expressions, though instructive for our own analyses of the texts, need not keep us from affirming the common ground upon which Paul and we stand (the world, life, time, space, etc.), thereby allowing us to

4) Kraftchick, "Seeking a More Fluid Model", 34. Note the similarities Kraftchick's comment has with Albert Schweitzer's conclusions concerning the quest for the historical Jesus in *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1906), 397: Jesus] does not stay: He passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let Him go. (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* [trans. William Montgomery: New York: Macmillan, 1968], 399).

understand Paul, at least to the extent that the letters permit.

Even when scholars most familiar with Paul's writings run up against seeming impassés, they cannot ignore their almost intuitive grasp of the sense or thrust of what Paul means to say by what he wrote. After all, it is the presupposition of all interpretation that we can in fact understand others' works. That means that we share with Paul some fundamental structures in experiencing life and in giving expression to our experiences. Thus admitting the constraints of searching for the meaning of Christ *in* Paul, that is, in his letters, I would, however, dare hope that by getting at the meaning of Christ *in* Paul we will also be able to understand the meaning that Christ had for Paul.

2. Expression and meaning

In exploring the meaning of Christ in Paul, I have found Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie* to be a helpful theoretical framework. According to Dilthey's tripartite interrelations of *Erlebnis* (lived-experience), *Ausdruck* (expression), and *Verstehen* (understanding), I understand Paul's letters as expressions of his lived-experience, most significantly his experience of Christ, which, as all interpreters would agree, became for him the center and power in his life, determining his understanding of all his experiences, past and present.

I also make use of Dilthey's concept of an *erworbener seelischer Zusammenhang* (acquired psychic nexus) to understand Paul in terms of an ever-developing nexus of acquired experiences in dynamic contact with his world. Perceived and experienced, the *objektiver*

Geist (objective spirit), or the historical world, provides the conditions and data for the developing psychic nexus of an individual, such as Paul (e.g., language and social conventions). The concepts of the acquired psychic nexus and *objektiver Geist* are especially important in understanding his thinking as coherent in the face of the variety and flexibility of his language (e.g., apocalyptic, Stoic) and the lack of systematic coherence on the discursive level of his expressions. My contention is that the forensic language of justification (δικαιοσύνη, δικαιώω) is one that Paul found readily at hand at opportune moments to bring to expression his experience of Christ.

Not only does the language of justification belong to the level of expression, but so do the equally significant concepts of νόμος and πίστις. Part of the interpretative problem for us is that Paul never defines such terms in his letters. Instead, he uses them freely in various places at varying frequency, depending on the situation at hand.⁵⁾ These three concepts, δικαιοσύνη, νόμος, and πίστις, interrelate and appear closely together mainly in Romans (Rom 3-4: 10) and Galatians (Gal 2-3) and have been the subject of numerous books and articles, although without any satisfactory consensus. Upon closer scrutiny, we can discover that these three terms are particularly related to the Jew-Gentile issue in the early church, most notably discussed in Galatians and Romans.

Recent works on Paul and the law reveal the perennial problem of Pauline interpretation with regard to the use of such terms and concepts in Paul.⁶⁾ For example, in Romans Paul can write οὐ γὰρ

5) Cf. Wrede: see footnote 3.

6) E.g., Ed P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983) and Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ [τῷ] θεῷ, ἀλλ' οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου δικαιωθήσονται (Rom 2.13: For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified) and then shortly thereafter confuse the issue by claiming that ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, διὰ γὰρ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας (Rom 3.20: no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin). E.P. Sanders views Rom 1.18-2.29 as an expendable anomaly, thus downplaying the palpable tension in Paul's claims. But the real reason for Sanders's position is that the passage does not fit nicely into his own interpretation of νόμος. On the other hand, Heikki Räisänen is more honest and blunt to admit that "contradictions and tensions have to be *accepted as constant* features of Paul's theology of the law."⁷⁾

My proposal is that we return again, with more precision, to the hermeneutical distinction espoused by various scholars in the past, most notably Rudolf Bultmann, viz., between expression and meaning. With this fundamental hermeneutical apprehension comes the freedom to permit Paul to speak using his own language as he wishes, instead of our tendency to project our theological agenda into Paul's text. We will also benefit from the freedom from the search for a coherent center on the level of the text, i.e., in the letters themselves. No single expression on the textual level—not even J. Christiaan Beker's suggestion of apocalyptic as the coherent center⁸⁾—can

7) Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 11.

8) J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

exhaust the meaning of Christ. The coherence of Paul's gospel is his experience of Christ itself, constantly active in his life and free to search out new ways of bringing that experience to expression.

3. ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ as One of Many Expressions in Paul

In the light of the above, I would like to suggest, even if too briefly, a few theses for consideration. First is that the so-called doctrine of justification (*Rechtfertigungslehre*) is not the center of Paul but one of many expressions of his experience of Christ. Secondly, Paul's statements about δικαιοσύνη, especially in Romans and Galatians, are means for expressing the meaning of Christ in terms of the problem of Jew-Gentile relations. Paul uses δικαιοσύνη language to argue that the separate missions to the Jews and the Gentiles are parallel and equally valid. That the Gentiles are justified as Gentiles, and should not become Jews through circumcision is the meaning of Christ that Paul brings to expression with regard to the Jew-Gentile issue. Finally, if my contention is correct, then not only should the concept of justification relinquish its privileged status as Paul's central doctrine (*pace* Martin Luther), at least among the Protestants, but there are also serious consequences for interpreting any and all claims on the level of the text. All of Paul's statements in all the letters must be understood with respect to Paul's continuing experience of Christ and with respect to the concrete situations at hand that call for particular expressions of the meaning of Christ.

As I mentioned already, the three terms δικαιοσύνη, νόμος, and πίστις are particularly related to the Jew-Gentile issue in Paul's let-

ters, most notably in Romans and Galatians. But for many interpreters, this concrete, historical reality has taken a back seat since the doctrinal disputes of the sixteenth century. It is mostly under the enduring influence of Martin Luther and other Reformers that we still tend to see Paul's emphasis on δικαιοσύνη ἐκ πίστεως as the coherent center of Paul. In the twentieth century, Ernst Käsemann once again focused on δικαιοσύνη (τῶν ἀσεβῶν) as Paul's central teaching and key to the rest of Paul's thought.

Against such a strong tide of Protestant interpretation of Paul, Joseph Fitzmyer cautions that the focus on δικαιοσύνη ἐκ πίστεως as a supposed center compromises our apprehension of the larger, richer tapestry of Pauline letters that contain multifaceted understandings and expressions of what he would consider the center of Paul, viz., christocentric soteriology.⁹⁾ Fitzmyer thinks that two extremes should be avoided with regard to the center in Paul. On the one hand, Albert Schweitzer's position does not do justice to the prominence of the theme of justification since his focus on mystical experience of Christ relegates justification to the margins of Pauline thought. On the other hand, Käsemann's claim of justification of the ungodly as the center of Pauline theology bypasses other significant expressions in Paul's letters. That is to say, both Schweitzer and Käsemann fail to appreciate the multifaceted expressions of soteriology that we find in Paul.

In the light of the variety of centers that have been proposed by previous scholarship, my contention is that a center is not to be found

9) Conference on "Rereading Paul Together", University of Notre Dame (Notre Dame, Indiana, 12 Feb 2002). At the same conference Margaret Mitchell argued that the center of Paul's theology was the death and resurrection of Christ.

on the textual level in the form of a proposition or doctrine in the dogmatic sense.¹⁰⁾ Rather, the letters bear witness to a dynamic process of continual theologizing in which the apostle Paul engages his readers in any way that would convince them to recognize ἡ ἀλήθεια τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (Gal 2.5, 14)¹¹⁾ with respect to their particular and peculiar situation.

4. The Meaning of Christ

It can be argued that for Paul the meaning of Christ had to do with individual salvation (e.g., Rom 10.9–10; Gal 1.15–16; 2.19–20; 5.21; Phil 2.12; 1 Thess 1.9–10). On the other hand, from the very same letters, we can argue instead that the meaning of Christ concerns cosmic salvation (e.g., Rom 5.12–21; 8.19–23). Neither of these understandings of the meaning of Christ for Paul is wrong; but neither can, on its own, exhaust the meaning of Christ for Paul. Both the individual dimension and the cosmic dimension are important in Paul. The important thing to remember, however, is that the letters are letters: i.e., they serve a practical purpose in a concrete situation. In that sense, then, Paul's statements about justification can be and must

10) Wrede insisted on a liberation of New Testament interpretation not only from canonical boundaries, but also from what he referred to as the "Method of doctrinal concepts" ("The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'", in *The Nature of New Testament Theology* [Naperville: Allenson, 1973], 73). He criticized the way in which many Pauline interpreters analyzed concepts like πίστις or σὰρξ as if Paul had "developed his concepts systematically and applied them precisely and with full awareness of their content and range of meaning"(77).

11) Cf. ἀλήθεια Χριστοῦ in 2 Cor 11.10.

be read in the context of the particular situations in which he finds the language of justification as helpful in communicating the meaning of Christ. So, for example, the meaning of Christ is communicated to the Galatians through statements about justification aimed at the concrete problem of circumcision among believers in Galatia.

In that particular case, where Gentiles wished to undergo circumcision, Paul used justification language to argue that the Gentiles are justified as Gentiles and therefore should not become Jews through circumcision. The meaning of Christ that Paul brings to expression in Galatians is that Jews in Christ and Gentiles who follow Jewish tradition have no soteriological privilege or advantage. That is to say, Gentiles who remain Gentiles are just as righteous in Christ as Jews, a view that apparently did not win the day in Antioch according to Paul's report in Gal 2.11–14. Paul was certainly a prominent figure, especially in the Gentile mission field, but according to the Antioch incident, his views do not seem to have been popular among the Jerusalem leadership.

Both in Romans and Galatians Paul emphasizes the same meaning of Christ for Jews and Gentiles, using in both letters the figure of Abraham to present his argument (Rom 4; Gal 3.6–29), although in a slightly different manner. The practical message for believers in Rome as well as in Galatia is the same: whether Jew or Gentile, in Christ there is no privilege, no advantage or disadvantage when it comes to justification before God. If that is the case, δικαιοσυνῆ ἐκ πίστεως~ is another way of proclaiming what Paul formulates in concrete socio-political categories in Gal 3.28: οὐκ ἔστι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλλην, οὐκ ἔστι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔστι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἓστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. If

this is the truth of the gospel in Christ, then the thrust of Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans has not so much to do with a dogmatic explication of justification, but rather with the practical problem of Gentiles' and Jews' coexisting in Christ. Furthermore, this understanding of the meaning of Christ leaves a great assignment of reconciliation still to be completed by the contemporary church, in which claims of soteriological privilege are still a regrettable reality.

Justification ἐν Χριστῷ in Paul

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Gal 2:17 Paul says, εἰ δὲ ζητοῦντες δικαιωθῆναι ἐν Χριστῷ. Here it is not difficult to find the relationship between "justification" and "in Christ." "The blessing of Abraham" (i.e. justification of the Gentiles)" "in Christ" is also indicated in Gal 3:14.

- 1) With regard to the reference of the blessing of Abraham in Gal 3:14, there is no agreement among scholars. Several commentators hold that it refers to the gift of the Spirit (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* [NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 168; R. A. Cole, *Galatians* [TNTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 144; J.D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* [BNTC: Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993], 180; G.W. Hansen, *Galatians* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994], 96; H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953], 128). A number of commentators reckon that Paul employs the phrase to refer to the blessing of justification (E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921], 175; Fung, *Galatians*, 151; I.-G. Hong, *The Law in Galatians*