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Pauline Christianity

J. A. ZIESLER

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Introduction

Pauline Christianity is the earliest for which we have direct documentary evidence. Despite the arrangement of books in the New Testament, the earliest gospel was written after the latest of Paul's letters, and it is Paul who lets us into the ground floor of the early church. A church receiving a letter from him probably had no other Christian writing, and as it was far removed from Palestine and from the memories of the followers of Jesus, it probably knew little of the oral tradition of his deeds and words. It had, of course, heard the preaching of Paul or someone else, and it may have had access to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures), but we cannot assume any more than this. In large areas of the Christian world Paul's gospel was the only one people had heard at first, and the idea that Paul complicated an originally simple gospel of Jesus simply does not fit; in many places it would be decades before a written gospel circulated. Of course there was earlier Christianity in Palestine, but all our documentary evidence for it is later than the undisputed letters of Paul.

The earliest Pauline letter is probably 1 Thessalonians, about AD 50–51, or twenty years after the crucifixion, though it could be even earlier. Paul nowhere says how long after the ministry of Jesus he became a Christian, but it was about the middle thirties: he had to escape from Damascus when Aretas was king of Nabataea (2 Cor. 11: 32f.) and this is probably Aretas IV, who controlled Damascus from 37 to 39. So, whether the crucifixion was in 30 or 33, Paul appears as an active follower of Christ less than a decade later. There is thus no doubt that he is a very early witness to Christianity.

An apostle

Paul is usually depicted as one whose zeal for the Jewish Law made him persecute Christians because they were being lax about it and encouraging others to be lax as well. While on his way to Damascus to pursue his crusade against them, he encountered Christ in a remarkable vision. He was not only converted but called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. After instruction by other Christians, and a time for thought and preparation, he began his missionary work, first in Syrian Antioch but then in three great journeys going ever farther west. After many tribulations he was eventually nearly lynched in the Temple at Jerusalem, but his arrest by the Romans saved him. He appealed as a Roman citizen to be tried by Caesar in Rome, fearing the influence of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem over the local magistrates. He died in Rome after a period in prison during Nero's persecution, about the year 65. It was because he was lax about the Jewish Law and encouraged others to be lax that he incurred so much hostility from those whose zeal was very much what his own had once been.

The above picture derives partly from tradition, partly from the letters, and partly from the Acts of the Apostles. It will serve as a rough outline, though several details in it are inaccurate: he himself did not call his encounter a vision, and it ought not to be called a conversion but a commissioning, and 'three missionary journeys' is a misleading description of his work. He did not set out on missionary expeditions and return periodically for home leave, and there is no evidence that he saw any particular place as his headquarters or his journeyings as having beginnings and endings. Rather, he was always on the move, and visited Jerusalem when he needed to, not for a rest from being a missionary. The whole 'missionary journey' notion is a modern deduction from Acts, but Acts leaves large gaps in its account, as we know from a comparison with the letters. It also streamlines the story, aiming to give not a full history of the early church nor even of Paul's part in it, but to show how the Christian message spread triumphantly, despite all obstacles, from its cradle in Jerusalem to its new centre as a world faith in Rome.

One important difference between Acts and Paul concerns his status as an apostle. Although more than half of Acts is about Paul as a great hero, it does not call him an apostle except in 14: 4, 14 (where, however, he is bracketed with Barnabas). For Acts, apostles are normally the Twelve, of whom Paul is not one (see 1: 15–26), and he cannot be called an apostle in the same sense. Yet Paul does claim for himself apostleship in the same sense as for Peter, though aware that not everyone concedes the point (see 1 Cor. 9: 1f.; 15: 1–11; Gal. 1: 1, 17 and cf. 1 Thess. 2: 6; Rom. 1: 1, 5). The exact meaning of 'apostle' in early Christianity is much debated, but clearly Paul regards himself as no whit inferior to any other apostle in status and authority. If having been a witness of the risen Christ is the necessary condition for being an apostle, then he qualifies, for his experience on the Damascus road was a resurrection appearance of the same kind and in the same series as those to Peter and the others (1 Cor. 9: 1; 15: 1–11). Nevertheless, the essential qualification in his view is the divine call and commission (Gal. 1 and 2) to apostleship which gave him his authority.

Letters

Paul wrote neither theological treatises nor sermons but letters. In Greek culture — as often in ours — the letter was a substitute for personal presence, and Paul's letters are substitutes for authoritative apostolic presence. They were meant to be received as he would have been, just as sometimes an emissary is to be regarded as a substitute for his presence (see 1 Cor. 4: 14–21; 2 Cor. 12: 14–13: 13; 1 Thess. 2: 17–3: 5). They are real letters, and so are directed to specific people in specific situations. Obvious though this may be, it needs saying because of its consequences.

First, Paul writes pastorally rather than systematically. For example, he nowhere gives a thorough account of the relation between the Law and the gospel, but deals with problems involving them as they arise. To the Galatians, he concentrates on Christians' freedom from the Law, but to the Corinthians, he is

preoccupied with the need for righteous living. This difference reflects the different situations and problems of the two churches at the times of writing. Paul consistently goes to first principles, and is an acute and creative theological thinker, but he is before that a missionary pastor giving his attention to concrete problems. All his theology comes to us in this way.

Secondly, we cannot too readily compare something in one letter with something in another, without taking account of the differing circumstances. We cannot just collect everything he says on a topic without regard for the contexts. Yet we must also be prepared for an underlying coherence and consistency in what he writes.

Thirdly, we are in the position of hearing only one side of a conversation, and can only deduce from what Paul says *to* a church what he must have heard *from* them. For example, in 1 Cor. 7: 1, 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman', is that what he is saying to the Corinthians, or is he quoting what they had said to him? In fact it is probably the latter. Moreover, why are the Corinthians proud of their wisdom, lax about incest, yet inclined towards asceticism, divided about eating food offered to idols, unsure about the resurrection, and so on? Is there a coherent position behind this strange assortment of ideas? Similar questions can be asked of all the letters, and answers often boil down to two. Sometimes Paul faces the problem of people who think Christians ought all to keep the Jewish Law, as in Galatians, Romans, and Philippians. Sometimes he faces those inclined to a kind of religion which later crystallized into something called Gnosticism (see pp. 15–17), as conceivably in the Corinthian letters. Certainly there will be times when interpretation is affected by the target we suppose Paul to be aiming at.

Fourthly, Paul writes to Christians, and his letters are not in themselves missionary preaching. Yet there are occasional allusions to what he preached, as in 1 Cor. 15: 3ff.: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in fulfilment of the Scriptures, and his appearances (see also Gal. 3: 1). Generally, however, the letters take the preaching for granted and go on from there.

Now when we say that Paul wrote real letters, we do not mean modern ones. Much work has recently been done, especially in the

United States, on the structure of Paul's letters in comparison with roughly contemporary letters. It has been shown that whatever their purpose and subject matter, letters had substantially the same structure. The Pauline form is:

Salutation (names of writer and recipient; greeting)

Thanksgiving

Opening of the body of the letter

Body of the letter (usually in two parts, theoretical and practical)

Closing of the body of the letter (often with the promise of a visit)

Ethical instruction ('paraenesis')

Closing: greetings, doxology, benediction.

Obviously the proportions may vary, and an element may on occasion be missing, but if so there is a reason. An outstanding case of a missing element is in Galatians, where there is no opening thanksgiving, despite the fact that Paul's Christian thanksgivings reflect the common good manners of secular letters. Paul is so furious with his Galatian readers for their lack of fidelity to the gospel as they had received it that he has no time or inclination for thanksgiving, whatever politeness dictated.

Moreover, this pattern can be used to help detect whether a letter now exists in the form in which Paul wrote it. Some letters may be composite, put together by an editor from fragments. Neither 2 Corinthians nor Philippians fits the pattern quite satisfactorily, and this is a strong, though not by itself conclusive, reason to regard them as composite. Certainly there is widespread agreement that the letters are not constructed haphazardly as used to be thought, but conform to the contemporary letter-pattern.

The recipients of the letters were of course Christians, but were they mainly Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians or Gentiles who had already been adherents of a Jewish synagogue without becoming converts? Undoubtedly many were Gentiles (non-Jews), which in practice meant they were Greek in culture and language. In nearly every letter this emerges somewhere (e.g. Rom. 11: 13; 1 Cor. 8: 7; Gal. 4: 8; Phil. 3: 3; 1 Thess. 1: 9). Moreover, although

the gospel came 'first to the Jew and then to the Greek' (e.g. Rom. 1: 16), and despite the pattern in Acts where he begins in the synagogue and moves out only under pressure, Paul sees his mission as specifically to the Gentiles. He is 'an apostle to the Gentiles' (Rom. 11: 13; 15: 16; Gal. 1: 16) by divine appointment. Thus it is likely that his churches were composed largely of Gentiles, but some may well have had a period as synagogue-adherents, and there were probably Jews too, because Paul can take for granted a knowledge of the Septuagint. He assumes his readers will know about Adam and Abraham, Moses and circumcision, and will recognize scriptural quotations and allusions. Because of the great cost, it is unlikely that individuals or young churches would have possessed copies, and it is only in the synagogue that this familiarity with the Scriptures in Greek could have been gained.

Sources for the knowledge of Paul's thought

We have seen that some letters may have been compiled by a later hand; others, at least as we now have them, may have been *composed* by a later follower or group of followers of Paul. This question will concern us in Chapter 7, though for a full treatment one should go to standard books like W. G. Kimmel's *Introduction to the New Testament*. Meanwhile, we need to know which letters we can use confidently as sources, which with no confidence at all, and which come somewhere in between, and we also need to know about the Acts of the Apostles.

First, we use Acts only as a subsidiary source. This is because it is proper to prefer a primary source (i.e. coming from the person himself) to a secondary source (i.e. evidence about that person from someone else). A second reason for caution is that both in chronology and in the account given of Paul's teaching, Acts is difficult to reconcile with the letters and appears to give an inadequate or even distorted picture of both. At the very least it leaves large gaps, both in time and in theology, for some of which see Chapter 7.

Secondly, of the letters ascribed to Paul we can confidently

use Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Some may not be in their original form, but few doubt that Paul wrote them. On the remaining letters, again see Chapter 7. We shall not be using them a great deal because, even if they are written by Paul, it is an older Paul whose thought and style have changed. Hebrews, of course, does not even claim to be by him.

The order in which they were written is of some importance, especially if we suspect that Paul's thought developed over the years. Unfortunately there is great uncertainty about the order, as there is about the chronology of the apostle's life. At the risk of being arbitrary, however, we need to give some indication of probable order and in rough outline some notion of time scale. It is generally agreed that there are three groups of letters:

1. Early letters: 1 and 2 Thessalonians (unless the latter is not by Paul).
 2. The great letters: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and perhaps Philippians.
 3. 'Captivity' letters: Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and perhaps Philippians.
- If Paul wrote them all, then Group 1 were written about 50, Group 2 in the middle to late 50s, and Group 3 in the early 60s, but almost every date is disputed and some would argue that all the letters in Group 3 are either not by Paul or not written from Rome. Again, many put Galatians in Group 1 rather than 2, and some put all the dates a good deal earlier. Nevertheless, as long as we do not pretend to precision, we have a reasonable idea of the time-span, namely the 50s and early 60s of the first century.