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# THE PAULIST BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

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of a network of small communities of Christ followers whose mission was to bear witness to the lordship of Jesus in their city and beyond. Each community (*ekklesiā*) met in a house (or perhaps occasionally in a workshop or tavern). The house church(es) in each city consisted of men and women, slaves and free, rich and poor, Gentiles (mostly) and Jews (Gal 3:28). In order to imitate Christ's own self-emptying love, and

to keep from being a burden to others, Paul worked with his hands as a tentmaker or leather worker (1 Cor 9; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:7–9; Acts 18:3). His apostolic life resembled Christ's in multiple ways, as he regularly suffered physical pain and deprivation, emotional distress, political torture, and imprisonment (Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 4:8–13; 2 Cor 4:7–12; 6:3–10; 11:23–33; 12:10).

## PAUL THE LETTER WRITER

Paul's apostolic ministry meant he had ongoing concern for the churches he founded, as well as for other communities to which he was connected via associates, both men and women. In addition to occasional pastoral visits, Paul wrote letters in Greek (the common tongue) as a form of ongoing formation and apostleship in absentia. As an apostle and father figure, he corresponded expecting his addressees to read his letters aloud in the assembly and heed them. Not everyone wanted to follow Paul, however, for he had opponents—who are often in view as he writes.

The NT contains thirteen letters bearing Paul's name. (Hebrews does not name its author, but it is almost certainly not by Paul, despite its frequent association with him since the early years of the church.) Each letter is distinctive in terms of the situation addressed, rhetorical strategy employed, and theological content conveyed. Seven of the thirteen are sufficiently similar to one another to be called the "undisputed" or "uncontested" letters, meaning that scholars almost universally

agree that Paul authored them: Romans (the longest), 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians (probably the earliest, ca. 51), and Philemon. To many scholars, the other six seem to reflect a situation, style, or substance that does not correspond to the historical Paul of the undisputed letters. These letters—2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus)—may have been written by friends or "disciples" in Paul's name to adapt his teachings to new situations.

There is ongoing debate about which letters, if any, are authored by someone other than Paul. The notion of *authorship* in antiquity covered a broad range of practices, including the use of secretaries, who sometimes had considerable freedom. Moreover, Paul's theology likely developed somewhat over time, and his pastoral approach varied from congregation to congregation. These factors, rather than non-Pauline authorship, may account for some of the unique features of the six contested letters.

## PAUL'S THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

Paul understood his message—his "gospel," or good news—to be the power of God at work in the world for the salvation of all people (Rom 1:16–17). This gospel was in continuity with the good news promised and proclaimed by Israel's prophets, and then taught and embodied by Jesus. Paul's gospel—what he called "the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thess 2:2, 8–9)—also stood in stark contrast to the Roman "gospel" of peace and salvation promised by the Empire and proclaimed by those who perceived in Augustus and his successors the means to human flourishing.

Paul's gospel, which he received from those before him (1 Cor 15:3–4), focused on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as being God's saving act of faithfulness to Israel and mercy to all. Paul proclaimed this surprising gospel of a crucified Messiah (1 Cor 1:18–2:5) as God's apocalyptic (revelatory) and eschatological (end-times) act that brought about the prophetically promised new covenant, new cre-

ation, and new age—the age of the Spirit. Thus N. T. Wright has rightly claimed that Paul's theology is a reconfiguration of Jewish theology in light of the Messiah and the Spirit. Scholars have debated how best to organize this theology; what, if anything, is at its center; and whether and how it developed over time. We will take a narrative approach, laying out the reshaped scriptural story of salvation Paul tells and how people are incorporated into it.

## HUMAN CONDITION, DIVINE RESPONSE

The one true God, YHWH, chose Israel to be the covenant people and thus the vehicle of divine blessing among the nations (Gentiles). This God is an impartial judge, who expects obedience from all people, whether through the law of Moses or through the unwritten law inscribed on human hearts (Rom 2). However, like the prophets, Paul believes that God

finds Israel faithless and disobedient, and the Gentiles idolatrous and immoral (Rom 1:18—3:20). God has therefore promised to establish a new, effective covenant with Israel (Jer 31:31—34; cf. 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6), and thus with and for all people.

Paul characterizes the human condition as one marked by both sins (or transgressions) and Sin, a cosmic power that holds humanity captive (Rom 1:18—3:20). Being under the power of Sin is like having an addiction that manifests itself in concrete acts. Without an intervention, the result is Death, both a living death in the present and a future, permanent separation from God. Human beings need a solution that deals with both: forgiveness for sins and liberation (redemption) from Sin—both an act of atonement and a new exodus. Only such a solution will restore them to life, to right covenant relations with God and others. The law of Moses, despite its divine origin, cannot bring about this life (Rom 3:20; 4:13; 5:12—21; 7:7—8:4).

In faithfulness to Israel and mercy to the Gentiles, God has acted in righteousness, that is, with saving restorative justice, by sending Jesus, the Messiah (“Son of God”), to effect salvation via his death and resurrection (known later as the “paschal mystery”).

### THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS

The death of Jesus the Messiah by crucifixion—Rome’s most degrading and shameful form of capital punishment—has rich and varied meaning for Paul. First of all, it is *revelatory*. It manifests Christ’s faithful obedience to the Father and his freely chosen self-giving love for humanity (Rom 8:35—37; Phil 2:5—8; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 2:20). It also discloses the Father’s faithfulness and love, as well as God’s counterintuitive and countercultural power and wisdom (Rom 5:1—11; 8:32, 39; 1 Cor 1:18—31). That is, the death of Jesus is both a Christophany and a theophany.

Second, Jesus’ death is *representative*. He dies as the faithful, obedient representative of God’s covenant people and the single representative of all human beings. He is a second Adam, whose actions contrast with and counteract those of Adam (Rom 5:12—21). In his death, Jesus is the paradigmatic human, faithful to God and loving toward others. Moreover, Jesus dies not only as humanity’s *representative*, but also in their place and for their sins (Rom 5:8; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14—15; Gal 1:4), fulfilling the role of Isaiah’s servant (Isa 52:13—53:12).

Third, Jesus’ death is *redemptive*. Jesus died both to forgive sins and to liberate from the power of Sin

(Rom 3:21—26). And fourth, therefore, Jesus’ death, as an act of both God and God’s Messiah, brings about human *reconciliation* with God (Rom 5:1—11; 2 Cor 5:11—21). In Christ’s death, God has acted to restore humanity to that for which it was created: right relations with God and others. In doing so, God has kept the promise to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed through him (Gal 3:6—14). Above all, the death of Christ is God’s act of amazing grace toward those who are God’s enemies: sinful, rebellious people, unworthy of such love (Rom 5:1—11).

The death of Jesus is not a saving event, however, without the resurrection. The resurrection is God’s act of vindicating and validating Jesus’ death. Without it, Jesus is simply another crucified victim and would-be messiah whose death reveals Rome’s victory, not God’s. Without it, there is no forgiveness of sins, no eternal life, indeed no purpose to life other than hedonistic pleasure (1 Cor 15:12—34). Although Paul can resolve to know nothing but a crucified Messiah (1 Cor 2:2), he also wants everyone to recognize that the crucified Jesus is now the resurrected and exalted Lord. At the same time, the exalted Lord always remains the crucified Jesus.

### JESUS AS LORD AND THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

When Paul speaks of Jesus as “Lord,” which he understands as the most basic affirmation of faith in the gospel (1 Cor 12:3), he once again means several things. First, Jesus has been exalted to a position of participation in God’s sovereignty, sharing the divine name, *Lord* (*kyrios*), and thus in the divine identity (Phil 2:9—11, interpreting Isa 45:23). Second, Jesus is the one on whom people must call for salvation (Rom 10:5—13, interpreting Joel 2:32[3:5]). Third, Jesus is worthy of obedience. To call on him and confess him as Lord means to pledge allegiance to him, to his way of faithfulness and love. And finally, to name Jesus as Lord is to reject all other lords and gods and any participation in them (1 Corinthians 10). If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not (as N. T. Wright has repeatedly put it), and neither is any other person or entity claiming rulership of the world and/or ultimate devotion.

God’s action in the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus is the climax in history of God’s promises to Israel (2 Cor 1:20). In him, the new exodus, new covenant, and new creation have been inaugurated, though in an utterly surprising way: via a crucified Messiah. Much Jewish thought at the time of Paul may be called *apocalyptic*, which is another term with many meanings. At the very least, however, it means that many Jews saw themselves as living in “this age” while anticipating “the

age to come." This age is characterized by sin, oppression, and injustice, while the age to come will be a time of righteousness, justice, and peace (*šālôm*).

In Christ, the new age has begun, but it is not yet here in its fullness. God's gift of the Holy Spirit—who is the Spirit of both the Father and the Son (Rom 8:9)—is at once the presence of God among the people of the Messiah and the promise of the fullness to come (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13–14). Scholars sometimes refer to this interim period, between Jesus' death/resurrection and his second coming (*parousia*), as the *overlap of the ages*. It is a time of "now but not yet." God's saving work will come to its ultimate conclusion, or *telos*, at the *parousia*. This does not mean either the removal of the church from this world (as in the popular notion of the "rapture") or the destruction of the world. Rather, the *parousia* signals a series of eschatological events, including the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the defeat of humanity's final enemy, Death (1 Cor 15:20–57; 1 Thess 4:13–18). It also signals the restoration of the entire cosmos to the wholeness intended by God (Rom 8:18–25; Col 1:15–20).

### HUMAN RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

We have thus far summarized Paul's understanding of God's redemptive action in Christ. But this grace does not convey automatically to human beings; there must be a response to the gospel of Christ crucified and raised.

Paul understands humanity's condition of being "in" sins and "under the power of" Sin as being "outside" Christ and his sovereignty. When the gospel is proclaimed, the appropriate human response, enabled by God's grace, is twofold: faith and baptism. When faith and baptism occur, a person is brought from being "outside" Christ to being "in" Christ. Being "in Christ," Paul's basic term for what we would call being a Christian, means to be located within the resurrected Messiah by being in his body, the community or assembly of Christ followers, and therefore under his lordship. In both faith and baptism (which probably occurred right after the public confession of faith), people begin a lifelong participation in Christ and his story by dying and rising with him (Gal 2:15–21; Rom 6:1–11). That is, to believe the gospel is to share existentially in God's saving act—Christ's death and resurrection.

Those who believe the gospel and are baptized into Christ undergo a transformation that Paul describes in many ways: they are, for instance, washed, justified, and sanctified (1 Cor 6:11). That is, they are forgiven of their sins, restored to right covenant relations with God in the midst of God's people, and set apart to live as part of God's covenant people. This occurs, not by

virtue of anyone's status or good deeds, but only by God's grace and the response of faith described above (Rom 3:27–31; 4:1–25; Gal 2:15–21; Eph 2:1–10).

Believers are now part of a new creation, remade for lives of righteousness (2 Cor 5:14–21). They are called to leave behind idolatry, immorality, and injustice. They are now the children of God the Father (*Abba*; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6), the "members" of Christ and his body (1 Cor 6:15; 12:12–31), and the temple of the Holy Spirit, both individually and corporately (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19). (This is one of many dimensions of Paul's incipient trinitarian theology.) The Holy Spirit supplies gifts for the common good (Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:7–16); produces "fruit," or Christlike virtues (Gal 5:16–26); and unites the community in faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13; Gal 5:5–6; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8) for faithful witness even in the face of opposition (e.g., Phil 1:3–2:18). The *ekklēsia* is a new family of brothers and sisters: male and female, slave and free, Gentile and Jew (Gal 3:25–28).

### PAUL'S SPIRITUALITY

Paul's spirituality is thus one of both individual and corporate participation and transformation. Those who have died with Christ and been raised with him to new life are also inhabited by him, that is, by the Spirit. This relationship of mutual indwelling—the Spirit/Christ inhabiting people, and vice versa—is true of both the *ekklēsia* as a community and each baptized individual (Gal 2:19–20; Rom 8:5–17). Paul refers to the relationship as *koinōnia* with both the Lord and one another—communion, partnership, solidarity (1 Cor 1:9; 10:16; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10)—and it should come to special expression at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16–22; 11:17–34; later called the Eucharist, "thanksgiving").

For Paul, the indwelling Christ is the one who lovingly gave himself on the cross. This means that Christ-filled individuals and communities will be characterized by a cross-shaped existence, or *cruciformity*. Cruciformity, which expresses the "mind of Christ," means especially a life of self-giving love that looks out for the needs of others rather than oneself—precisely what Christ did in his incarnation and crucifixion (Phil 2:1–11).

This transformation of thought and action (Rom 12:1–2) into Christlikeness is possible only by the activity of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:13–26; 2 Cor 3:17–18). Paul refers to all believers as "saints" or "holy ones." His goal is for each individual and community in Christ to become holy in anticipation of the final judgment (1 Thess 3:13; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:8). Holiness, then, is not reserved for a special class of saints but is for all.

It means being set apart for God's purposes. Holiness is therefore the lifestyle of an alternative culture to that of the dominant culture (for Paul, the culture of Rome), those who do not know God (1 Thess 4:5). It means knowing Christ by sharing both in his death and in the

power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10–14), thus participating in, and extending, God's saving mission.

Paul probably died a martyr at Rome in the 60s. In death as in life, his motto was "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1).

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