

Paul *Gentiles and Galatians*

We come to the critical study of the Pauline corpus with a certain trepidation. Of all areas of our Scriptural survey, this is both the most visited and the most controversial. Not only is the understanding of Paul the great Reformation bone of contention: it is also a place of crucial conflict in our own time. If any study could be said to affect the history of the whole Church, this study would be it.

Perhaps it would save a good deal of struggle if, for the purposes of this lecture, we accept the broad scholarly agreement about which letters are indubitably Pauline (see handout). We are using the Letter to the Galatians as our port of entry, because it is reasonably unified and short, and because Paul's own beliefs and outlook form part of its subject-matter.

We should note from the beginning that the *Acts of the Apostles* will not furnish us with a *primary* source for the study of Paul. It naturally does not have the same authority as the autograph letters Paul himself wrote, and crucially it is in conflict with the letters in important ways. We know that Paul thought himself an excellent Pharisee: specifically what that entailed in Tarsus is not clear to us. *Acts* tells us Paul grew up a disciple of Gamaliel I, but there is great reason to doubt that he spent his youth in Jerusalem. What seems quite certain is that Paul persecuted Christians; another reason to think he was no disciple of Gamaliel, who is depicted as speaking up for the Christians. As E P Sanders remarks, "if Paul had been a student of Gamaliel's, he did not learn harshness and intolerance from him". Remember that no Pharisee is depicted as speaking against Jesus at his trial. The enemies of the Christian movement were the Priests; and the Priests were no Pharisees, but Sadducees to a man.

You will see from the dating in the handout that Paul's letters date from the fifties to the early sixties of the first century. This makes them by several years the oldest Christian documents we have, very much the oldest documents in the New Testament. Remember: the earliest Gospel was written well after the latest of Paul's letters. This means that the Pauline Corpus represents our best window into the mind of the early Church, our nearest way to the thought of the first generation of believers. This is especially true when (as in the institution account of the Eucharist in 1 Cor, or in the Christological hymns of Philippians and Colossians) Paul is quoting a source even earlier than himself.

This is more than pious hyperbole. The letters of Paul do not only tell us his mind: they actually contain the ghost-voices of his correspondents; a fact we'd do well to bear in mind, rather than assuming that every line of the letters represents Pauline thinking. Frequently it is possible that the line in question may be a quotation from the letter Paul is answering, rather than a long-excogitated principle from the mind of Paul himself. For example, take 1 Cor 10: 23. Paul is expounding the principles to be observed about food sacrificed to idols. He says

Everything is permissible: maybe so, but not everything does good.
True, everything is permissible, but not everything builds people up

The first sentence is obviously a quote from the letter he is answering. It may even represent something he had once said to the Galatian correspondents, so that they are quoting his own words back to him. Realising this, he reiterates the statement on his own account, but introduces a governing principle: how much good does a particular exercise of freedom achieve? One can imagine these words being used as weapons in a dispute about morality: they are clearly a dangerous weapon in the wrong context and the wrong hands. "Everything is permissible" is not a principle we should like to issue without qualification in any human community.

We possess no copy of any letter to Paul from a church: so we have to reconstruct their tone and concerns from the Pauline letters themselves.

Talking of excogitated principles brings us to the question of Paul's status as a theologian. He is a creative, accomplished, inventive thinker with a fondness for bold expressions. But we never get the impression that Paul has *thought* himself into his doctrine. He is speaking out of an overwhelming spiritual experience - which in some of its dimensions (he tells us) *cannot and may not be put into words*. This is the main reason why his thought is *never* presented to us as an organised system. Maybe the stage the Church had reached in realising itself would not have allowed of such a thing anyway. Rather, Paul comes across to us in these letters, written in answer to the special problems of individual churches that are well-known to him; and he addresses his response in whatever mode is best suited to, or most needful for, that particular church. As in all the history of the early Church, we can clearly see the crises and questions driving the theology forward, as Jewish or pagan thinking is hammered into a Christian shape. Paul is particularly hammering the likes of the Corinthians - who live in a city fulsomely pagan; but he is also working on some of the attitudes of the Jerusalem Church, as they seep into his new Churches with insidious effect. His constant defence of his own Apostolic Credentials shows that he was being denounced as an upstart with a bad record whose word is not to be trusted: another example of reconstruction would be the exegesis of Gal 1: 10:

Whom am I trying to convince now - human beings, or God? Am I trying to please human beings? If I were still doing that I should not be a servant of Christ.

The implication is that he has been accused of picking up Gentile converts by preaching to them a lax and emasculated religion. Jewish male proselytes had to face being circumcised (an even more off-putting ordeal than Total Immersion, which defeats many a Baptist convert today). Paul's abandonment of circumcision, diet, and the other requirements of the Mosaic law is denounced as "trying to please human beings". Paul retorts that his life has become immensely harder since he became "a servant of Christ".

So the *Letter to the Galatians* concentrates on the liberation of the Christian from the demands of the Mosaic Law, because the Jerusalem Church has a particular difficulty over admitting Gentiles without imposing on them the demands of Jewishness. This may give us the impression of Paul as a crusading libertarian, determined to free the Christian life from Jewish shackles. In no way does this do him justice; he writes (Rm 6: 18)

You may have been liberated from slavery to sin, but only to become slaves of righteousness

Paul is not preaching lax morality. In *1 Corinthians*, by contrast, he is confronted by a young church which is confused about seeing the place of ethical demands; themselves captivated by the beauty of Christian freedom, they have drawn the conclusion that any behaviour at all is acceptable. This means quite a lot in a city like Corinth, whose multifarious paganism was notorious, and by Judaeo-Christian standards deeply immoral. In letters to this church, therefore, the careful reader will find exhortations to the keeping of commandments which will contrast clearly with some statements in the *Letter to the Galatians*.

It is paradoxical that, despite the rickety state of his system of thought, Paul can still be so positive in his assertions; and we have to build into the picture a series of new convictions in Paul-the-Christian which are too deeply-held for any question. It is precisely because these perceptions have enlarged his Jewish understanding almost to the point of detonation that he has to struggle so hard to find coherent expression. We have the clear impression that, in some of the things he finds himself saying, he is even shocking himself.

Letter to the Galatians: Sitz im Leben

It will be important to discern the life-setting of the *Letter* before we read it, and as you probably haven't recently read it, you can accept some help from me in doing so. I've said that Paul's letters are largely generated and formed by particular pastoral needs or crises in the community he is addressing¹. This one is a case in point.

The form of the crisis can be adduced from Gal 2: 14. Paul has been watching the behaviour of the Jerusalem Church and its apostles, particularly Peter.

When I saw, though, that their behaviour was not true to the Gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all of them: *Since you, though you are a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?*

This is the vital core of the *Letter*; but it has to be extrapolated from a dense undergrowth of live controversy, a real, urgent pastoral crisis. An argument has arisen about the heart of Paul's foundational proclamation to the Galatians: that they, as Gentiles, are saved entirely through their faith in the crucified Jesus, and that there is nothing to say that they should adopt Jewish religious practice or obedience. With hindsight the principle that is emerging could be stated very simply: it is that these Gentile converts are the first People of the New Testament. But the categories of Old and New Testament are not yet formed, not yet available as reference-points. What we are watching in this letter is the hot metal in the crucible, the pouring and casting of which is so deeply significant for the future of religion. The crucible is, in this department, the mind of Paul. Your awareness of his importance will depend on your understanding of the issues he faced and resolved, often by sheer force of personality. Few men have had more influence on the Christian Church; many commentators, especially from outside the Church, believe that he "invented Christianity".

¹ *Romans* appears to have a more synthetic aim, in that Paul is distinctly motivated to construct something much more comprehensive and free-standing, a genuine literary work. Nevertheless, it still carries much material *ad ecclesiam*, directed to the needs of the Church he is addressing.

Paul's Dilemma

The *Acts of the Apostles* gives us a description of the first conversions which is polyvalent in terms of race and religion. You will remember the large number of races who listened to the proclamation at Pentecost. The apostolic mission remains a Jewish one until chapter 8, in which Philip the deacon goes to Samaria, where the people are still regarded as a sort of honorary Jews. But then comes the baptism of the eunuch of the Candake of Ethiopia, an unlikely candidate for Judaism: the first clear example of a Gentile convert. After this, Peter's visit to Cornelius, a Roman centurion who is a God-fearer and a benefactor to Jewish causes, results in a mass baptism accompanied by pentecostal signs. Peter says: *Could anyone refuse the waters of baptism to these people, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*

Then the scene shifts (Acts 11) to Antioch in Syria, the principal city of Asia Minor and a Roman colony, the third city of the Empire in size. Barnabas discovers that refugees from the persecution following Stephen's death have preached in Antioch, and that numbers of Gentiles have already been baptised. The cardinal phrase is *He was glad to see that God had given grace.*

It is when certain of the Jewish Christians - led by *James the brother of the Lord* - complain about the liberty granted to the Gentile converts, towards the prescriptions ancestrally enjoined upon the Jews, that strife breaks out. We have it from Paul in Galatians that Peter found himself swayed by their arguments and sided with them - which led to the outburst of Paul with which we began our consideration of Galatians.

It is worth stopping to consider what this policy towards the Gentiles cost Paul in terms of his personal inclination. If we read Philippians 3: 4-6 we shall hear the true timbre of Paul's self-respect as a Jew.

We are the true people of the circumcision, since we worship by the Spirit of God, and make Jesus Christ our only boast, not relying on physical qualifications (*literally* "flesh") although I myself could rely on these too. If anyone does claim to rely on them, my claim is better. Circumcised on the eighth day of my life, I was born of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents. In the matter of the Law, I was a Pharisee; as for religious fervour, I was a persecutor of the Church; as for the uprightness embodied in the Law, I was faultless

Again and again we hear of Paul's assiduous Pharisaism and we know instinctively that he was fully engaged in that mode of his religion.

For this reason, we should not be surprised at the cutting edge of the Pauline spirit. He knows as he writes that the person who most needs to be confirmed and sustained in his faith is himself. In 2 Cor 11: 21bff we shall find his record as a religionist in panoramic form. It is as if his fidelity to Christ is a constant investment on the foundation of his Jewish practice. In the *Letter to Rome*, chapter 9 opens with the most moving and heartfelt expression of his grief at the abandonment of his place in the Jewish synagogue.

The truth is that all the apparatus of argument Paul marshals to support his decision never serves as an *explanation* of his position. That might have suggested that he was argued into his position by intellectual means. It didn't happen like that; in fact, a fully

coherent intellectual justification for his position was still not clearly in place when he wrote Galatians.

From various evidence we can construct Paul's compositional technique. In several cases we find the last paragraph of a letter in autograph: Galatians (6: 11) is a case in point, as is 1 Cor (16: 21) and 2 Thess (3: 17). This means that the body of the letters must have been *dictated*. It seems certain that, from time to time, the dictation became frenetic and hurried to the point where the poor scribe falls hopelessly behind. Perhaps this is how the end of the rhetorical question

What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body doomed to death?

gets lost in a totally lame jumble of questionable grammar. Paul was clearly very emotional at that point.

This accounts for Paul's clearly rhetorical passages. We are not seeing Paul, pen in hand, carefully piling up vocabulary to be oratorically delivered. He is actually waving his arms about, waxing eloquent on the hoof: he has the training and experience of a rabbi, and the words are flowing in him as if his audience is actually in front of him. The hard-pressed scribe actually appears to us in Romans 16: 22, and we know that he had two elder brothers:

I, Tertius, who am writing this letter, greet you in the Lord.

This makes it all the more remarkable that the letter to the Galatians can be divided into such clear passages of rhetoric as the one on the back of your handout, which have been discerned by H D Betz, and can be found reproduced in the NJBC.²

One of the values of studying this particular letter is in the *Narratio*, where Paul tells his own story of coming to faith in Jesus. We should contrast this version with the thrice-told story in *Acts* (cc 9, 22, 26) which contain minor contrasts in their telling³. The whole presentation of Paul's experience seems to be quite different, and *Gal* raises large questions about the place in which Paul became a persecutor; in *Acts*, Jerusalem: but in *Gal*

(I) was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judaea which are in Christ.

If we contrast that with *Acts'* sensational account of Paul's presence at the stoning of Stephen, it is strange indeed. However, *Gal* gives us a vivid account of the growing friction between the Jerusalem Church and the Gentile mission. This raises the issue of how the Church was growing at this period. We call Paul "apostle of the gentiles", but he

² *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* is imperfect as a tool for the study of Paul, in that its confiding of all the Pauline articles to Fr Fitzmyer excludes from it much of the rather revolutionary work of more modern scholars like E P Sanders. Fr Fitzmyer appears as a Jesuit promoting positions which would not have upset Martin Luther very much. The new light on Paul, drawing on a rethinking of the nature of rabbinic, and by extension Pharisaic, religion, seriously puts into question the whole basis of Reformation theories of justification. Needless to say, Sanders and his fellow-sappers are not universally loved in Protestant schools of theology.

³ Eg "He fell" and "I fell", but "We all fell"; "They heard the voice (but) could see no-one" but "They saw the light but did not hear the voice".

is often presented *in statu pupillari* to Barnabas, who was the first to recognise in Antioch the workings of grace; and even *Acts*, of which Paul is undoubtedly the hero, retains a story (14: 11ff) of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra, where the people chair the two apostles as “gods in human form”; but it is Barnabas who is called Zeus - king of the gods - and Paul (the principal speaker) is accorded only the title of Hermes, the messenger. This should remind us that several non-Pauline missions to gentile territory must have taken place, and that the apostolic traditions surrounding figures like Thomas and James the Greater lead them to India and to Spain. The survival of the Pauline letters and their acceptance into the Canon of scripture has undoubtedly focused our attention on Paul in a unique way.

In the *Propositio* we find the nub of Paul’s argument. It is underpinned by, but not fashioned from, a quotation from Ps 143:

Lord hear my prayer, listen to my pleading;
In your constancy answer me, in your saving justice.
Do not put your servant on trial, for no-one can be found guiltless at your tribunal.

In a parallel, and much more fulsome quotation in Romans 3, on a similar theme, Paul chooses Ps 14:

The fool has said in his heart, *There is no God*.
Their deeds are corrupt and vile, not one of them does right.
The Lord looks down from heaven at the children of Adam,
to see if a single one is wise, a single one seeks God.
All alike have turned away, all alike turned sour;
not one of them does right, not a single one

and eventually follows this up with a citation of the Ps 143 quoted above. Paul assumes for purposes of argument that it is possible to fulfil the Law of Moses in an external sense: he himself often claims to have done so (*I was faultless*). He is asserting far more than the universality of sinfulness; he is asserting that the Law and its obedience cannot produce in us what the free act of God (his accounting us as just) alone can do. And this free act of God, for Paul, is attached to the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the one crucified and raised from the dead, in whom sinful people of whatever race can be reconciled to God.

The recognition that the Torah, heart and soul of his Jewish obedience, must now be put aside, is easily expressed. Paul knew that the heart of his faith was now the Son of God whom the Father had “chosen to reveal in him” (Gal 1: 15); and he had to find a new way of looking at the life he had lived with the Torah at its heart. The transition is so traumatic to him, that its only paradigm is the crucifixion itself:

Through the Law I am dead to the Law, so that I can be alive to God.
I have been crucified with Christ, and yet I am alive:
yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me.
The life I am now living, subject to the limitations of human nature,
I am living in faith: faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.

He now sees the Law as having a startlingly twofold image: it is the nurse who had charge of him in his childhood: but it is also the executioner who sentenced him to death,

or by enumerating the facts of crime, convicted him (= us) of unrighteousness. Still, the mere *presence* of a Law gives no power to *keep* the Law: it only witnesses against those who break it. In this way Paul comes to see the awe-inspiring Torah as a staging-post on the way to the full revelation and inheritance God had always planned: the knowledge of Christ, the sacraments of rebirth, and the life of grace which undercuts the need for the Law. The human nature of Jesus becomes the stage on which this drama is unfolded, where we see the punishment which human nature deserves vented on the undeserving Jesus: as the corresponding passage in Romans 8: 3ff has it:

What the Law could not do because of the weakness of human nature, God did, sending his own Son (in the same human nature as any sinner) to be a sacrifice for sin: and (in that same human nature) condemning sin

The words *human nature* in the *New Jerusalem Bible* represent the Greek *sarx*, "flesh". The problems of the flesh are not solved in the flesh by fleshly means, but by the gift of the Spirit. Indeed, because the Law belongs to the pre-Christian world that is anchored in the flesh, it becomes a weapon in the hands of the world's elemental masters, the powers of fleshly creation. This is why it becomes a death-dealing presence. In Galatians we shall see this expressed in Proof 4 in these words:

So too with us: as long as we were still under age, we were enslaved to the elements of this world; but when the fulness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as sons. As you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son crying *Abba, Father*, and so you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir, by God's own act.

In the more reflective *Letter to the Romans* this becomes an almost ecstatic passage:

All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God; for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out *Abba, Father!* The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God. And if we are children then we are heirs, joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory.

This thought continues to be influential throughout the Pauline corpus, so that in Colossians 2: 20 ff we read:

If you have really died with Christ to the principles of this world, why do you still let rules dictate to you, as though you were still living in this world? "Do not pick up this, do not eat that, do not touch the other", and all about things that perish even while they are being used - "according to merely human commandments and doctrines"!....Since you have been raised up to be with Christ, you must look for the things that are above, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.