

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, mainly because it is reasonably unified and short.

NB The *Acts of the Apostles* will not be a primary source for the study of Paul. It does not have the same authority as the autograph letters Paul himself wrote, and it is in conflict with the letters in important ways.

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, as well as very much the oldest documents in the New Testament. Sustain this fact: that 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 more than pious hyperbole; because the letters of Paul actually contain the ghost-voices of his correspondents (a fact you would do well to bear in mind when assuming that every line of the letters represents Pauline theology; 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). We possess no instance 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 his thought is *never* presented to us as an organised system. Rather, he 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.

So the Letter to the Galatians concentrates on the liberation of the Christian from the demands of the Mosaic Law, because they have 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 1 Corinthians, by contrast, he is confronted by a church which has great difficulty in seeing the place of ethical demands; themselves obsessed with 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 is well-established, 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 statements in the Letter to the Galatians.

It is paradoxical that Paul can be so positive in his assertions; and we have to build into the picture a series of convictions in Paul which are too deeply-held for any question. It is precisely because these perceptions have enlarged his understanding almost to the point of detonation that he has to struggle so hard to find coherent expression.