

Paul and the Globalisation of Christianity

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In *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, Robert Morgan has listed four lasting contributions that Paul has made to Christian talk about God.¹ Morgan does not include in Paul's "enduring legacy" the fact that Paul was the one theologically responsible for Christianity becoming a global religion, for Christianity indeed becoming a religion at all, rather than a pathway or a sect within Jewish religion. So here is the place to outline another aspect of that legacy: Paul's globalising tendency.

Jesus did not initiate a mission to the gentiles during his own lifetime. There is evidence that he received gentiles when they came to him, sometimes warmly (the centurion Lk 7.2–10), sometimes reluctantly (the Syrophenician woman, Mk 7.25–30), but, like John the Baptist, he did not make any move towards taking the message of the coming Kingdom of God outside the house of Israel. The mission of the twelve (Mk 6.7–11) and of "seventy others" (Lk 10.4–11) to go out two-by-two preaching and healing was, it would seem, to Israel alone.

One can certainly argue that the implication of some of Jesus's teaching is that it was available to all (e.g. the Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son) but Jesus himself showed little interest, so far as we know, in the spiritual welfare of gentiles. The same was true for a decade or more of the first followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish. According to the Acts of the Apostles the first move was made by Peter when he baptised Cornelius and his household – though according to Acts 10 the initiative was taken by the Holy Spirit! It was also Peter who had the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven that was, in retrospect, taken to imply the abolition of the Jewish food restrictions (Acts 11).

Yet it was Paul who became identified with the gentile mission and it was Paul who in the 50s developed a theology to justify the baptism of "God-fearers" and other converts from paganism *without the necessity of adopting the initiation rites and ritual practice of Judaism*, in particular circumcision and the food laws. The root of all this lay in Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. (And despite recent

¹ R. Morgan, "Paul's enduring legacy" in J.D.G. Dunn (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, CUP 2003, p. 253f.

debate, I shall continue to speak of it as a conversion; it may not have been a conversion from one religion to another as at this stage there was no Christianity to convert to, but it was a conversion in the Benedictine sense of a “conversion of life”.) Saul, as he then was, had been an ultra-orthodox defender of the Jewish torah as delivered through Moses, such that he tried to put down this new heretical movement derived from Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, whatever he saw or heard in detail on the Jerusalem-Damascus road, he certainly had an intense religious experience which he took to be an encounter with the risen Jesus. Through this experience he came to realise that Moses was not enough. If Moses and the torah had been enough, there would have been no need for God to act through Jesus of Nazareth. But he had so acted and, for Paul, the resurrection was the act that confirmed this. Read 1 Corinthians 15 and you will see that the resurrection is not an optional extra for Paul; everything depends on it.

So God has done something new, there is a “new creation” (Galatians 6.15). Paul’s conviction that God has raised Jesus from the dead led him to realise that that death must have some positive meaning. Jesus had been condemned by the law, both Jewish law represented by Caiaphas and Roman law represented by Pilate, and he had been executed as a criminal, a lawbreaker. That God has raised this man from the dead shows that God has overturned the law that had brought Jesus to his death. The law that placed a curse on everyone who hangs on a tree (Gal 3.13ff referring to Deuteronomy 21.22ff.) is no longer effective. The power of that law, religious or secular, has been broken. That law no longer has the power to justify anyone in the presence of God. The law can condemn but it cannot save.

Paul does not seem to have initiated the gentile mission but he came to represent it at the Jerusalem Council held in or around AD 48. His practice was to preach the gospel and baptise former pagans without requiring the men to be circumcised. The fuss was about circumcision but what was in question was the status of the whole torah. For Paul the torah had become something of an irrelevance as salvation now comes through Jesus rather than Moses, and the law, insofar as it commanded tribal practices despised in the pagan world (circumcision), was an obstacle to the acceptance of the gospel. To this end Paul was prepared to make all kinds of cultural adaptations:

For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jew I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law – though not myself being under the law – that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law . . . that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings. (1 Cor 10.19–23)

And elsewhere, “we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor 10.12). So if anyone is deterred by having to get circumcised or keep the food laws or rites of purification, those laws have to go!

Of course, Paul had a hard time using scripture to justify this as circumcision is clearly commanded by God in Genesis 17. Paul came up with some tortuous and not always convincing exegesis which typically involved rooting his ideas in texts chronologically earlier than Genesis 17, that is, in the earlier experience of Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15. Moses came “four hundred and thirty years after” so he hardly counts because the law does not annul a covenant already established on promise, a promise given to Abraham who was pronounced a just man because he had believed God’s promise (a paraphrase of Galatians 3.15–18 referring to Genesis 12). It is not surprising, then, that this messianic movement that dealt so lightly with God-given ritual came to be seen within Judaism as heretical after AD 48 and was eventually forced to go its own way outside the synagogue. But through his theology Paul had effectively globalised a messianic form of Jewish religion. It became available for all, Jews and gentiles. Clearly justification or salvation can no longer be based on works of the law because this law is only available to Jews. What do believing Jews and gentiles have in common? Their belief, their faith. It is on that basis that both come into the Church; and on that basis that both can stand before God, justified.

We can see from Romans 9–11 that getting the gentiles in was a matter of great urgency. God, we are told, is about to intervene in world history in a short time, perhaps even before Paul dies (1 Thessalonians 4.15). In the meantime God has turned away from the Jews for a time and he has turned toward the gentiles; the former have been pruned from the olive tree while the latter have been grafted on. But God will return to the Jews once the full number of gentiles has been called in. So Paul and his companions have to get a move on to take the gospel to the gentiles throughout the known world in the short time that is left, “so that all Israel will be saved” after the gentiles have been brought in (Romans 11.26). Hence his journeys round Asia Minor and his wish to go to Rome and Spain (Romans 15.24). One could reasonably say, as Ernst Käsemann did, that Paul was a religious fanatic.

The other driving force in Paul’s life as a missionary and theologian was to maintain unity within the Church: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (to quote Ephesians 4.5 which Paul didn’t write). Paul wanted no divisions. You can see this in the opening to 1 Corinthians where he tries to dissolve the separate parties that had emerged in the local Church, “I appeal to you . . . that there be no dissensions among you but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor 1.10). You can see this in his accusation against Peter at

Antioch where Peter mixed and ate with the gentiles but then separated himself after the so-called Judaisers had arrived from Jerusalem (Gal 2.11ff). Believers were now members of a new covenant (a theme better developed in *Hebrews* than Paul's own letters) and the sign or seal of that membership is baptism. He saw baptism as, so to speak, a bigger and better sign of a bigger and better covenant. The sign of the old covenant is circumcision (Gen 17.11) but its limitation is that it is only for Jews, only for men and, you would suppose, only for free-men, though in fact Jews circumcised their slaves as well (v.12f.). With baptism there are no such limitations. In a much misused quotation that, when read in context, is clearly about baptism: "For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ, so there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.27 f.). In baptism into the new covenant-people, there are no racial distinctions, no social distinctions and no gender distinctions. All are baptised together, all eat together and all worship together. Paul illustrated this with his talk of eating from one loaf because we are all one body (1 Cor 10.17), for again the problem with the practice of the eucharist at Corinth in the early 50s was that there were divisions and factions, on that occasion between the wealthy and the poor (1 Cor 11.18 f.).

At this point we must allude to the recent debate about what Paul meant by justification, represented on the one hand by Luther's interpretation of justification and on the other by the so-called "new perspective" on Paul that began with Ed Sanders in his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* of 1977. For over four centuries the understanding of Paul in Protestant theology – and that's where most of the theological literature on Paul has originated – had been shaped by Martin Luther's interpretation of "justification by faith" (alone) as found first in Galatians and then developed a couple of years later in Romans. Luther has a very individual understanding, reflecting his own experience, of the lone sinner, racked by religious scruples, standing before God, as in a court of law, under judgment but asking how he may stand uncondemned. Is it by appealing to the good works he has performed? No, because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and all deserve condemnation (Romans 3.23). His only hope is to fall on the mercy of God and trust that he will be saved as he is, a sinner, a justified sinner. All he can do is believe it. Justification by faith is what Paul Tillich called "the acceptance of acceptance".

Advocates of "the new perspective", among other things, object to such an individualised interpretation grounded in Luther's own (perhaps neurotic) crisis of conscience as an Augustinian friar. What is looked for now is a more social, communal interpretation. So, Sanders tells us, "justification by faith" is not about a private

moment between the individual and God, it is to be seen as an account, expressed in juridical terms, of the basis upon which the gentiles can be received into the Church. The basis upon which *both Jews and gentiles* can come into the Church, we are assured, is faith, “first the Jew and then the Greek, for God shows no partiality” (Romans 2.10 f.).

This emphasis is certainly true. “Justification by faith” is about the inclusion and equality of all people in a global, universal Church. Christians come to the Church because they wish to be accepted by and united with a God who is more generous and merciful than anything we can imagine because, unlike secular judges, “he passes over our former sins” (Romans 3.25).

But Luther was also right. Sin is indeed an obstacle but God counts (*logizesthai*) us as just (*dike*, righteous, innocent, not guilty) when God accepts us. It shouldn’t be too difficult to work out a way of understanding Paul which sees the Lutheran forensic interpretation of justification as the reverse side of the new perspective’s emphasis on “justification” as a metaphor for the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles on equal terms in the Church.

In his theology Paul encapsulated a vision of the whole of humanity incorporated into the Church through their faith that “God has raised him [Jesus] from the dead” (Romans 10.9) and “reconciled all things to himself”, a faith articulated in a gospel that Paul sought to take round the then known world. In such a Church tribal regulations were to be of no account. It would be a truly global Church, a Catholic Church. For Paul it would be a tragedy that Jewish religion would for the most part go its own way and develop independently into Judaism. We have yet to see the fulfilment of his prophecy that “a hardening has come upon a part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and so *all* Israel will be saved” (Romans 11.25f).

In the century after his death, how did Paul’s successors live up to his vision?

Even in the first century there were many and varied streams of Pauline influence. In the generation that followed Paul there was a branch that produced Colossians, and another that produced Ephesians (they are not by the same hand, though it is just possible Paul wrote Colossians). A Jewish Christian who was concerned about his congregation returning to Judaism wrote Hebrews. Nearer the end of the century another Paulinist wrote the Pastoral Letters. And the author of Luke/Acts must have had some connection with Paul.

As much as our limited and fragmentary sources from the second century allow, it seems other writers either didn’t know much about Paul, didn’t understand him or didn’t think much of him: John, Papias, Ignatius, Justin. Unfortunately the strongest defender of Paul in the middle second century was Marcion, active in Rome

around 150, influenced by Gnosticism and subsequently condemned (rightly) as a heretic. Marcion latched on to some of Paul's language to emphasise a spiritual interpretation of the gospel ("flesh and blood cannot inherit eternal life") and went on to identify two gods: the Old Testament god of creation and the spiritual god of Christianity who can be experienced if we loosen our ties with materiality. So the Jewish scriptures are out and cannot be part of a Christian Bible. Christ "is the end of the law" and Jewish religion is excluded (all very reminiscent of the *Deutsche Christen*). In Marcion's version of Christianity, God does show partiality – to the gentiles. His is not an all-inclusive Church, not a Catholic Church, because the Jews qua Jews are excluded. They could only be baptised if they threw off their Jewishness to be replaced by the gnosis that comes with believing Marcion's version of the gospel. It is significant that Marcion's canon excluded Matthew's Gospel because it was too affirmative of the torah ("do not think that I have come to abandon the law and the prophets..." Mt 5.17) and the Letter of James because it tried to correct Paul. In the end Marcion so trimmed back the emerging Christian canon that not only was there no Old Testament but there was only one Gospel, a reduced version of Luke, and ten Pauline letters. One can say unequivocally that Marcion was not Catholic. In seeking to exclude others from the Church, Marcion and his many followers excluded themselves. So much for Paul's universal vision.

In laying the basis of a theology for a global Church, Paul had done his job all too successfully. In spreading the gospel to all nations, in becoming all things to all people, his engagement had been with Judaism. But a huge shift took place over the following decades: in the New Testament all the writers were Jewish; in the second century all the prominent Christians writers were gentile. The engagement was now with paganism and the context had shifted so much that no one seemed to know how to deal with Paul's theology any more. Think of Harnack's famous comment that no one understood Paul in the second century except Marcion, and he misunderstood him! Certainly Marcion's rejection of Jewish scripture on the back of his regard for Paul is odd when you think how far Paul used scripture to show that those who believe God's promises are the true descendants of Abraham.

The Ebionite rejection of Paul in favour of torah was equally one-sided and it was Irenaeus's achievement to ensure the inclusion of all apostolic traditions in the canon. Irenaeus was at least able to draw on Paul's condemnation of factions in Corinth even if he doesn't seem to have done much else with Paul's theology. So the Old Testament was retained in Christian tradition but as a foretaste of the good things to come, not the true form of those realities (to almost quote the Letter to the Hebrews). It was then interpreted

allegorically and typologically so that Paul's apparent rejection of the law was taken to refer to ritual law but not moral law as Christianity moved towards a law-based morality in a way that Paul in his letters did not. Of course, Paul's attitude to torah is difficult and is not a simple rejection of it, but no Paulinist could complain about allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament given what Paul gets up to in some of his arguments in Romans and especially Galatians, where there are some very stretched arguments based on his own allegorical interpretations of scriptural texts.

So, Paul seems to have largely gone missing in second century theology because his engagement with Judaism no longer formed the context for a theology that had now to deal with paganism. The so-called "new perspective on Paul" has emerged in the last two decades or so because the Church has renewed its dialogue with Judaism since 1945. Paul stands at the centre of that difficult conversation. We have had to wait a long time for this new perspective and alarmingly it has taken Hitler's gas chambers to provoke it as Christians seek to assuage an ancient guilt.

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