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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Pauline Concept of the Economy of Salvation

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Paul's understanding of his mission is intrinsically related to his concept of the plan of salvation. The plan of salvation provides the theological foundation of Paul's missionary task. Paul describes his role in relation to a "pattern" when he speaks of himself as a "minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God" (Rom. 15:16). So we would like to investigate first of all the nature of the "plan" behind the pattern.

A. Plan: Terminological discussion

Paul speaks of the divine plan to save men as a "mystery"¹ (Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:7-10; Col. 1:26-27; Eph. 1:8-10; 3:10). He gives a christological content to the concept of "mystery" and explains the plan of salvation in relation to the revealed mystery of God. In Paul the term *mysterion* occurs 21 times (including the Pastorals).² In 1 Cor. 4:1; Col. 1:25-27;³ Eph. 1:9;⁴ 3:2-4;⁵ 3:9 the word "mystery" is linked up with *oikonomia*. What is the

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¹ The term has a complex background. It is debated whether this term is explicable from the Semitic background or from the background of Hellenistic mystery religions. See R.E. Brown, "The Pre-Christian Concept of Mystery," *CBQ*, 20 (1958), pp. 417-443. See also C.K. Barrett, "Mystery Religions," *The New Testament Background, Selected Documents* (1971), pp. 91-104. Cf. J. Armitage Robinson, "On the meaning of *mysterion* in the New Testament," *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (1903), pp. 234-240.

² In the New Testament apart from Pauline epistles the word is found only once in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk. 4:11/Matt. 13: 11/Lk. 8:10) and four times in the book of Revelation (1: 20; 10: 7; 17: 5, 7).

³ In Col. 1: 25-27, the mystery *par excellence* has a specific reference to the Gentiles. According to Prat, Col. 1:27 represents the scheme of redemption. *The Theology of Saint Paul* (1961), Vol. 11, p. 384.

⁴ At Eph. 1: 9, the plan of God includes not only the salvation of the Gentiles but also of the whole universe. Prat calls it the "redeeming plan." *The Theology of Saint Paul*, Vol. 4, p. 384.

⁵ At Eph. 3: 24, the plan of salvation is interpreted as a revealed mystery which is nothing but the salvation of the Gentiles.

relation between *musterion* and *oikonomia*? How do they convey the ideas associated with the divine plan of salvation?

John Reumann in his article "Oikonomia-terms in Paul in comparison with Lucan *Heilsgeschichte*"⁶ gives three general observations on the background of *oikonomia*. We would like to summarise the relevant sections as follows:

(i) *Oikonomia* and its related terms (*oikonomos*, *oikonomein*, *dioikesis*) were "in the air" with a variety of meanings in the first century A.D. According to Reumann, "there had been a steady development of usages from the root meaning of management in a household (*oikos*) to management of a city state (*polis*) to the management of the world (*kosmos*)."⁷

(ii) In the LXX *oikonomia*-terms are not significantly used. Perhaps there was no Semitic equivalent to the Stoic idea of an *oikonomia* of God. The Hebrew words underlying *oikonomia* are *memshala* and *masab*.

(iii) Although *oikonomia* is a rare word in the Old Testament literature, "the books composed in Greek and the literature of Hellenistic Judaism employed these words much more commonly and with meanings similar to the Stoic use. Here *oikonomia* and related terms are employed to describe Yahweh's rule in nature and history." Philo also refers to the divine administration of the universe much as the Stoics did. For him, God is the administrator who manages the whole world savingly.⁸ Josephus also speaks of God's rule and providence. Of all the New Testament writers, Luke makes use of the word in all its forms.⁹

The above discussion shows that Hellenistic Judaism took over the *oikonomia*-vocabulary in order to speak of God's rule in the world. The accent falls on God's rule and his plan. It is quite possible that Paul being a Hellenistic Jew was familiar with the terminology of Hellenistic Judaism and its writings and made use of it in order to accentuate the rule of God in history with special reference to the divine plan revealed in Christ. For Paul, God's willingness to share the knowledge of his rule in history through Christ is an "open secret" which must be proclaimed to the world (Col. 1:25-27). Thus the idea of "mystery" according to Paul is an integral aspect of *oikonomia*. Paul wants to make it clear that he is called to carry Christ the mystery of God to the Gentiles.

⁶ NTS, Vol. XIII (1966-67), pp. 147-167 for the terminological discussion of the term. See also O. Michel, "Oikonomia," TDNT, Vol. V, pp. 151-154.

⁷ John Reumann, "Oikonomia-terms in Paul," p. 150.

⁸ IV, 281, 5 (Cohn-Wendland ed.)

⁹ In the parable of the dishonest steward (Lk. 16: 1-13), Luke refers to the words *Oikonomia*, *Oikonomeo*, *Oikonomos*. But he uses them in the sense of the office of the household administration and the discharge of this office.

Paul's concept of "mystery" can thus be summarised as follows:

- (i) It was mediated in eternity in the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:10).
- (ii) It was concealed from the *aeons* (1 Cor. 2:8; Col. 1:26; Rom. 15:25; Eph. 3:9).
- (iii) It was hidden in God, the creator of all things (Eph. 3:9).
- (iv) It is now revealed in Christ (Col. 2:2).
- (v) The full revelation of the mystery—Christ—takes place in preaching (Col. 1:26; cf. Rom. 15:19).

In order to accentuate the idea of revealing the mystery—Christ to the Gentiles, Paul makes use of several words of "mission vocabulary,"¹⁰ *katangellein* (1 Cor. 2:1; Col. 1:28); *lalein* (1 Cor. 2:7; Col. 4:3); *euangelisasthai* (Eph. 3:8); *photisai* (Eph. 3:9); *phanaroun* (Col. 4:4). Paul believes that he is commissioned to make the revealed mystery known to the Gentiles.¹¹ He fulfils his role not only through preaching, but also through his personality (Col. 1:24-26).

To sum up: When Paul speaks about the revelation of the "mystery" he understands his role along with it as (i) to announce the plan of God and the content of "mystery" and (ii) to show how the plan is being carried out (Eph. 3:6). The mystery and revelation are two sides of the same coin. The plan "to save men" is not merely revealed in preaching, but it is executed to its realisation with regard to the Gentiles.

When Paul speaks about the plan of salvation, he sheds light on a "pattern." As the "pattern" is intrinsically related to "the plan" and *vice versa*, it is imperative to examine the nature of the "pattern."

B. Pattern

Rom. 15:16 shows that Paul had a particular "pattern" in his mind when he spoke about his missionary commission in relation to the plan of salvation. To quote:

...because of the grace given to me by God to be a *minister of Jesus Christ*, to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God (Rom. 15:15b-16a).

The component elements of the "pattern" are: (i) God—Christ—Paul, (ii) God—Christ, (iii) God—Paul, (iv) Christ—Paul. In his comprehension of the plan of salvation, the "pattern" appears not as a marginal concept, but as belonging to the core of his understanding of his role in the plan of salvation. The theological foundation of Paul's mission hangs on the fact of God's revelatory

¹⁰ Cf. Bornkamm, "musterion," *TDNT*, Vol. IV, p. 821.

¹¹ In Rom. 16: 26; Col. 1: 27; Eph 3: 6, 7, 8, there is the mention of *etna* in connection with *musterion*.

act in Christ. So Paul links up his missionary task with God and Christ. Hence the pattern behind the "plan" is the natural outcome of his understanding of his role as "apostle to the Gentiles." The following group of texts can be cited as examples: 1 (a) 2 Cor. 5:18-21: God-Christ-Paul; (b) 2 Cor. 2:14-17: God-Christ-Paul; (c) 1 Cor. 4:1: Paul-Christ-God. 2 (a) 1 Cor. 8:6: God-Christ; (b) Col. 1:13-14: God-Christ. 3 (a) 1 Thess. 2:4: God-Paul; (b) 1 Cor. 3:9-10: God-Paul; (c) 2 Cor. 3:6: God-Paul. 4 (a) Gal. 1:1: Christ-Paul; (b) 1 Cor. 1:17: Christ-Paul; (c) 2 Cor. 13:10: Christ-Paul.

The aim of our investigation was to look at the framework of pattern in which Paul fulfils his role as "apostle to the Gentiles." It is the plan that makes the pattern significant. Paul looks at the "plan" and the "pattern" from the functional nature of mission. He had a consistent view of his role in the plan of God and he links up his ministry either to God or to Christ in a significant way. The pattern shows that Paul is not the originator of the mission. He does not relate it to any human agency. Paul is only an instrument in God's hand (or Christ's) to execute the plan to its stage of realisation with regard to the Gentiles.

The above analysis leads us to investigate the motivation and finality of the divine plan of salvation. We would like to investigate two questions: (i) What goal does the plan aim at? (ii) Why does God desire that goal? These two questions are mutually related.

C. Motivation and Finality

Motivation deals with the "why" of God's initiative in the plan of salvation. The decision to "save men" was made by God in perfect freedom. This he did because the whole man was "sold under sin" and death. God's purpose for mortal man was that he should pass from "death to life" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:8; Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:10). Thus Paul's concept of divine "motivation and finality" should be taken against his concept of "old self" sold under "sin and death." His concept of "old-self" implies five things: (1) Man is hostile towards God; (2) the hostile man is subjected to powers like "sin," "law" and "death;" (3) because he shares solidarity with Adam, he belongs to the "aeon of death;" (4) the "aeon of death" has been superseded by the "aeon of life;" (5) the "aeon of life"¹² belongs to Christ (Rom. 8:1). Paul finds a role in the "aeon of life," as the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. God's act of grace is the fact behind the "aeon of grace."

Paul describes the decision of God "to save men" in categories analogous to God's nature as a self-existent being who reveals his character through his act. This means that God is known only

¹² The "aeon of death" belongs to *he diakonia tes katakriseos* and the "aeon of life" belongs to *he diakonia tes diahousis* (2 Cor. 3: 9).

through his revelatory acts (cf. Rom. 11:33-34). God's "wisdom," "knowledge," "judgements" and "plans" are known to us in so far as he reveals them to us through his act of grace. In the divine plan of salvation, we are "known by God" (Gal. 4:9) through his act of grace. The concept of God as one who decides out of his perfect freedom is the testimony of the Old Testament (cf. Deut. 7:7-8). This idea is well depicted in 1 Cor. 1:26-29 when Paul writes:

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but *God chose* what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, *God chose* what is weak in the world to shame the strong, *God chose* what is low and despised in the world even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are..... (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

God took the decision out of divine freedom. Hence the act of God derives its impetus from his own nature. The divine decision is above and beyond all human motivation. The argument in 1 Cor. 1:26-29 reaches its climax in v. 29 when Paul writes: "Let him who boasts boast of the Lord" (1 Cor.1:29). Paul's main idea is to show that the plan of salvation derives its source from God and that God took the decision not out of any "external pressure." The compulsion arose out of God's own nature. Love is the key to divine motivation. The act of God is verifiable. Rom. 5:8 and 5:10 will illustrate the point.

Rom. 5:8: But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Rom. 5:10: For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Rom. 5:8 and 5:10 are found in the framework of a cluster of ideas, all linked up with the amazing love of God (cf. Rom. 5:6, 8,10). By emphasising the grim picture of the world's hostile character, Paul accentuates the intensity of the "love of God." Eph. 2:4-6 also sheds light on the magnitude of God's love and motivation. To quote:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-6).

The love with which God loved us is revealed to us through his love for his Son. So we read in Eph. 1:5:

He (God) destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will (Eph.1:5).

As Jerome Murphy O'Connor puts it, "Christ is not only the expression of God's love for us; he is in a sense also its origin. Only in Christ are we the objects of God's saving love."¹³

So Paul gives thanks to God for the "gift of love" in Jesus Christ. He writes in 2 Cor. 9:18: "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift." Paul as the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles believes that he is commissioned to share the gift of love with the Gentiles. Paul thus links the motive of God's love with the fact of his gift. For Paul, love is not a metaphysical or philosophical idea, but it confronts mankind in challenges and decisions. Man can be the object of God's love only as a consequence of and by participating in the love of God for his Son. In Eph. 1:3-14, Paul accentuates the christological link.¹⁴ So it can be concluded without any doubt that for Paul the motive force behind the divine plan for the salvation of mankind is the eternal love of the Father for the Son.

God gains nothing by his love-inspired activity. But that which it achieves is to the praise of the glory of his grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 13). The above discussion leads us to the "finality" of the divine plan of salvation. The word "finality" deals with the goal of God's act of grace. God's act of grace becomes meaningful in the context of its "goal." Paul deals with the "finality" of divine "motivation" in 1 Cor. 8:6:¹⁵

.....yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all being comes, towards whom we move; and there is one Lord, Jesus, through whom all things came to be, and we through him (NEB).

In the above text *heis theos ho pater* and *heis kurios Iesus Christos* stand in contrast with *theoi polloi* and *kurioi polloi* respectively (v.5). The accent falls on the phrase "yet for us there is one God and for us one Lord Jesus Christ" which means that there is a link between "one God" and "one Christ" and that the divine plan of salvation belongs to the initiative of the "one God" and the instrumentality of Christ.

Christ is the "mediator." He is the agent of "creation" and "new creation." "It is through Christ that we reach the goal of the divine purpose" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 8:29).

¹³ *Paul on Preaching* (London and New York, 1964), p. 6.

¹⁴ The christological link in Eph. 1:3-14 is either expressed by the preposition *en* or *dia*.

¹⁵ Cf. Rom. 11: 36 where Paul applies both the functions—creation and new creation—to God. On 1 Cor. 8: 6, see Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (ET, 1962), p. 114.

“To serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9) belongs to the goal of divine plan. Because of Christ’s redemptive work, we come into being. This means that the divine motivation reaches its stage of finality only “in and through” Christ who is the “means of salvation.” The above view of Paul—the finality of the divine plan—finds its highest expression in 1 Cor. 1:30:¹⁶

.....but you God has made members of Christ Jesus and by God’s doing he has become our wisdom and our virtue, our holiness, and our freedom (Jerusalem Bible).

In the realm of new creation too, Paul wants to attribute the same priority which is manifested in the material order of creation. As Chrysostom remarks, Paul “nails everything to the name of Christ.” The christological link is an integral aspect of the finality of salvation. 2 Cor. 5:21 also shows that God the Father, who initiated the ministry of reconciliation, took the decision to use Christ as his instrument to execute the plan of salvation. The goal of God is to inspire “love-inspired activity” in man because God conceived and executed the plan through the creative expression of “love.” Man reaches this goal through the “sharing of the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). “The Father’s plan,” which as Cerfaux remarks, “set out with the enthusiasm of filial love” in Rom. 8:28-30, is only a section of the total plan of universal salvation.¹⁷ The finality is expressed in a series of actions in the realm of planning and execution, and “this plan is being realised in stages.”¹⁸ The different stages are: (1) God’s choice (the elect); (2) the predestination of the elect to be conformed to the image of his Son; (3) the divine invitation to Christian life through the call; (4) justification as the present experience of “sonship;” (5) glorification as the full realisation of the status of “sonship.” The above stages of realising the destiny of man take seriously into account our “vigorous and unflagging co-operation with divine grace.” The community constituted “through Christ” becomes the outward expression of God’s love for the world. The motive of God is to inspire “love-inspired” activity in man. The very existence of the believers in Christ is the manifestation of the divine power on earth. The Church is the visible presence of the glorious body of the risen Christ in which both the Jews and the Gentiles strive for the praise of God. In the words of Jerome Murphy O’Connor:

¹⁶ On 1 Cor. 1: 30 Hans Conzelmann comments: “Die drei soteriologischen Begriffe sind nicht-systematisch geordnet” (*Erster Korinther Brief*, p. 68). In the realm of new creation too, Paul wants to attribute the same priority which is manifested in the material order of creation.

¹⁷ *The Christian in the Theology of St Paul* (London, 1967), p. 237.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.

The Church is thus an eternal hymn of praise. This is the ultimate end that God set before himself in the conception and execution of the plan of salvation.¹⁹

For Paul, the motivation and finality of salvation belong to the realm of God's grace and every step in the process of man's salvation from conception to execution is due to God (cf. Phil. 1:6).²⁰

Conclusion

Paul's concept of the divine plan of salvation gives the theological framework and foundation in which he fulfils his role "as the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles." The finality of the divine purpose for the elect belongs to the total plan of the history of salvation. Paul believes that he has a part to play in the execution of the love-inspired plan of God in relation to the Gentiles.

¹⁹ *Paul on Preaching*, p. 9.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 7.