

# The Relevance of Paul for Preaching

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**P**AUL did more than any of the apostles "to win for the Christian religion its place in the life of the world, and he has done more than any of them in always winning that place again when it seemed in danger of being lost. Evangelical revival, in personalities so powerful as Luther, Wesley, and Chalmers, has always been kindled afresh at the flame which burns inextinguishable in his testimony to Christ."<sup>1</sup> Thus did James Denney pay tribute to the great apostle to the gentiles. More recently, and just prior to his death, Martin Dibelius declared that whenever the Church "levelled his (Paul's) thoughts down and made them innocuous by incorporating them into its own systems," they have "again and again been dug up" and let loose to influence, and sometimes to initiate, great movements in the history of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The story is written from Augustine to Karl Barth.

This estimate of Paul's place in Christian history may have something significant to say to the Church in the twentieth century. For clearly it has been the proclamation of Paul's interpretation of the Gospel, and not merely an academic understanding of it, that has been the primary factor in producing those forces which, more than once, and in dark days, have turned the minds of men back again to the central conceptions of the Christian religion, and have quickened and revitalized, with amazing results, the life of the Christian Church. It does not follow, of course, that what happened in former centuries, when man's outlook and preoccupations were so different, can happen again in this. Nevertheless, one might surely be pardoned the suspicion that this periodic return to Paul has not been purely fortuitous, but due rather to something so eternally and universally true in his gospel that it never ceases to have contemporary appeal. While we cannot attempt to be exhaustive, an examination of certain basic Pauline conceptions may enable us to judge the relevance, or otherwise, of his thought for preaching in our age.

## I. PAUL'S GOSPEL

Fundamental to everything that Paul taught is his gospel, grounded in the conviction that the nature of God is fully revealed in the fact of the cross. There the unqualified love of God has been set forth, attested in the resurrection, and made available to men through faith. When it is accepted, it initiates them into a new relationship with God which is frequently described as being "in Christ" or "in the Spirit". This new relationship is defined as being "justified", which in modern speech means "brought into right relation with God", not indeed one of moral perfection, but rather of commitment to the divine will and purpose in Christ, and thus a condition

of heart and mind well-pleasing to God, accepted by Him as now facing in the right direction, and anticipating the final completion of the work of redemption here begun. The reality of this experience, made necessary by man's sin and by his impotence for self-deliverance, is for Paul the Gospel, the good news that God, on the ground of faith, recreates and redirects the life of man, and welcomes him into the family of those who share His own life because they share His will. Thus the society of which Jesus dreamed, the company of those who acknowledge and seek to extend the sovereign purpose of God, comes into being.

To this Gospel succeeding ages have turned to discover, or to rediscover, the power of the Christian faith, and to find that where ritualism, moralism, mysticism, humanism, and many other forms of belief and practice have failed, the Christian Gospel really works. Why this turning to Paul? Why not to the religion of Jesus? The answer is that through Paul's work and teaching men have found their way to the heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom which Jesus proclaimed; for, while our Lord proclaimed the Kingdom clearly enough and described the character of the sons of that Kingdom, he did more. "In actual fact," declares one writer, "what happened was that Jesus laid down the Christian ideal, and *then* went on to the creation of that moral and spiritual dynamic by which alone the ideal can be transmuted into actuality."<sup>3</sup> This is the crux of the matter, since one cannot isolate the religion of Jesus from what he was and did; and what he was and did cannot be separated from those events from which has stemmed the "moral and spiritual dynamic" which has given actuality to the Christian ideal, namely his cross and resurrection. Paul's significance lies mainly in this, that he experienced and interpreted this dynamic, and believed it to be as essential for others as for himself.

His proclamation of this Gospel was inseparable from his emphasis upon faith, the key that unlocked this reservoir of power and gave it freedom to do its redeeming work. But, as Nygren insists, "it is not man's faith that gives the Gospel its power; quite the contrary, it is the power of the Gospel that makes it possible for one to believe."<sup>4</sup> This is what Paul means when he writes: "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The business of the Church then, in every age, is to placard Christ before men, in all the aspects of his mercy, love, and grace, as concretely manifested in his life, death, and resurrection, that the drawing power of that sight may enable them to say: "Lord I believe." It is difficult, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that the inescapable presuppositions of all effective and evangelical preaching for us, as for Paul, are man's sinful helpless plight, the offer of God's saving grace in the Gospel, and the faith that is elicited when by proclamation Christ is seen as the embodiment of the unfathomable love of God. The modern preacher may find it necessary to translate this, as a recent writer maintains,<sup>5</sup> into terms intelligible to his congregation. He cannot dispense with it.

## II. THE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

The positive issue of such preaching is the fellowship of believers or, as the apostle describes it, "the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). This introduces us to the many metaphors he used to describe the Church, all of which, properly understood, suggest its true nature and its distinctive character. It recalls too what has already been said about the family of those who share the divine life, for that is precisely what the Church is in Paul's thought, and it accounts for the remarkably rich figures he uses to express it. What, for example, does "Body of Christ" (I Cor. 12:27) mean but a community, or fellowship, expressing the divine life of those who are already in the Kingdom, already sharing a life which partakes of the life that is eternal? Again, note his description of the church as "the temple of the living God" (II Cor. 6:16, cf. I Cor. 3:16). Here the reference is to the very inner shrine itself (*naos*), the place where the living God meets man, where the life of God dwells, a beautiful, though highly exacting criterion of churchly character expressed even more vividly in the phrase "habitation (dwelling place) of God" (Eph. 2:22). Observe still further the reference to Christians having their "commonwealth in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). This metaphor, perhaps most clearly of all, characterizes the fellowship of the Church as sharing the divine life in this world, partaking of an eternal citizenship, drawing its source of strength and power, and deriving its very nature, from the life of God. Consider also the affirmation that Christ dwells in his Church, that he is its very life, that the Church is, therefore, the instrument of his redemptive purpose (Col. 1:24, 3:15; Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23-32). Here is a relationship so close that the apostle can assert that the Church, in bodying forth the life of God, will share the vicarious life of Christ, and thus extend his passion in the world until the final redemption. The words of Professor H. H. Rowley, in another context, accurately interpret Paul's view: "In a profound sense the Church is called to agonize for the world's redemption, and to realize that it can never fulfil its mission in the world unless it is prepared to tread the path of suffering and sacrifice, and to know in its heart an agony that reflects the agony of the cross."<sup>6</sup> Space forbids reference to other confirmatory allusions to the Church in Paul's thought. These, however, are clearly relevant in an age when often the Church's true nature and function are hidden in the eagerness to enlarge its membership and to stress the external aspects of its life. The Gospel is only adequately and effectively communicated to the world in the measure that the church identifies itself with the purposes of God for humanity, and seeks to reveal in its witness the life divine as sacrificial love.

## III. THE NEW HUMANITY

Co-existent in Paul's thought with his high conception of the Church is his teaching concerning "the new humanity" which Christ, as the Second

Adam, has begun, and of which he is "the first-born" (Rom. 8:29). We must not get so academically involved in a study of the Adam theology, and the contrast between the work of the *first* with that of the *second*, as to miss the tremendous significance of this aspect of the apostle's thought. For Adam stands for unregenerate man, with all his progeny; and now that Rousseau's influence is less than it used to be, and our sitting on the edge of world catastrophe gives the lie to the facile views of human nature largely derived from him, we are not so readily disposed to deny the existence of such a basic wrongness in man. Christ, the second Adam, however, comes "retrieving the error of the First",<sup>7</sup> reversing the stream of history and introducing a new creation, a new kind of manhood, a new spiritual race, of which he is the head. What God had intended for mankind, and what man's moral perversity had continually frustrated, has now become clear in this new society of those who live "in Christ" and "walk in love" (Gal. 5:13; Eph. 5:2). Man the ego-centric individual, governed by his selfish passions and impulses, has given place to the man who has died to self and who lives, imitating Christ, in self-sacrificial service. The whole creation was designed to bring forth this type of manhood, and even now is eagerly awaiting the consummation of such a humanity in the revealing of the "sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). The ground of this hope is that the Church already is the nucleus of the new humanity.

Is not this a word in urgent need of proclamation today, in a world that has lost its nerve, trembling on the brink of despair, because it has lost its faith in human nature and its hope in God? The new world, with new terrors undreamed of, is still largely in the hands of the "old humanity", and that is what frightens us. Our world cries out for a "new humanity", and we may agree with C. H. Dodd that "any effective reconciliation between nations will involve a real new community."<sup>8</sup> This much is imperative, ere we suffer irreparable disaster. Our expectation can only be from God, who alone can change the evil desires and wilful passions of men as they are gathered into, and brought under the influence of, His Church. How eagerly Paul would bless the ecumenical movement! His teaching is full of it, because he so faithfully interpreted the mind of his master.

#### IV. THE MEANING OF HISTORY

Reflection upon the nature of the Gospel, the Church, and the New Humanity, inevitably led Paul to concern himself with the meaning of history; for it was quite impossible to make such affirmations concerning these without seeing their implications for an understanding of the whole historical process. What the apostle saw unfolding before his very eyes he believed to be the fulfilment of God's purpose for Israel. His people had been destined to bless the world. They had failed in their day of visitation, but now through Jesus Christ there was coming into being a completely new society, universal in its outreach, with no barriers of race or class whatsoever, all one in Christ, Jew and Gentile, bond and free, living as

brethren, reconciled to one another, and at peace with God. This impressive fact could mean but one thing: God willed this process of reconciliation, for it was manifestly creating a new Israel, which was to be the mark of Christ's coming. History, therefore, does not run a purposeless course. It must be understood in the light of the redeeming reconciling work of Christ, for that is the clue to its meaning.

The relevance of this for our age is too obvious to occupy us at length. Many people, having had this "clue to history", like John Richard Green, the English historian, "have lost it without gaining another".<sup>9</sup> Many more have not found any clue at all and are eagerly reading the numerous philosophies of history that are seeking to fill the void. Let the Church proclaim afresh, with Paul, that Christ is the clue to history, that he sits in judgment upon all our projects, small or great, national or international, that his Lordship must be acknowledged in all things, that destruction awaits all plans and purposes that ignore him, and that all things in heaven and in earth are to be brought to their consummation in him who is to be pre-eminent (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:10).

#### V. CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

The apostle, however, though fundamentally an idealist who saw everything, including cosmic meaning, through his interpretation of Christ and the Church, was also a realist who had to do with churches in which, as now, great divergence existed between theory and practice, and often very different levels of understanding concerning the nature of the Christian faith. Some Christians were weak, others strong; some 'babes in Christ', others mature; some insisting on their freedom, as they had a right to do, others not quite so confident and somewhat hesitant about certain habits and restrictions to abandon which would leave them conscience-stricken. How modern! Is not this an accurate picture of every church in every place? What then is the responsibility of the mature enlightened Christian, the man who has a proper appreciation of Christian liberty, and who knows the rights of the Christian man? Is he to insist upon doing as he likes, standing upon his privileges and looking patronizingly, or even disdainfully, upon others who do not see eye to eye with him, who have not perhaps quite so deep an understanding of the faith as he? No! says Paul. The more mature the Christian, the greater his understanding of the faith and freedom. The closer his relationship to Christ, the more anxious he will be to shoulder his responsibility for the building up of the Church, even to the point of dedicating his own rights and privileges, subordinating his own wishes, and consecrating his own liberty for the sake of Christ and his brethren (cf. Rom. 14; I Cor. 8). Thus can he walk in love; thus can he care for the Church for which Christ cared enough to die (Eph. 5:25).

How essential this is in an age when many members of the Church are insisting upon their freedom to follow certain courses of conduct—to drink alcoholic liquor, for example—and forgetting that Christian freedom,

precious as it is, is a blessing to be used for the glory of Christ and for the sake of those for whom he was willing to sacrifice everything. To care for men as God cares, to seek to do anything and everything to develop their moral and spiritual capacities, and thus to lead them into the higher reaches of life as children of God, that is to be a truly responsible Christian, dedicated to the purposes of love.

#### VI. THE HOLY SPIRIT

In like manner Paul dealt with all spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of the Spirit. That some in his churches should be influenced strongly by external evidences of Spirit-possession is not surprising, for in ancient times the Spirit of God was held to be present, in special degree, when there were unusual physical accompaniments. Thus when the *glossolalia* appeared, Paul, although recognizing and even sharing this phenomenon, was faced with the problem of persuading those who were attracted to it that the only gift worth coveting was that which served the Church (I Cor. 14). The problem has recurred again and again and is with us today, stress being laid upon the external emotional evidences of religion, and the work of the Spirit being identified all too often with spectacular phenomena, with the result that many suspect any reference to the work of God's Spirit altogether. This is most unfortunate, and means that we are still lacking a true understanding of the nature, activity, and power of the Holy Spirit. From the apostle we can learn to proclaim again a doctrine woefully neglected in our time.

Clearly Paul identified the Spirit of God with the power that raised Jesus from the dead, and he believed that this same power also raised Christians into newness of life. He came, however, to think of it in terms of the Spirit of Christ, so that being "in the Spirit" and being "in Christ" meant the same thing. "For him," declared James Moffatt, "the Spirit is no longer a sudden force or impulse that comes and goes, it is not merely a special endowment for special service, or an ecstatic rapture of abnormal origin, but the power of the indwelling Lord in the sphere of the community."<sup>10</sup> Thus he ethicized the Holy Spirit and regarded the best evidence of it as appearing in those fruits which are the harvest of love (Gal. 5:20). In this he still points the way to a vitally needed reinterpretation, for many folk cling to an older and much less significant view because they have never been introduced to anything different. The man who is moved to gentleness, kindness, patience, generosity to the point of self-sacrifice, acceptance of his Christian responsibility to others and to his church, may not be shouting in an "unknown tongue", but may be even more genuinely baptized with the Holy Spirit.

#### VIII. THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

The present-day emphasis upon Christian hope reminds us finally how up to date Paul was on this very point. He did not build his belief in eternal

life upon some philosophical argument. Rather, as in the case of each concept discussed above, eternal life is a concomitant of the experience of being "in Christ." To fail to see this, and to forget the power that initiated this spiritual union, is to miss the ground of our Christian hope altogether. Paul insisted, as did the Johannine writer later, that eternal life is qualitative and is already being shared by those who are "in the Spirit." The life now being enjoyed in the Body of Christ, the Church, is the pledge of the life which one day will be the believer's possession in its fullness (Eph. 1:14). The ultimate ground of this life with its attendant hope is the gracious purpose of God (Rom. 8:31-39). Surely for the Christian man there can be no other. And if we inquire further as to what form that ultimate existence will take, Paul has truth which needs to be emphasised in our day. Immortality means nothing to him unless it be the preservation, in some form, of human personality. He does not indulge in the endless ideas or fantasies of eternal salvation to which many, in all ages, have been prone. He holds "to the essential thing: that, whatever else it may be, salvation means sharing the likeness of Christ, and Christ we know."<sup>11</sup> Even as the Christian has borne the image of "the man of dust", so also will he bear the image of "the man of heaven", Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:29; I Cor. 15:49). Perhaps, as Emil Brunner suggests, "in human language there can be found no more perfect expression of the life of eternity as consisting in the eternal plenitude of God's love" than the Pauline description "face to face (I Cor. 13:12), when time is no more, and the Christian, in "the perfect present of God", is forever with the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian Gospel is at once simple and profound. No one knew this better than Paul, who can still speak to us of its simplicity and its profundity. We need both to give strength and certainty to our Christian witness.

## NOTES

1. J. Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 22.
2. M. Dibelius, *Paul*, pp. 1 ff.
3. Edwin Lewis, *The Faith we Declare*, p. 70.
4. A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 71.
5. A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting Paul's Gospel*, pp. 85-88.
6. H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*, p. 56.
7. W. A. Curtis, *Jesus Christ the Teacher*, p. 34.
8. C. H. Dodd, *Christianity and the Reconciliation of the Nations*, p. 27.
9. H. S. Coffin, *The Portraits of Jesus Christ in the New Testament*, p. 81.
10. James Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament*, p. 168.
11. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Moffatt N. T. Commentary), p. 142.
12. E. Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, pp. 204-206.