

Prof. James Dunn

MAIN THEMES IN PAULINE THEOLOGY

3. The Gospel – for all who believe

3.1 What made the difference?

In the light of what we have so far seen we can and have to say that Paul changed. He changed from being a traditionalist Jew to become a Jew 'in Christ'. He changed from being a Pharisee, to become, at least in his own eyes, an apostle, indeed, the apostle to the Gentiles. What made the difference? To answer this question we have to consider first of all the change which took place in Paul, that is, what is called by common consent Paul's *conversion*. So our question, What made the difference?, becomes a two fold question: What was he converted *from*? And what was he converted *to*? We have already considered a large part of the answer to the second question. He was converted to become an apostle to the Gentiles. But we have still to plumb the depths of the question. It is the way the two questions tie in to each other, the way in which the answer to the question What was Paul converted to? depends on the answer to the prior question, What was he converted from?, which we have now to explore.

3.2 Paul's previous conviction

The most striking feature of Paul's pre-Christian past as he himself recalled it was his role as a *persecutor* of the church, that is, of his fellow-Jews who believed Jesus to be Messiah. He refers to this pre-Christian past several times: 'I persecuted the church of God' (1 Cor. 15.9); 'I persecuted the church of God in excessive measure and tried to destroy it' (Gal. 1.13); 'as to zeal, a persecutor of the church' (Phil. 3.6). In Gal. 1.23 he recalls that he was commonly known among the Judean churches as 'he who persecutes us', 'the persecutor'.

Why did Paul take on the role of persecutor? The answer he himself gives has just been mentioned: he did so as an expression of his 'zeal' – 'as to zeal, a persecutor of the church' (Phil. 3.6). The account of Paul in Acts agrees. According to Acts Paul testified that he had been trained as a Pharisee 'at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being a zealot for God. And I persecuted this Way to the point of death' (Acts 22.3-4). Why did Paul's 'being a zealot for God' cause him to persecute the followers of the Way, the sect of the Nazarene? Why did zeal motivate him to persecute those who he subsequently identified as 'the church of God'? Somewhat surprisingly, this answer to our question, Why did Paul persecute his fellow Jews?, has not been given the attention it deserves, even though it is actually Paul's own answer to the question. So it requires more attention than it has been given.

a) The answer lies partly in Paul's training as a *Pharisee*, as indeed a Pharisee who progressed in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries among his people being so exceptionally zealous for his ancestral traditions (Gal. 1.14). Now we know that the name 'Pharisees' was probably something of a nickname – the *perushim*, the 'separated ones' (from the Hebrew *parash*, 'to

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

separate’).¹ This indicates the conviction of the Pharisees that in order to maintain their level of purity, or holiness, they had to maintain a high degree of separation from the sources of impurity and defilement. Since for the Pharisees, these sources were other people, other Jews, who did not maintain such a strict level of law observance, that meant separation from other Jews. So Pharisees were notable for their practice of eating their meals among themselves, separate from other Jews, probably maintaining the level of purity required for priests while in service.² We see indications of this in the criticism of Jesus’ table-fellowship with taxcollectors and sinners which the Gospels attribute to Pharisees.³ ‘Sinners’ were those who broke the law. So for Pharisees, who interpreted the law with scrupulous accuracy and exactness (*akribeia*),⁴ in order to observe it more faithfully, other Jews who did not share or follow the Pharisees’ interpretation, their halakhoth, were law-breakers, ‘sinners’.

Since Paul was such a zealous Pharisee we may assume that the same reasoning determined his own conduct. In his pre-Christian state he would have counted it as of first importance to maintain his separation from sin, and from ‘sinners’. He would have conducted himself as one who saw it as a priority to observe the patriarchal traditions. He would almost certainly have condemned and looked down on other Jews who did not share that priority. This was what ‘righteousness which is in the law’ demanded, and Paul could claim that in terms of this righteousness he had been ‘blameless’ (Phil. 3.6). That is, not that he had never sinned, but that he had lived completely within the terms of the law, including faithfulness to its requirements and atonement for his failures.

But there is more to it. The language of ‘zeal’ takes us more deeply.

b) *The theology of zeal* within the religion and traditions of Israel is not hard to trace. Integral to the concept of ‘zeal’ or ‘jealousy’ (it is the same word, Hebrew *qn*), was the fundamental conviction that YHWH is a jealous/zealous God. YHWH’s zeal was expressed in his insistence that Israel must not worship any other gods but remain dedicated to him alone. ‘You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God . . .’ (Ex. 20.5).⁵ E. Reuter notes that the relationship between YHWH and his worshippers ‘is characterized by an intolerant demand for exclusivity: it is Yahweh’s will “to be the only God for Israel, and . . . he is not disposed to share his claim for worship and love with any other divine power”’.⁶ In the LXX God himself is described as a ‘zealot’.⁷

¹ See Schürer, *History* 2.396-7; S. J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987)162; A. J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 220-5.

² See further e.g. Saldarini, *Pharisees* 212-6, 233-4, 285-7, 290-1; M. Hengel & R. Deines, ‘E. P. Sanders’ “Common Judaism”, Jesus, and the Pharisees’, *JTS* 46 (1995) 1-70 (here 41-51); H. K. Harrington, ‘Did the Pharisees Eat Ordinary Food in a State of Ritual Purity?’, *JSJ* 26 [1995] 42-54; J. Schaper, ‘Pharisees’, in W. Horbury, et al. eds., *Judaism. Vol. 3: The Early Roman Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999) 402-27 (here 420-1). The old view that the Pharisees sought to extend the holiness of the Temple throughout the land of Israel, on the basis of Exod. 19.5-6, is probably still warranted (Schürer, *History* 2.396-400; A. F. Segal, *Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1986] 124-8.

³ Matt. 11.19/Luke 7.34; Mark 2.16-17; Luke 15.2.

⁴ Josephus, *War* 1.110; 2.162; *Ant.* 17.41; *Life* 191; Acts 22.3; 26.5; see particularly A. I. Baumgarten, ‘The Name of the Pharisees’, *JBL* 102 (1983) 413-7.).

⁵ So too Ex. 34.14; Deut. 4.23-24; 5.9; 6.14-15; 32.21; 11QT 2.12-13.

⁶ E. Reuter, *qn*, *TDOT* 13.54, citing G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962) 1.208. Paul’s plea to the Corinthians, ‘I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God’ (2 Cor. 11.2), is a direct echo of this divine zeal/jealousy.

⁷ Ex. 20.5; 34.14; Deut. 4.24; 5.9; 6.15.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

It was this 'zeal' of YHWH which was seen as requiring and providing the pattern for Israel's own 'zeal' – a 'zeal' for holiness, as Yahweh is holy (Lev. 19.2). Holiness was understood here as a being set apart to God alone. But it was taken for granted that so to be set apart *for* God unavoidably meant also being set apart *from* the other nations. Consequently, 'zeal' was a burning concern to maintain Israel's identity as a people set apart to God, a passionate concern to protect Israel's holiness over against other nations. This gives us the clue to why Paul's zeal caused him to persecute his fellow Jews.

The most famous of Israel's 'heroes of zeal' was Phinehas, who, when an Israelite brought a Midianite woman into his tent (into the congregation of YHWH), forthwith slew them both, 'because he was zealous for God' (Num. 25.6-13). In Num. 25.11 Phinehas' zeal is understood as a direct reflection of YHWH's zeal.⁸ For this single deed he was often recalled and his zeal praised,⁹ and he became the model and inspiration for the later Zealots who led Israel's revolt against Rome.¹⁰

Other examples in Israel's roll-call of heroes of zeal are easily catalogued:

- Simeon and Levi who 'burned with zeal' and avenged the seduction of their sister Dinah, 'the pollution of their blood' (Jdt. 9.2-4), by slaughtering the villagers where she had been seduced (Gen. 34).
- The Maccabean revolt against their Syrian overlords was sparked off by Mattathias of Modein, when, 'burning with zeal', 'with zeal for the law, just like Phinehas's, he executed the Syrian officer and the fellow-Jew who made to apostatise by offering forbidden sacrifice (1 Macc. 2.23-26). Mattathias rallied the rebellion by crying out, 'Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come with me' (2.27; Josephus, *Ant.* 12.271), and his death-bed testimony is a paean in praise of the zeal displayed by the heroes of Israel (1 Macc. 2.51-60).
- Philo bears witness to the same attitude when, writing possibly only a decade or so before Paul's role as a persecutor, he warned that 'there are thousands . . . who are zealots for the law, strictest guardians of the ancestral customs, merciless to those who do anything to subvert them' (*Spec. Leg.* 2.253).
- And in the same spirit are the rulings preserved in the Mishnah: 'If a man . . . made an Aramean woman his paramour, the zealots may fall upon him. If a priest served (at the altar) in a state of uncleanness his brethren the priests did not bring him to the court, but the young men among the priests took him outside the Temple court and split open his brain with clubs' (*m. Sanh.* 9.6).

In the light of this evidence, we can see that the tradition of 'zeal for the Lord/Torah' was marked by three features in particular:

1. It was sparked by sight of fellow-Jews disregarding the law, particularly when it meant that *Israel's set-apartness to God and from the defilement of other nations and their gods was being threatened or compromised.*

⁸ 'Like Joshua's zeal on behalf of Moses (Nu. 11:29), Phinehas's zeal on behalf of Yahweh realizes Yahweh's own jealousy . . . which otherwise would have consumed all Israel' (Reuter, *qn'*, *TDOT* 13.56). As A. Stumpff observed (*TDNT* 2.879), the term ('zeal') is linked with 'anger' (Deut. 29.20) and 'wrath' (Num. 25.11; Ezek. 16.38, 42; 36.6; 38.19); see also 1QH 17[= 9].3; 4Q400 1.1.18; 4Q504 frag. 1-2 3.10-11; 5.5); similarly M. Hengel, *The Zealots* (1961, ²1976; ET Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1989) 146-7.

⁹ Ps. 106.28-31 (the deed was 'reckoned to him as righteousness'); Sir. 45.23-24 ('third in glory for being zealous in the fear of the Lord'); 1 Macc. 2.26, 54 ('Phinehas our ancestor, because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood'); 4 Macc. 18.12.

¹⁰ Hengel, *Zealots* ch. IV.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

2. It could be *directed against fellow (compromising) Jews* as much as against the foreign ‘others’ whose involvement marked the breach of Israel’s boundaries.¹¹
3. It regularly *involved violence and bloodshed*, as necessitated (in the view of the zealots) by the severity of the danger to Israel’s exclusive set-apartness to and holiness before God.

All this, of course, explains why ‘Zealots’ was the name used for those who led the revolt against Rome in the 60s. Their revolt was the ultimate attempt of Second Temple Judaism to maintain its loyalty to God alone, and to retain its set-apartness to God and from other nations.

What is immediately striking for us, of course, is that the three features provide a remarkably accurate description of Paul’s persecution of the Jews who believed in Messiah Jesus. For Paul’s persecution was directed against fellow-Jews (the Hellenists) and was evidently as fierce as the tradition of zeal documented – ‘I persecuted the church of God in excessive measure and tried to destroy it’ (Gal. 1.13). Since the latter two of the three characteristics of Israel’s tradition of zeal match Paul’s own persecuting zeal (violence directed against fellow Jews), it suggests that the first characteristic was true of Paul’s zeal too. That is, Paul probably persecuted the first Christians because he regarded the Hellenists, those identified with the views of Stephen, as *a threat to Israel’s set-apartness to God*. For reasons we cannot fully explain, Paul seems to have regarded the attitudes and actions of some (representative) Hellenists as a threat to Israel’s holiness and separateness. Presumably Paul saw the threat posed by the Hellenists as potentially breaching the protective boundaries formed by the law and maintained by doing the law. That could also be described as ‘zeal for the law’; but in this case it was the law in its role as a bulwark against the corruptions and the defilements of other nations. This understanding of the role of the law is classically expressed in the Letter of Aristeas 139-142:

In his wisdom the legislator [i.e. Moses] . . . surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other peoples in any matter, being thus kept pure in body and soul . . . To prevent our being perverted by contact with others or by mixing with bad influences, he hedged us in on all sides with strict observances connected with meat and drink and touch and hearing and sight, after the manner of the Law’ (Charlesworth).

If this function of the law, if Paul’s concern to shelter behind the protective boundary of the law, and his zeal to maintain Israel’s holiness in separation from the Gentiles explains what Paul was converted from, then what was he converted to?

3.3 To what was Paul converted?

a) One answer must be that Paul came to the conclusion that Jesus was indeed God’s Messiah. In fact, that belief in Jesus as Messiah does not seem to have motivated sustained persecuting zeal against the Jerusalem Jews. But certainly Paul ‘the persecutor’ would have been convinced that Jesus was *not* Israel’s Messiah. As a crucified criminal he was under God’s curse (Gal. 3.13). A crucified Messiah made no sense, a ‘stumbling block’ indeed to Jews generally (1 Cor. 1.23). But on the Damascus road, Paul encountered Christ, saw Christ alive and exalted to heaven (1 Cor. 9.1; 15.8). In Gal. 1.15-16 he describes his conversion as God revealing his Son ‘in me’. And in Phil. 3.7-11 it is clear that it was the wonder of gaining Christ, and the hope of being found in him and of sharing fully in his death and resurrection, which transformed everything which he had previously counted upon into mere rubbish. According to Acts, the heavenly Christ confronted Paul, struck

¹¹ ‘Sinners and lawless men’ in 1 Macc. 1.34 and 2.44, 48 certainly included those whom the Maccabees regarded as apostate Jews, Israelites who had abandoned the law; see further my ‘Pharisees, Sinners and Jesus’, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (London: SPCK/Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990) 61-86 (here 74).

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

down on the Damascus road, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? . . . I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’.¹² Whatever the detail of the event itself, it must have been a shattering blow to Paul, and must have convinced him that he had been totally wrong about Jesus. He was converted to what he had previously denied.

b) Bound up with this would be the revelatory realisation that those he had been persecuting were right after all. He had persecuted them for their readiness to set aside Israel’s previous policy of maintaining separateness from Gentiles, for the threat of their being more open to Gentiles than the law allowed. So presumably Paul’s conversion also included a conversion to such openness. This indeed is what Paul expressly states in Gal. 1.15-16, that God had revealed his Son in him ‘in order that I might preach the good news of him among the Gentiles’. This is why several scholars have argued that what happened on the Damascus road was more of a commissioning than a conversion. It is hardly necessary to regard the two aspects as mutually exclusive. We have seen clearly enough that Paul’s conversion was indeed a turning from. But it is very striking that Paul emphasized the commissioning character of his conversion so strongly. This is what was at stake for Paul in his insistence that he was an apostle (Gal. 1.1, 11-12). He was an apostle because he had seen the Lord (1 Cor. 9.1). His apostleship was as ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ (Rom. 11.13) – a commission which the leading Jerusalem apostles had readily conceded when they met in Jerusalem (Gal. 2.7-9). And it is also worth noting that here too Acts accords with the Pauline letters. Each of the three accounts of Paul’s conversion in Acts includes the element of Paul’s commissioning to take the gospel to the nations.¹³ In other words, it was Paul the convert who took up the very tendencies which he had so violently opposed and transformed them into active mission; the openness of the Hellenists to the Gentiles became the Gentile mission of Paul the apostle.

c) As we have seen (#2.5), Paul regarded this not as a betrayal of his Jewish heritage. Quite the contrary, as an apostle of Jesus Christ he was also an apostle of Israel, not an apostate from Israel. His commission was towards the fulfilment of Israel’s commission to be a light to the Gentiles. His claim is elsewhere reinforced by Paul’s exposition of Israel’s own fundamental creed to make the point. Thus in Rom. 3.29-30 he presses this very point: if indeed God is one, as he is indeed (Deut. 6.4), then he is not simply God of the Jews but also God of the Gentiles. And as such he will justify the uncircumcised through faith just as he justifies the circumcised through faith.

The same basic logic of Paul’s gospel is indicated in his use of the key motif, ‘the righteousness of God’. This phrase, we recall is at the centre of the thematic statement of Paul’s principal theological writing, his letter to Rome:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, since it is the power of God for salvation, to all who believe, Jew first but also Gentile. For the righteousness of God is being revealed in it from faith to faith – as it is written, “He who is righteous by faith shall live” (Rom. 1.16-17).

No one with knowledge of Israel’s scriptures could fail to recognize here a major motif of Israel’s theology and understanding of how God conducts his dealings with his creation and his chosen people (Israel). For ‘righteousness’ in Hebrew thought refers to the meeting of obligations which arise out of a relationship. So the phrase, ‘the righteousness of God’, refers to God’s enactment of the obligation he had accepted in so creating the world and in so choosing Israel to be

¹² Acts 9.4-5; 22.7-8; 26.14-15.

¹³ Acts 9.15; 22.15, 21; 26.16-18.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

his people.¹⁴ His righteousness was the obligation he had taken upon himself to sustain and save both creation and people. For Jews the phrase had an inescapably covenant connotation: it denoted God's *saving* righteousness, which is why the Hebrew term *tsedhaqah* ('righteousness') is often better translated 'deliverance' or 'vindication', as we see in modern translations.¹⁵ Since God's righteousness was revealed by the gospel, 'the power of God for *salvation*', Paul had surely done enough to ensure that the recipients of his letter would understand this 'righteousness' as *saving* righteousness. It was Martin Luther's realization that this is what Paul had in mind – 'God's righteousness' as saving righteousness ('the righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith'), and not God's righteousness as his 'justice' ('that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust')¹⁶ – which gave birth to the Reformation and to the key Reformation doctrine of 'justification by faith'.

For Paul, of course, the key point was that this gospel is '*to all who believe, Jew first but also Gentile*'. This is not a simple statement of (naïve) universalism ('to all who believe'). The 'all' Paul had in mind, here as elsewhere in Romans,¹⁷ was the 'all' that transcends and breaks down the barrier between Jew and Greek,¹⁸ between Jews and Gentiles.¹⁹ So, for Paul, the gospel which he had been commissioned to proclaim was precisely the good news of God's saving righteousness, of God's covenant grace, now extending beyond Jew to embrace also Gentile. That was what Paul had been convinced of by his Damascus road conversion. That was at the heart of the gospel for Paul – Israel's good news for Jew and Greek, for Gentile as well as Jew.

3.4 The confirmation of God's Spirit/grace

Without in any way diminishing the importance of Paul's conversion in transforming his understanding of God's saving purpose for humankind, there is another factor which must also be noted. This is the fact that the conviction which came to Paul, regarding the openness of God's saving grace to Gentiles, was confirmed by the actuality of that grace bestowed on Gentiles. This includes the fact that the same grace was bestowed on Gentiles solely on the basis of their believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, and without their being circumcised. The point came home with decisive force at two points in the earliest Christian mission.

a) *Acts 10-11*. The first, according to Acts, was Peter's mission to the Roman centurion Cornelius, living in Caesarea (Acts 10-11). One of the most striking features of this account is that before Cornelius could be converted, *Peter himself had to be converted*, that is, to change his mind

¹⁴ For 'righteousness' as a relational term, denoting that which meets the obligations laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he/she is part, see my *Theology of Paul* 341-4 and the bibliography there. I also note that the relational character of God's righteousness undercuts the traditional debates of post-Reformation theology as to whether 'the righteousness of God' is a subjective or objective genitive, 'an activity of God' or 'a gift bestowed by God' – a case of unnecessary and unjustified either-or exegesis (344).

¹⁵ E.g. Pss. 51.14; 65.5; 71.15; Isa. 46.13; 51.5-8; 62.1-2; Mic. 6.5; 7.9.

¹⁶ *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan; St Louis: Concordia, 1960) 34.336-7, as cited by R. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951) 65; full quotation in my *New Perspective on Paul* 187. See also E. Lohse, 'Martin Luther und die Römerbrief des Apostels Paulus – Biblische Entdeckungen', *KD* 52 (2006) 106-25.

¹⁷ 'In all the nations' (1.5); 'to all who believe' (1.16); 'to all who believe' (3.22); 'father of all who believe' (4.11); 'to all the seed' (4.16); 'to all' (5.18); 'gave his Son for us all' (8.32); 'to all who believe' (10.4); 'all who believe' (10.11); 'he is Lord of all, rich towards all who call upon him' (10.12); 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord' (10.12); 'God has confined all in disobedience in order that he might have mercy on all' (11.32); 'all the nations, all the peoples' (15.11); echoed in the 'all's of 1.18, 29; 2.1, 9, 10; 3.9, 12, 19, 20, 23; 5.12.

¹⁸ Rom. 1.16; 2.9-10; 3.9; 10.12.

¹⁹ Rom. 3.29; 9.24.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

on the acceptability of Gentiles. The episode is vividly told, and referred to no less than three times by Luke, since evidently it had been so important in determining the development and transformation of earliest Christianity.

The conversion of Peter was on the issue of the inherent uncleanness of Gentiles. It was this conviction of Gentile uncleanness which lay behind Israel's need to keep themselves separate from the other nations and which lay at the root of Paul's persecuting zeal. What is less well understood is that the Torah laws of clean and unclean foods were an expression of the *same* conviction. The laws of clean and unclean were based on the premise of Gentile uncleanness and reinforced the separation required of Israel. This is nowhere more clear than in Lev. 20.22-26:

You shall not follow the practices of the nations that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. . . . I am the Lord your God; *I have separated you from the peoples*. You shall *therefore* make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. *You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.*

In other words, the laws of clean and unclean were important because they indicated the importance of Israel's separation from the uncleanness of other nations.

To recognize this helps us to understand Peter's reaction when, on the rooftop in Joppa, he was given a vision. The vision was of a large sheet let down from heaven and crowded with clean and unclean animals. When the heavenly voice told Peter to 'kill and eat', Peter's immediate reaction was to refuse: 'By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean' (Acts 10.13-14). Peter is presented as a loyal Jewish traditionalist, who had never breached the laws of clean and unclean. But the heavenly voice immediately rebukes this attitude: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane' (10.15). This happened three times, says Luke. And what did Peter learn from this? When the messengers from Cornelius invite him to go to Cornelius, he goes with them without question, to this Gentile's house. And when he arrives, what is the first thing he says? Not that God had shown him that it was all right for him to eat unclean food, to share table fellowship with his Gentile host. No, what he says is, 'God has shown me that I should not call any *person* profane or unclean' (10.28). This, we may say, was fully the equivalent of Paul's conversion. As Paul had been changed from one who regarded openness to the Gentiles as a threat to Israel's holiness, so Peter had been changed from one who regarded Gentiles as such as unclean and a threat to Israel's purity.

But the story is not complete. For as it began with the conversion of Peter, so it climaxes with the conversion of Cornelius. Following his welcome by Cornelius, Peter had been preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his friends. And he had hardly begun to speak, so Acts narrates (11.15), when the Spirit fell upon his audience in a visible and indisputable way (10.44; 11.15). What happened to Cornelius was just so similar to what had happened to Peter and the first disciples at Pentecost, that they simply could not fail to recognize that God had accepted Cornelius and his friends – and had done so without any expectation that they would have first or as a consequence to be circumcised.²⁰ *Here was a case where God's Spirit had acted in disregard for the sacred traditions which had hitherto governed Jewish faith and praxis.* The Spirit had rendered one of Israel's most defining *scriptures* null and void. So much so that even the more traditional Jewish believers, both those who had accompanied Peter and those to whom he reported in Jerusalem, could not gainsay what had happened or its significance.²¹

²⁰ Acts 10.47; 11.15-17; 15.8-9.

²¹ Acts 10.45-48; 11.18; 15.14.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

b) *Gal. 2.6-9*. In the account of Acts it is this episode which proves decisive when the first Christians met in council in Jerusalem to decide whether circumcision should be required of Gentile believers (Acts 15.5-29). The equivalent crucial decision is recalled somewhat differently by Paul. In *Gal. 2.1-10* he tells how, in what was probably the same Jerusalem meeting, some ‘false brothers’ had tried to insist that Titus, the Gentile believer accompanying Paul and Barnabas, should be circumcised. Paul recalls how he had vigorously resisted this. The issue was essentially the same as in the Acts account: whether Gentiles who had believed the gospel must be circumcised before they could be regarded as full members of the Jewish sect of Jesus-messianists. And the outcome was essentially the same. For the assembled Christians, says Paul, were so impressed by Paul’s account of the mission success of Paul and Barnabas that they had little choice but to accept the conclusions which Paul drew. *They recognized the grace* which had so evidently been given to and through Paul and Barnabas. They recognized that God was manifestly working through the mission to the uncircumcised just as he was working through Peter’s mission to the circumcised (*Gal. 2.7-9*). Since Paul saw ‘grace’ and ‘Spirit’ as overlapping terms, presumably he was thinking of God’s grace manifested to Paul’s converts in the terms he uses a few verses later, when he recalls the Galatians to their reception of the Spirit (3.2-5).

This is a very important point to take on board: that *the development of Christianity was shifted on to a new track by the manifest work of the Spirit*. Christianity might have remained a Jewish messianic sect had it not been for the unexpected and scripture-breaking, tradition-breaking initiative of the Spirit. The Spirit opened up a whole new vista for the first Christians, and they were brave and bold enough to follow where the Spirit showed the way. If we are to fully appreciate Paul the apostle, Paul the theologian, Paul the church-founder, we must take full account of this vital aspect of his gospel. Having been converted by the Christ to recognize that God’s saving righteousness reached out to embrace Gentile as well as Jew, Paul was also quick to recognize that God’s Spirit was breaking away from the old patterns established by scripture and sanctified by tradition. This is why we need to rediscover Paul and to let him provide a fresh challenge to our own traditions where they no longer express the life of the Spirit, and to restore to us a fresh vision of how the initiative of the Spirit may once again be taking us in unexpected directions.

3.5 The double dimension of justification

One of the corollaries which come home forcefully from all this is that there is a social dimension to the gospel which is integral and fundamental to the gospel

a) As we all know, Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith was at the heart of the Western Reformation. But typically within Reformed theology the doctrine of justification has been understood in very individualistic terms: how the individual is accepted by God; how the individual can find peace with God. As part of this, Paul’s slogan, ‘a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ’ (*Gal. 2.16*), has been traditionally understood in terms of an antithesis between faith and good works. The individual cannot earn his way to heaven by performing good works; justification before God cannot be attained by merit and self-achievement.

This is all true, and Paul clearly affirms that God ‘justifies the ungodly’ (*Rom. 4.5*), that God operates by grace (*11.6*). But the typical Reformed exposition of justification has left to one side an important dimension of Paul’s teaching on justification, a dimension which was actually central to

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

Paul's own gospel and teaching.²² For when Paul speaks of 'works of the law' he was not thinking primarily of 'good works'. He was thinking of doing what the law demands. By 'works of the law' he was thinking primarily of the obligations which Jews had taken on. This is why the issue for Paul was whether *Gentiles* should be expected to observe works of the law. This was why his great statement in Gal. 2.16 is the climax of his rejection of Peter's attempt in effect to compel the Gentile believers in Antioch to 'judaize', that is, to live like Jews (2.15). To do the works of the law is to judaize, to live like a Jew. This was why the whole issue arose out of the two episodes recalled in Galatians 2: the attempt in Jerusalem to require Gentile believers to be circumcised; and the attempt in Antioch to require Gentile believers to observe the laws of clean and unclean. These were the works of the law that the false brothers and Peter had attempted to impose on the Gentile believers. And it was these attempts to compromise and constrict the gospel that Paul resisted so forcefully.²³

The point for Paul, then, was, as we have seen, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for *all* who believe, for Gentile as well as Jew. Alternatively expressed, the gospel is the fulfilment of God's purpose to bring Jew and Gentile to worship God together. The point is made most explicitly in two other passages in the Pauline corpus.

b) In the conclusion to his great letter to Rome (Rom. 15.7-12) Paul sums up and rounds off what this great letter was all about, and what he regarded as the central passion of his own life and mission. Christ, he reminds his Roman audiences had 'became servant of the circumcised' (15.8). Why? 'For the sake of the *truth* of God' – that is, for the sake of the reliability and integrity of God and of the constancy of his purpose. This purpose of God is, and Paul would say, always has been twofold (15.8-9). One was to confirm the promises of the fathers; as in 11.29, Paul reaffirms the irrevocable nature of God's calling of Israel. And second, that 'the Gentiles should give praise to God for his mercy' ('mercy', that key term in both Israel's and Paul's understanding of God's purpose).²⁴ Here not least is confirmation, if confirmation were needed, that *central to Paul's gospel and the primary motivation of his apostleship and mission, was precisely the realisation of that vision: the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel, and Gentiles praising God for mercy.* Here as the climax of this letter, the letter in which he laid out most carefully and most completely his understanding of the gospel and of God's saving righteousness, Paul sums up his hope and prayer in scriptures drawn from all sections of the Tanak, from law (Deut. 32.43), prophets (Isa. 11.10) and psalmist (Pss. 18.49; 117.1). Paul's supreme goal and sublime hope were that Jews and Gentiles would rejoice together and together praise God (15.9-11); and that Isaiah's vision of the Messiah's rule embracing the nations (Gentiles) and of the Gentiles finding their hope in him (Isa.11.10) would now, finally be realized. (15.12).

c) The other passage is the clarification that the letter to the Ephesians brings to the mission and theology of Paul. For it insists that Christ's saving mission was all about bringing in the Gentiles. They had been 'without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus those who once were far off had been brought near by the blood of Christ' (Eph. 2.12-13). In his flesh Christ had made both groups into one and had broken down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, the partition which in Jerusalem's Temple prevented Gentiles from entering nearer to the

²² For my understanding of Paul's theology of justification, see my *Theology of Paul* #14.

²³ I discuss all the issues involved in this exegesis in my *The New Perspective on Paul*.

²⁴ Ex. 34.6-7, a theological insight and assertion frequently echoed in Israel's scriptures. The theme is prominent in Rom. 9-11: Rom. 9.15, 18; 11.30-32 (*eleeō*); 9.23; 11.31; 15.9 (*eleos*).

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

divine presence (2.14). Christ had abolished the law, the law which demanded and maintained the separation between Jew and Gentile, 'that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through him' (2.15-16). Consequently, Gentile believers were 'no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God', growing into 'a holy temple in the Lord', 'built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God' (2.19-22). In the following chapter Paul's own role in this great enterprise is underlined. The mystery of God's purpose to include Gentiles among his people had been specially revealed to Paul, and he had been specially commissioned to bring this gospel of God's riches in Christ to the Gentiles (Eph. 3.1-10).

3.5 Implications for the social and ecumenical dimensions of mission

To conclude, it is well worth reflecting on this dimension of Paul's mission. And not just well worth doing, but essential that we draw the appropriate conclusions from our recognition of this dimension of Paul's mission.

a) *The social dimension.* This emphasis on Paul's apostleship for the Gentiles is not just an incidental add-on to what else can be said about his apostleship. It is not a case of describing Paul's role and status as an apostle, and then adding, 'Oh yes, and he was also apostle to the Gentiles'. No, this was central to Paul's apostleship. This is what Paul's apostleship had been all about. This was why he was prepared to allow a breach with James the brother of Jesus to grow. This was why he was prepared to rebuke Peter in public. This was what he directed all his energies and his very life to accomplish.

Alternatively expressed, we should not be content to say that for Paul the gospel is about how individuals are accepted by God – by faith. And only then to add, 'Oh yes, and that means that Jew and Gentile can come together in the same community, can eat together, and be fully accepted by each other'. For that was at the heart of the gospel for Paul. It was not gospel unless it meant that Jew and Gentile could worship together, could sit at the same table, together form the one body, the one worshipping congregation.

Another way of putting it is that for Paul the gospel had both a vertical dimension and a social dimension. It could not function on the one dimension unless it also functioned on the other dimension. Paul did not work with a facile distinction between the gospel as a purely spiritual phenomenon, opening people to the grace of God and bringing the grace of God to them, and the social corollaries of that gospel as something quite different. For too long evangelicals, whose name reminds us that their position is determined by the gospel, for too long operated with a distinction between the gospel and the social gospel – the assumption being that the social gospel was a departure from and corruption of the true gospel. But Paul would never have agreed. For Paul, if the gospel did not have a social effect, a breaking down of racial and national antagonism and disharmony, it was not the gospel. If the gospel did not bring together different races and nations and classes in the one worship, round the one table, then it was not the gospel. If it did not express itself in believers truly loving their neighbours as themselves, it was not the gospel. It simply is impossible for me to be accepted by God if I do not accept those who are also accepted by God.

In a word, Paul teaches us that if we forget the horizontal dimension of the gospel we lose the gospel for which he gave his life.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON SAINT PAUL

Ariccia, 19-29 April 2009

b) *The ecumenical dimension.* What continuing weight do we give to one of the most fundamental of Paul's statements: that 'no human being is justified by the works of the law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ' (Gal. 2.16)? It seems straightforward enough: that faith in Christ is the one thing that matters, indeed, is the only thing that matters to God; that to require anything more than faith, some legal requirement or ritual obligation, is to undermine the gospel, to destroy what Paul calls 'the truth of the gospel'. The issue had come home to Paul in all its sensitivity and sharpness in the incident at Antioch. There Peter and the other Jewish Christians had withdrawn from table fellowship, no doubt including eucharistic fellowship, with the Gentile Christians. In effect, Paul says, they were trying to compel the Gentile believers to live like Jews, to observe Israel's sacred laws of clean and unclean. In effect they were trying to add works of the law to the gospel's invitation to faith alone.

How does Paul's gospel speak to our ecumenical scene today? For we all are in one degree or other in a position similar to that of Peter and the other Jewish Christians. We say to fellow believers, in effect, we cannot sit at the same table as you, there are certain things we cannot do with you, because you do not recognize traditions and rituals which we hold as central to our own identity as Christians. And in effect we make our traditions and distinctive beliefs as important as the gospel itself, as important as belief in Christ, as important as being in Christ. We deny Paul to his face: we affirm by our actions that a person is *not* justified by faith alone, but must also observe certain works of tradition. We take the side of Peter and like Peter we abuse and forsake the truth of the gospel. Do we really think that Paul would commend us for our unwillingness to sit at the same table as our fellow Christians, at *his* table? I think not. I think rather that he would say with John Wesley: 'If your heart beats with mine in love for our common Lord, then give me your hand', and let us sit and eat together, let us stand and worship together, let us go forth together and tell the good news of Jesus Christ.