

St Paul and his Ministry

Greco-Roman background

Paul was a Hellenistic ('Greek influenced') Jew; he was born in the university town of Tarsus; he would have been familiar with some of the Greek philosophy current at the time: Plato's (b. 487 BC) notion of the immortality of the soul (and its superiority to the body), and virtue consisting in directing the soul towards the Idea of the Good (a fixed, changeless 'Form' of the Good beyond the various 'goods' one sees in life); the Stoic acceptance of every happening as the divine will, the perfect acceptance of which was virtuous; in Stoic thinking the emotions (with their tendency to disturb a perfect acceptance) were evil; Aristotle's (a student of Plato) notion of moral virtue as intermediate between vicious excesses. Virtues like generosity, courage and temperance lay at the mid-point between extremes (eg. courage was the mid-point between cowardice and foolhardiness).

Paul was born a Roman citizen; he used the privilege of Roman citizenship to his advantage in his apostolic ministry. He may also have been familiar with Roman law and their practically orientated virtues (eg. justice, political honesty, courage).

Jewish background

Paul was brought up a Jew and studied in Jerusalem under the respected Jewish scholar Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee, and, as was the custom, learnt a trade for his upkeep (tent-making).

As such, Paul knew the Jewish law and tradition; he therefore believed in monotheism, that there was one God, the Creator, and that God had elected Israel to be his chosen people.

As a Pharisee Paul also believed that the present evil age would be superseded by a

coming new age in which Israel would be vindicated. God's Messiah, in whom the fortunes of Israel would be bound up, would come as God's king, God's servant, God's victor.

With such a religious sensibility we can make sense of Paul's (or Saul's - as the Jewish version) zeal, of his desire to stamp out the Christian sect that had grown up within Judaism and yet seemed to be warping some of Judaism's treasured beliefs.

Some may argue that Paul was the product of his background, his character etched by the combination of Judaism and Hellenism. They sometimes point to various parts of his writings for evidence of this: Paul often *did* use a Pharisaic style of argument; he *was* steeped in the Hebrew scriptures; he *did* refer to lists of virtues and vices, to household codes (cf. Colossians 3, Ephesians 5) familiar in the Hellenistic world.

However, one should be aware that Paul was ingenious and opportunistic; it could easily be argued that he *used* his Hellenistic Judaism knowingly, self-consciously, in order to appeal to the various audiences of his day. His prime concern was implanting the knowledge and love of Christ in the hearts of those who were part of the Christian communities he founded. Often his audience were formerly pagan Greeks, and so it made sense to strike a chord with their Hellenism; sometimes his audience were a mixture of Greek and Jew, and so he would inject a little more reference to the Hebrew scriptures.

Conversion

On a mission to persecute the Christians, Paul was confronted by the risen Christ on

the road to Damascus. It is sometimes helpful to think of this dramatic incidence as a 'death-new life' experience: the light dazzled him so that he fell off his horse; he lost his sight; he took no food for three days; he lost his independence for that time; he lost what had given meaning to his life up to then. Ananias baptised Paul, bringing him into the Christian fold, whereupon he received his sight again. The theology of baptism (death to the old man, new life in Christ) and the recent events of Paul's conversion seem to be resonant with each other.

The importance of this conversion event cannot be emphasised too much: if God had raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus must be God's Messiah, and the New Age must already have broken in on the Old. In

the suffering of Jesus on the cross, and in his resurrection from the dead, God's Messianic servant and victor had been revealed, and God's kingly rule had been established. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19). In Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, Israel herself, and so all humanity, dies and is raised to new life (cf. Gal. 2:12-21).

Paul had had a personal encounter with the risen Messiah; he had received Christ's Spirit in baptism: one could say that this encounter was the 'engine' for all Paul's subsequent work as an Apostle to the gentiles. However, such was the dramatic nature of the change that Paul had to spend many years pondering on its implication for him before he assumed an active life as an Apostle.

Paul the Pastor

There is a pattern traceable in some of Paul's writings: problem - response - theological/ethical insight. This pattern is perhaps clear in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Some examples are given below.

| Problem | Response | Insight |
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| Incest case tolerated | throw the man out of your gathering to purify him | the Passover of Christ means the throwing out of the old leaven/yeast (yeast would normally be kept over from one baking to the next; at Passover, unleavened bread was used with its symbolism of a break from the past) |
| sleeping with prostitutes | don't! | you are all Christ's body; can you join the Body of Christ to the body of a prostitute? your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; use your bodies for God's glory |
| court cases between Christians | avoid running off to court to sort out disputes | the saints will take their place in judging all creation at the end of time; surely you should be able to sort out petty disputes without recourse to secular courts? besides, as Christians you should be prepared to accept a wrong without seeking redress |
| too much emphasis on the 'showier' gifts of the Spirit - prophecy, speaking in tongues ... | don't be so dazzled; give attention to the giver of the gifts | all the gifts are given so that everyone can serve, taking their place in the Body of Christ; no gift, no matter how great, is of any worth without love (<i>agape</i>) - three things last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love |

Law versus the Spirit

Paul was deeply wounded by the activity of Judaizers amongst the Galatians (they asserted that being a good Christian meant acceptance of certain Jewish ways). Paul pointed out that it was faith that justified (makes one right with God); after all, Abraham, the father of the Jews, had shown faith; and it was this that pleased God.

Faith in Christ enables the reception of God's Spirit within the heart of the believer; one was not bound to the Old Law; one had received a freedom in Christ by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:1). The Law could, in a sense, only condemn - for one would always fall short of its demand. The Law had served a purpose of preparing for the time of Christ - like a *paidagogos*, a slave who oversaw the education of a young boy.

This freedom of Christ was not an unchecked 'do whatever you want'; in the same letter, Paul wrote that the Spirit was opposed to self indulgence. It seemed as though some of the Corinthians had seen this freedom in Christ as licence to indulge (perhaps this was why they tolerated the incestuous relationship).

Paul proposes a notion of *Christian* freedom: in it he brings together the concept of willingness and the concept of obedience. The Christian was indeed free - free to serve God, empowered to do so by the Spirit, and earnestly *wanting* to serve. Pauline ethics is an ethics of *response* to God's graciousness.

Paul did not propose antinomianism; he had recourse to rule-giving, list of sins and virtues, household codes, and so on, when he thought them a fitting vessel for carrying the message of Christian living.

It might be argued that pastoral problems in

the early Church shaped Paul's theology and ethics entirely; had the problems been different, we might have inherited a different theology. This, however, is to ignore the central concern of Paul: Christ and Christ's Spirit. This, for Paul, is the beginning; and this is the end to which all the problems are related.

Certain other notable features to Paul's ethics arise from his pastoral dealings:

- the body is given a high status, as opposed to its 'shell for the soul' status in certain Greek philosophies; what one did 'in the body' mattered; the body would be resurrected;

- in Romans 13, Paul acknowledged the role of good government in society and expected obedience to right authority, given that this authority came from God;

- in Galatians 3, Paul explained that the identity of 'being Christian' went deeper than any other (male, female, Jew, gentile, slave, free); this identity and the union it brought was preserved by the Holy Spirit;

- in his Letters to the Thessalonians (the earliest writings of the New Testament), Paul nurtures a community in which the expectation of the Parousia in their lifetimes was high; he explained that those who died 'died in the Lord' and would be at no disadvantage; Paul had in himself to adjust to the fact that Christ's coming may not be as soon as hoped; some have pointed to his celebration of the single life (to the seeming denigration of marriage) as evidence of one who sees no point to marrying now that Christ's coming was so near (cf. 1 Cor 7); however, elsewhere Paul (or Pauline writing) develops a rich theology of the marriage bond, comparing it to the bond between Christ and his Church.

Scriptural & scholarly quotes

'Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love.' Col 3:14

For Paul, right action springs from **'faith working through love'** (Gal 5:6).

'Paul's ethical direction for the new Christian ... is live appropriately for the new age.' Jones, p 37 Groundwork of Christian Ethics

'In the glorious freedom of the Spirit Christians live in glad and grateful obedience to the law of Christ.' Jones, p 37 Groundwork of Christian Ethics

'Covenant ethics became swallowed up in 'Spirit ethics' '

'The fundamental motivation of Paul's approach to ethics is that Christians should 'be what they are' on the basis of

God's saving action in Jesus Christ.'

both from David Atkinson, Fellow and Chaplain of Corpus Christi College, Oxford

'His (Paul's) ethics were mainly determined by his theology ...'

'Faith denotes the attitude of openness or simple trust on the basis of which alone he (a believer) can relate truly to God. Love denotes the generous self-giving which flows from it.' both from J. C. Houlden, Professor of Moral Theology, King's College, London

'Christian ethics (for Paul) comes down to an imitation of Jesus in the power of his Spirit. This is why the Jewish Torah is out of date and unnecessary. Christians have direct access to the lawgiver; they no longer need the written code.' Allsop, Module 11 booklet

General points/questions that might be made/raised

Should Christians be expected to follow Paul's ethical teaching in detail?

What do you consider to be the most significant aspect of Paul's ethical teaching for present-day Christians?

What does Paul teach about Christian freedom and the responsibilities it brings?

'All you need is love.' Is this a satisfactory summary of Pauline ethics?

Does Paul's teaching imply that 'walking by the Spirit' makes it unnecessary for Christians to have moral rules?

To what extent do you think the ethical advice in the Pauline letters is applicable

to Christians and churches today?

'There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit' (1 Cor 12:4). What are the implications of this teaching for Christian behaviour?

On what grounds does Paul describe Christian living as 'freedom', and how does he deal with possible misunderstandings of this idea?

Paul is sometimes accused of introducing into Christianity a negative view of the body and of human sexuality. How fair is this accusation?