

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
LENT 2004
NEW TESTAMENT BASICS 3

THE PAULINE EPISTLES

So far in this series we have spent some time looking, first, at the origins of the NT writings and then, last week, at the Gospels and Acts. Today we come to another major group of writings which, for convenience, we dub “The Pauline Epistles”, that is to say, letters written by St Paul. If you look through your New Testament you will see that there are 14 letters assigned to St Paul – Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Hebrews. Now, it is generally agreed that Paul did not write Hebrews, so utterly unlike anything else he wrote is it. That reduces the number to 13. Some scholars think that Colossians and Ephesians, because of differences in style, vocabulary and theological ideas from other of Paul’s letters may not have been written by him – they prefer to refer to them as Deutero-Pauline, that is as written by people after Paul’s lifetime but in the tradition of Paul and his churches. And that would reduce the number to 11. For similar reasons many scholars also hold that 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, usually called “the pastoral epistles”, are not by Paul himself, but by a follower claiming his authority and trying to apply his thought to a later period. We could be down to 8 genuinely Pauline letters. 2 Thessalonians may also be this kind of production - 7. Obviously, I cannot go into detailed argument here – or we will be as long as we were last week and I want to be a bit shorter this time – and it is hard to be sure anyhow. All agree that these 7 are definitely written by Paul – Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon. I would have an open mind about the rest, least open perhaps about the pastoral epistles. Philippians, Philemon, Colossians and

Ephesians are often called “Captivity Letters” because the apostle’s imprisonments are mentioned in them. The important thing, though, is that all of these texts are, in fact, in the New Testament, and so part of the foundational scripture of the church.

What form does a Pauline letter take? Is it a polished literary production intended, as it were, for publication, or is it more like the letters you and I might write to friends or organizations, as need and desire arise? The answer, I think, is the latter, except that as Paul’s letters were widely read in the churches and were collected and put together into one body of writings, and as the Spirit, through that process, used them for building up the church, they became a literary corpus as well. But originally they were somewhat *ad hoc* productions, often done in haste, mostly in complete independence of each other. For example, Philemon is a private letter sent to an individual; Galatians is a letter sent to a group of churches full of Paul’s burning personal concern for his converts; 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians and Philippians certainly consider general truths, but above all they tackle concrete issues in the churches to which they are addressed. Romans is more like a theological essay but even here much is on the level of practical concerns. But always these are what you might call apostolic letters – they express, very forcefully, Paul’s apostolic ministry and presence and authority for building up the churches. I would venture the suggestion that they are often occasioned by either the need to defend the gospel he has preached against various opponents within the churches – it was not for nothing that he wrote to the Philippians *beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!* - or by the need for instructions on how the church should order its own affairs or relate to the community around it – often by a combination of both. It must have been quite an event to have received them in a church and heard or read them – Paul, you often feel, makes

himself present through them. And that would not always have been a particularly comfortable experience, one senses.

Paul's letters have a clear structure – *opening formula*, *thanksgiving; message* – usually a mix of doctrine, or the truths of the Christian gospel, and ethics, instructions for Christian conduct and church life; *conclusion* and *final greeting* where you often get personal messages to or about particular named individuals. Into this general pattern Paul often introduces what we could call literary sub-forms like hymns or confessions – we will look at some of these a bit later on.

In the ancient world the most common ways of producing letters were either to write oneself or to dictate the sense leaving the precise formulation to a secretary – writers often complained of the wearying method of dictating word for word, syllable for syllable, especially if the scribe wasn't much good. I know a little bit about that problem when I have worked with secretaries whose spelling is a bit dodgy or who do not know how to use "its". Paul's letters themselves make it clear that he dictated them, but whether word for word or the general sense it is hard to know. Dictating the general sense could explain the different style in Colossians and Ephesians. He may have written Philemon entirely in his own hand.

Let me say a few words about the chronology of these letters, because as the letters are printed in our bibles they are not in the order of their composition. You will see that 9 letters to the churches precede 4 to individuals; you will probably also notice that the letters may actually have been arranged in order of length – they decrease in length as you go on. If you were to print them in chronological order, they would go something like this, according to recent scholarship:

1 Thessalonians		50
Galatians		c.54
1 Corinthians	54	
Philippians		54-58
2 Corinthians	55	
Philemon		56-57/60-63
Romans		57-58
2 Thessalonians		51-100
Colossians		70-80
Ephesians		80-100
The Pastorals (1&2Tim & Tit)	c.100	

Obviously, if you think that these last six were written by Paul himself, which it is perfectly possible and proper to think, then they are much earlier than these dates – all before 64 when Paul is thought to have been martyred. The dates for the first seven depend on larger questions of dating what we know of the events of Paul’s life, mainly from the Acts, but they are not likely to be very far out. As you will see, all of the undoubtedly genuine Pauline letters pre-date Mark. Colossians and Ephesians are probably roughly contemporary with Luke and Matthew, maybe the Pastorals with John.

We are dealing with a lot of material here. My aim in the remainder of this talk is to give you just a flavour of what is to be found in Paul’s letters by presenting Paul as traditionalist, theologian, pastor, and man of faith.

I mentioned earlier on that into the general framework of his letters Paul inserts what we could call literary sub-forms, that is other types of writing. These often show us *Paul the Traditionalist*. St Paul is commonly presented as an explosive, original thinker, almost the inventor of theology, and there is much truth in that. But he is also a convert to a new way, an apostle who hands on what he has received from the church into which he has been

drawn. In other words, when he became a Christian he found a lot already there – hymns, confessions of belief, the eucharistic words of Jesus, lists of vices and virtues - took them on board and handed them on to the new churches and new Christians he helped to bring into being. Paul may have had a big hand in inventing Christian theology, but he most certainly did not invent the church – it was there before him, as he very well knew when he devoted so much effort to eradicating it. Now, it is true that he sometimes, as Eamonn put it on Tuesday night, “tweaks” the traditional material to suit the particular purpose he has in view, but one should not exaggerate this or allow it to obscure the fact that Paul is a bearer of tradition and in that sense, a traditionalist. Three examples. In 1 Corinthians 15.3f we read: *For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.* This is a very early creed of the church which Paul, in this context, closely associates with his own preaching of the gospel (15.1). Or take Philippians 2.5f: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* It is generally agreed that this is an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul. Another example would be the eucharistic words of Jesus in 1 Cor 11.23f: *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance*

of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Here Paul claims to have this "from the Lord", which I think probably means "the church has it from the Lord"; the part at the end is Paul's gloss on the words.

Then, of course, there is *Paul the theologian*. Not Paul the theologian with a complete system worked out, like St Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin, but Paul focussing on the death and resurrection of Christ and on the life of the church, and trying to get a handle on their true significance, as opposed to the many false interpretations which seem to have been around, and in the process setting many important agendas for future theological work, for good or ill. One example of this is his description of the Christian life in terms of becoming right with God by faith in Christ against those who insisted that doing works of the Law was the way to right relationship with God – this is famously worked out in Romans and Galatians. Another is his use of the image "body of Christ" to denote the nature of the church – *we are the body of Christ, by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body* - and of "in Christ" to describe what it is to be a Christian – *in Christ there is a new creation*. Or one might think of his exposition of baptism in Romans 6 as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ or of the eucharist in 1 Corinthians 10 as a participation in the body and blood of Christ - *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

Paul's letters reveal to us, not only a traditionalist and a hugely creative theologian, but also an extremely energetic and busy apostle who took a keen interest in the day to day life of the churches. His letters are full of discussion of very practical issues and of exhortation to embrace a truly Christian life-style. We can find in them *Paul the pastor*. A few examples of this kind of thing. In 1 Corinthians we find the apostle discussing what to do

about eating meat that is on sale as left-overs from the sacrifices at pagan altars and advises that whatever is done should be respectful of the scruples and consciences of other believers – a principle of solidarity that he uses elsewhere to determine proper conduct; in the same epistle he gives advice on marriage and on the proper ordering of worship in the community. He rebukes the behaviour of those who come to the eucharist: *When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!* In Galatians he outlines the ethical implications of being in Christ: *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.* And there are many such passages.

Not everyone likes St Paul – he was not an easy person. He can come across as arrogant and I for one would not have liked to cross him in anything important. He argued with colleagues and split from them and we all know the public row he had with Peter. You sometimes feel that he stands rather too much on his apostolic authority and compares himself rather too favourably with other apostles – there is not even the faintest hint of false modesty, and perhaps not enough of true modesty. It is obvious from the letters that he faced much opposition, not only from his former co-religionists, but also from within the churches. And it is also clear from the NT itself that a lot of people found his writings difficult to understand! But, after all is said, he still shines through as a person of deep and passionate faith who gave himself unstintingly to the preaching of the gospel and the ministry of an apostle and who was simply brimful not only of

creative ideas, but also of love for Christ and his people. For me this is wonderfully summed up in 1 Thess 2.8: *So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.* (Here Paul is speaking of himself and of Timothy and Silvanus). Or we could recall the famous words from Philippians: *More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* If he frequently exhorts his readers to imitate him, to follow his example, passages like these perhaps offer a justification for such boldness. And, of course, he is always thanking God for the Christians and holding them in his prayers.

To end, here, without comment, are two of my favourite texts from St Paul, to which I frequently return and from which I draw much food for thought and much inspiration:

1 Cor 1.25: *God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

Romans 5.8: *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

