

Reflection Paper: "Sessions Four and Five: Pauline Thought"

MY UNDERSTANDING OF PAUL'S THEOLOGICAL VISION AND WHAT IT
SAYS TO MY FAITH EXPERIENCE AND MINISTRY

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Pauline theology is at the very heart of the New Testament witness and the Christian faith. He saw what many of his contemporaries could not see. A self-proclaimed personification of a model Pharisee (Gal 1:13-14), before his conversion he was far more zealous than his peers and his rage knew no bounds in his attempts to wipe out (Acts 9:1-2) the group that proclaimed Jesus as the Anointed One.¹ Of his 13 or 14 letters² (Eusebius 3.3; Council of Laodicea, Canon 60 in Jurgens 318), Romans is the most complete presentation of what he taught. I will use this letter as a guide to explore my understanding of the heart of Paul's theological vision. I will focus particular attention on the concepts of law, faith, justification, salvation and his creation of the faith versus works of the law dichotomy. This will lead into the implications I see for my own experiences of faith and ministry.

I believe the reasons Ludwig presents for the writing of the letter to the Romans, namely, that Paul had never been to the Roman Church and that it had close ties to the Jerusalem Church, are sound (82-83). It seems as if he were preaching through the letter. The entirety of what he taught the Romans is encapsulated in 1:16-17, which Johnson calls Paul's announcement of his thesis (319). The good news is that God will save all people who believe in Him. Justification is summed up as starting and ending with faith, an argument against justification by observance of the law that sets up the dichotomy mentioned above. "As scripture says (1:17)," gives us a foretaste of how Paul gives scripture³ a primary place in the basis for his teaching throughout the letter. Continuing in the letter, he makes clear that idolatry is followed by God's just punishment. He then goes on to show clearly that all people are judged, Gentiles by an interior law, Jews by their law, both laws from the same God. He next juxtaposes God's faithfulness against human

unfaithfulness; enunciating that both those under natural law and those under Torah are all bound under the chains of sin.

Saint Paul sets up his teaching on justification by putting at odds faith on the one hand and the works of the law on the other. The Law of Moses, Torah, was revered by all Jews and was their sacred guide for living. Obedience to this law was required in order to receive the blessing (Jos 22:1-6), disobedience a curse (Jos 23:12-13). The Judaizers who were in both Churches in Jerusalem and Rome were teaching that without observance of Torah, Goyim⁴ were lost. In other words, they would be justified by their works of the law. Paul's writing indicates that those who teach such are ensnaring the people in a trap. While the law is good and holy, Paul makes it quite clear that it lacks the power to save those who live according to it (Rom 7:7-25). Johnson points out in his evaluation of the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus can be understood to have been the personification of Torah (188-191). This is consonant with Jesus' own words, "I have come, not to abolish (the law and prophets), but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17b)." Paul echoes these same sentiments in many places, for example, "Help carry one another's burdens; in that way you shall fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2)."

Paul's preaching was challenged at every turn because the Judaizers claimed that there was no salvation outside the circumcision of Moses and they had much influence in distorting Paul's message into one of abandonment of Torah. Paul confronted this head-on by going to Jerusalem for the Council of that city (Acts 15:1ff). From this council it was unanimously decided that the only rules they would levy would be the abstinence from meat sacrificed to idols, blood, meat of strangled animals and illicit sexual union. These restrictions were not an imposition of the law on the Goyim, rather were implemented

because of the use of these things by the pagan religion and the fact that many of the Gentiles had previously been pagan. It also was a concern because it scandalized Jewish followers of the Messiah. Paul elucidates this clearly in chapters eight and nine of his first letter to the Corinthians. This sheds light on the Galatians passage quoted above. It is not lawful or right for one to do something that would scandalize a brother or sister, but all must be done in love. This is culminated in his statement, "Love never wrongs the neighbor, hence love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10)." This makes clear how the law is fulfilled. This fulfillment of the law brings a freedom to the sons of God (Rom 1-6).

Yet this fulfilling of the law must be completed by his teachings on justification. Paul speaks unreservedly about what justifies a person. The rebel Augustinian monk, Luther, added the word alone to Paul's own explanation of justification by faith. This misstates Paul's thoughts more than any other statement. He writes plainly, "When he will repay every man for what he has done: eternal life to those who strive for glory, honor, and immortality by patiently doing right... it is those who will keep (the law) who will be declared just (Rom 2:6-7 & 13b)." Here Paul makes clear it is what one does that justifies, with his statement, "by patiently doing right." This is the beginning of Paul's arguments, showing that from the outset he did not believe what Luther put forward. His line of argumentation then proceeds to take on the Judaizers' belief that it is by the works of the law that no one is justified, but by faith. Since he is defending against the belief that one is justified by the works of Torah, he takes his argument to the extreme to make his point very clear. There is confusion when some read the Pauline writings and James 2:14-26. James uses Genesis 15:6 to show clearly that Abraham was justified by his works and his faith. James is addressing a problem of living a life consonant with the Christian faith

believed. Paul, on the other hand, is contrasting the justification of a person through faith in God with justification through obedience to Torah. I believe the misreading of Paul has created much controversy and confusion between Catholics and Protestants.

In Romans 3:21-31, Paul shows how one is justified outside of the law using the same passage as James above. This truth shows the Judaizers to be liars. He appeals to the authoritative scriptural witness to show that it was outside obedience to the law that the father of the Jews was justified. By going to the roots of his religion and showing that Abraham was not justified by obedience to Torah, he further undermines the Judaizers position. Paul writes about access to salvation, "Through (Jesus) we have gained access by faith to the grace in which we now stand (Rom 5:2a);" about the mechanics of salvation, "For by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:8-9, KJV);" and acknowledges what brought him to faith, "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace (Gal 1:15)." Paul's theological vision touches several areas:

- ~ Our salvation is total gift (charis)
- ~ We are not justified by observance of the law
- ~ We have the freedom from observance of the law of Moses
- ~ We are justified by faith and works consonant with that faith

When I was 20 years old, I left the Catholic Church, believing a lie. I was not taught to study the Bible like Protestants, nor did we read the Scriptures at home. I was never really taught my faith as a thing to be learned about intellectually. For this reason, I was left defenseless, yet felt a great need to live my life with consistent beliefs and actions. As a Protestant, I learned to hate the Catholic Church and all it taught, yet paradoxically, was not systematically taught my 'new faith.' I attended a great variety of Churches, from

fundamentalist Baptist to the Assemblies of God and most of the Churches in-between. I listened to those who appeared to know, for I acknowledged that I certainly did not know very much at all about the Scriptures or religion. My own faith is colored by these experiences and the great tension and division that exist between Catholics and just about every other Christian denomination. This affects me deeply as this has been a big part of my formative years as an adult. My faith comes out of these experiences, so that I understand God as the giver and me the receiver in the Psalm, "For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore (Ps 38:2, KJV)." Despite the pain and suffering of my experience of leaving and returning to my Church, I am comforted that God has been so gracious to teach me to love Him, His Church and His people.

My experiences of faith directly affect how I minister to others. I have learned that people are more important than ideas and that the bottom line of life is to love them as Jesus and Paul taught. In my Church setting, I minister to people in the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, people interested in becoming Catholic), SFO (Secular Franciscan Order) and lector at Mass. Through e-mail, I have discussions with people who want to save me from the 'whore of Babylon.' At work in supervising and working with people to do my job, I minister to those I interact with on many different levels. My new understanding of the Pauline theological vision through this paper has made me more sensitized to the complexity of issues such as faith, works and observance of the law, salvation and the proper living of life and treating of people. I can see more clearly how important it is to be patient with people and to treat them in a way that I want to be treated; with love and respect acknowledging that they have competencies and strengths as well as shortcomings and weaknesses. I am also reminded that they are people made in the image

and likeness of God with thoughts, desires and plans of their own. This strengthens my resolve to be ever mindful of this when I am tempted to cut people off, to dismiss them as incompetent or without value. Whether I am explaining Church teachings, striving to live according to the rule of the Secular Franciscans, having conversations with those convinced the Catholic Church is evil or dealing with people at work, this paper has reminded me to love the people with whom I interact.

¹ In this way, he was a type of predecessor to the medieval inquisition of Jews and Heretics, but was stopped dead in his tracks.

² It is a stated fact that Paul did not write every letter with his own hand, as is testified in some of the letters. This does not invalidate Eusebius' and the Fathers' attribution of the letters to him. I was very disappointed with how the course material seemed to dismiss the clear teachings of the church fathers with hardly an argument or justification. The church fathers are proven and so have a greater weight in my estimation than modern scholars that are largely unproven and lacking in authority. This can be shown by the wide variety of opinions that modern scholars hold (Ludwig 165-166). I do not claim by this that there is no need for modern scholarship, only that the author ought to have engaged this disparity in order to reflect the thinking of modern scholars to a greater extent than done.

³ Scripture to Paul, in this context, was the canon used in his day as scripture, that is, the Old Testament. This canon was not firmly defined, but several collections of writings were used then. As is also evident in Paul's writings, he also quotes extra-biblical and non-biblical sources. Protestants cannot take this as evidence of their concept of Sola Scriptura for it is not supported by the evidence.

⁴ Goyim is Hebrew for a foreign nation or heathen people, generally translated as gentile.

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