

“The Theology of Paul”
The Bible Student 7:332-340. [1903]

The preaching and teaching of Paul, as they are reflected in the epistles we have from his pen, possess more than any other New Testament body of truth a theological character. From the subjective, historical point of view, it is not difficult to find explanations of this fact. Undoubtedly the apostle's mind had by nature a strong systematic bent. Before his conversion he had received a careful training in the school of Pharisaism, where his natural gifts in this line had been given every opportunity for development. During his Christian career he found himself involved in great religious controversies touching the very foundations of man's standing before God, and, as on numerous later occasions in the history of the church, so here the conflict with error proved the mother of theological progress. Finally Paul exercised his apostolic activity on a virgin field, where the necessity of a radical reconstruction of the entire fabric of life compelled reflection upon the fundamental principles of religion and ethics. But, while recognizing the validity of all such considerations, we cannot as believers in the inspired character of apostolic teaching consider them ultimate. The deepest reason for the theological form of the Pauline teaching is an objective one, inherent in the purpose itself for which the truth exists. Because so much depends for the vigor and purity of the Christian religion on its practical side upon the definite apprehension of its truths in their various relations and their organic unity, there was need that the main lines of this apprehension should be firmly drawn beforehand in Scripture for the infallible guidance of believers in later ages. This important service Paul was privileged to render to the church. While belonging to the history of revelation, his teaching at the same time marks the beginning of the history of theology. How prominent a part it has played in at least two of the great constructive epochs of the doctrinal life of the church—in the time of St. Augustine and in the time of the Reformation—is known to every student of the history of doctrine.

At one time there was danger of over-emphasizing the influence of the theological factor in Paul's religious consciousness. The Tübingen school conceived of the early history of Christianity as essentially a process of evolution of ideas, in which the intellect was the prime moving force. This, applied to Paul, resulted with such writers as Holsten and Pfleiderer in the view that the apostle was led to frame his specific gospel by a train of reasoning, which he pursued within himself, while persecuting the Christians, and which came to a climax in the moment of his conversion. With his penetrating intellect, relentless logic, and natural tendency towards absolutism in every respect, he perceived that the expiatory interpretation of the death of Jesus, which the Christians advocated, involved much more than they realized or were ready to acknowledge, indeed, that it involved nothing less than surrender of the legalistic principle of Pharisaism. Thus, as an outsider, he placed himself upon the standpoint of his opponents, thought out their position, and evolved in his mind a scheme in which the cross would be the only source of righteousness with the same absoluteness as the law was to his own Pharisaic standpoint. This scheme, once having been theoretically conceived, drew him to such an extent under its spell that he began seriously to consider its merits and to doubt the correctness of his own position. The inward agitation thus produced, becoming more and more intensified, at last threw Paul into a visionary state, in which he believed himself to have beheld an objective appearance of the risen Jesus. It will be perceived that this makes the theologian in Paul in the most literal sense the father of the Christian in him. To accept such a construction involves a strong belief in the primacy of the intellect as being able to overrule the most pronounced

antagonism of the will and of the affections. As a psychological explanation of the conversion it appears extremely implausible. But the mere fact that such a theory could be in all seriousness proposed and worked out with a degree of verisimilitude shows how potent a force the theologizing habit must have been in Paul's mental make-up. It is well to remember this, because at the present day, the opposite tendency, which sees in the apostle not primarily the man of the intellect, but the man of the will, the missionary, the organizer, the religious enthusiast, and explains his theology out of his experience as a Christian, has and is likely for some time to hold the upper hand. Of course this also represents an important aspect of Paul's many-sided equipment, but carried to an extreme it is apt to obscure unduly the other side. Under its influence present-day writers are ready to assume on the slightest provocation that there are in the apostle's teaching trains of thought which directly contradict and exclude each other, and that he remained blind to this fact and allowed them to co-exist because his ability and interest lay more on the practical side of religion than on the side of its system of truth. For the interpretation of Paulinism not a little depends on the attitude assumed towards these two extreme standpoints.

It ought to be noticed that the features in view of which we ascribe a theological character to Paul's presentation of the truth belong to it not merely in some advanced form, which it assumed in the apostle's own mind, or among "the perfect," to whom he refers in 1 Corinthians 2:6, but even in its common form, as it is embodied in the gospel-preaching and as it is delivered to every believer. It is true the terms *γνωσις* and *επιγνωσις* are used by the apostle to designate a deeper, more perfect understanding of the truth of Christianity, such as only the mature require. This is found already in the earlier epistles (cf. Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 1:5, 12:8, 13:8, 14:6; 2 Cor. 6:6, 8:7, 11:6), and appears more prominently in Ephesians and Colossians in contrast with the false *γνωσις* which these epistles are directed against. But *γνωσις* is also descriptive of the common apprehension of the substance of the gospel (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14, 4:6, 10:5). Nay, the peculiar use of *πιστις* itself, as *fides quae creditur*, met with in the Pastoral Epistles and made so much of as an argument against their genuineness, has its preformation in Ephesians 4:5, 13, perhaps also in Galatians 1:23. Paul intimates in the words *εν πρωτοις*, "first of all" (1 Cor. 15:3), that he observes a well-ordered method in imparting the truth, which assigns to each doctrine the place it is entitled to by its intrinsic importance. In Romans 6:17 he speaks of a *τυπος διδαχης*, "a pattern of teaching" whereunto the Roman Christians had been delivered. The conception of *αληθεια*, "truth," also which the apostle repeatedly introduces, even into his correspondence with the Thessalonians, where many writers find represented a more primitive type of mission-preaching, proves that from the beginning Paul looked upon the gospel from the point of view of an absolute and eternal rule of faith, which demands obedience of the intellect. The entrance into Christianity is through the gateway of a supernaturally enlightened understanding (2 Cor. 4:6; cf. Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:14). All these statements, it will be observed, imply that Christianity has essentially a cognitive side, and that this cognitive side is not limited to the acceptance of the bare historical facts of the gospel, but comprises also the interpretation of these facts in a coherent, doctrinal system. Paul is conscious of the fact that his presentation of the gospel bears a distinct theological impress.

We should further observe that for Paul this cognitive apprehension of Christianity derives its organic unity from the fact that it centers in God and in Christ. The new light which the Christian receives is a light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The systematizing trend of Paul's thinking is connected with his theocentric way of looking at all things in the practice

of religion. One who framed the comprehensive formula, "From him and through him and unto him are all things," obviously derived the inspiration of his theology from his religion. Romans 1: 18-20 shows that all "truth" is ultimately truth concerning God. To find God everywhere of necessity leads to conceiving of all religious knowledge as organically one. This is the only standpoint which satisfactorily upholds the ideal value of theology and permanently sustains the theological impulse. Where it is not accepted, theology is apt to become even in the eyes of its friends a mere instrument for the salvation of man. At the same time the reference of all religious knowledge to God as its object of necessity imparts to the apostle's theology an eminently practical purpose. Paul stands at the furthest remove from every form of scholasticism which would seek and study the truth for the sake of the mere intellectual delight it affords. Even in the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, where the gnosis character of Christianity is most emphasized and exalted, the personal center of this knowledge in God and its consequent practical issue in the service and worship of God, are not for a moment lost sight of. According to Ephesians 1:17, the knowledge is an ἐπιγνώσις αὐτοῦ, i.e., of God. This does not mean, however, that the practical end which the knowledge of the truth is intended to serve lies exclusively in the guidance and strengthening of man's moral life. Passages like Colossians 1:9, 10 certainly imply that this is an end which all increase in Christian knowledge has in view. But it is not the only end. Side by side with these we find passages which represent knowledge as a practical end in itself, because it involves a fuller apprehension and appropriation of God in His personal relation to us, and therefore forms a necessary ingredient of mature Christian manhood (cf. Eph. 4:13, 24; 5:9, and for the older epistles 1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20). Paul evidently looked upon the knowing of God as in itself a religious ideal. This may best be seen from the fact that he conceives of the blessedness of the heavenly state as centered in that knowledge of God face to face which will take the place of the vision in the glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).

But the intimate union between theology and religion can be shown not merely in this fundamental way; it appears also in the scope and tenor of every single Pauline doctrine. Even those doctrines which the modern mind, in its straining for simplicity in matters of religion, is inclined to look upon as abstruse and impracticable speculations, have in reality to the apostle's mind a most direct bearing upon the vital piety of the heart. Such an abstract subject as sovereign election, such an exalted theme as the preexistence of Christ, are yet never treated without the warmth of a genuine enthusiasm, born from the conviction that they touch the soul of man in its highest concerns with God. A striking proof of this is that the passages most suffused with spiritual fervor and usually considered the finest in point of religious eloquence occur in close proximity to and dependence upon the theological presentation of the great distinctive doctrines of the Pauline gospel, e.g., Romans 5:1-11, 8:12-39. The apostle affords a classical example of the unique spiritual inspiration which a truly religious mind can draw from high doctrinal thinking. The flights of his theological genius were for him veritable flights into heaven.

Next to its profoundly religious spirit the breadth and comprehensiveness of Paul's theology perhaps ought to strike us most. His outlook is unbounded except by the mystery of the hidden background of the counsel of God itself. The Spirit, who teaches this highest knowledge, "searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10; cf. also the comprehensiveness of the hypothetical statement, 1 Cor. 13:2). Paul's theological vision spans the entire sweep of man's spiritual history and places it in its entirety under the point of view of an unfolding of the eternal purpose of God. He is not content with giving a soteriological construction, as in the contrast between the disobedience of Adam and

the obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:12-20), though this is in itself one of the boldest and grandest contrasts ever drawn, but, recognizing that Christ accomplishes far more than the restoration of what Adam ever lost, he places the two over against each other in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 as the representatives of two successive stages in the carrying out of God's sublime purpose for humanity, in such a way that the state of rectitude and the state of glory are by a sudden flash of light seen in their mutual relation, detached as it were for a moment from the soteriological process intervening. In Ephesians and Colossians also Paul reduces to a higher unity the work of creation and the work of redemption as both mediated by Christ. And the same masterful grasp of the principles underlying the structure of history, as an organism of the ages, may be observed also in the apostle's dealing with the history of redemption. The promise given to Abraham in its worldwide significance, the law as introduced by Moses in its disciplinary, convicting function, both in their relation, in case of the former positive, in case of the latter negative, to the gospel, have once for all been interpreted for us by this great philosopher of history. And this retrospective grandeur of conception is equaled by the sublimity of the eschatological outlook the apostle opens up to us into that perfect kingdom of God towards which all the streams of human history roll their waters as towards their final goal.

In its soteriological aspect Paul's theology is characterized by the same broad treatment. The great all-embracing contrasts between sin and righteousness, death and life, works and faith, flesh and Spirit will occur to everyone in this connection. The entire soteriological structure shows extraordinary compactness. The two principles of forensic retribution and of gracious love in God underlie it as a broad foundation. Here again we observe the theological bent of Paul's thought, in that the two fundamental attributes of God are seen to shape the soteriological process from beginning to end. Writers on the Pauline theology scarcely ever think it necessary to devote a chapter to the apostle's doctrine of God. And yet it is safe to say that in no type of biblical teaching has the writer's ultimate conception of God so thoroughly molded the doctrine of salvation as in the teaching of Paul. Besides by the great contrasts already enumerated, this is proven by what might be called the great reproductive conceptions which the apostle predicates both of God and of man, on the principle that, belonging originally to the divine nature, they find a secondary expression in man. Such are the righteousness of God, the love of God, the grace of God, the glory of God. In the person and work of Christ the forensic element and the gracious aspect of God's nature are both harmoniously embodied. From each of these two the whole content of God's soteriological procedure and of man's soteriological inheritance can be deduced. From the eternal foreknowledge of God, i.e., from His sovereign love, follows the whole *ordo salutis* on its subjective side not only, but also the whole objective work of redemption (cf. Rom. 8:28-34). From the carrying through of the forensic scheme in the work of Christ follows the same chain of consequences with the same absolute necessity. The atonement must issue into justification, justification must issue into the gift of the Spirit, the gift of the Spirit must issue into the complete renewal and supreme glorification of man. But most clearly of all the theological genius of Paul can be seen at work in the manner in which he subsumes the entire saving work of God under his conception of the person of Christ. It would be inaccurate to say that Paul's theology is Christocentric, in as much as the work of Christ remains subordinate to the glory of the Father (1 Cor. 15:28). But it would be quite proper to say that Paul's soteriological teaching amounts to a Christologizing of the gospel on the grandest of scales. From the beginning to the end man's salvation appears to Paul not merely associated with Christ, but capable of description in terms of Christ. We are chosen in Him in the premundane eternity and shall share His glory in the eternity of the world to come. And in all that lies between the figure of Christ accompanies

that of the believer through every stage of its progress in the grace of God. The determination with which the apostle has carried through this principle appears from the fact that even such subjective experiences as conversion and regeneration are described by him in Christological terms, viz., as a dying and rising with Christ, as steps in the reproduction of the life of Christ in us. And within the limits of the life of Christ in which all grace is thus concentrated, a still greater concentration is effected by Paul's viewing everything from the standpoint of the living, glorified Christ, who sums up and carries in Himself all the saving energies and gifts acquired during His life in the flesh, so that the whole work of salvation has an eternally fixed personal center of unity in the exalted Lord. In this soteriological reduction of everything to terms of Christ, as well as in the reduction of everything to terms of God in the broader theological sense, we feel how perfectly the head and heart of Paul interacted and responded to each other. The recognition of the supremacy of both in his thought was but the highest form of homage and devotion which his love prompted him to lay at the feet of his Savior and his God.