

Paul as a Pastor-Theologian in the Early Church: A Re-Reading in the Indian Context

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Abstract: This article emphasize the key role Paul has played in making the gospel of Jesus Christ and the wider dimensions of his message available to the entire world. It means that, if it were not for Paul, the universal dimensions of the gospel of Jesus Christ would not have become a reality as it is today.

Finally, the author asserts: The Pauline Year is the *kairos* given to the Church in India and to her theologians and exegetes to have a better awareness of what Paul has contributed to the universal Church and thereby to play a more responsible and creative role within the rich and pluralistic context of the Asian subcontinent.

Keywords: Paul the Pastor, Paul the Theologian, Paul the Ecumenical Theologian, Church, Human rights, human dignity, Indian context.

With all our optimism about God working through his Spirit, above and against all human resistance and calculations, it is only logical and refreshing to understand that God works more through human agents than through supernatural events. The wisdom as well as the theological and pastoral vision of Pope Benedict XVI by announcing a Pauline Year in conjunction with the Year of the Word of God belong to this category of human and divine providence. Calculating a bi-millennium of the birth of Paul as happening around the corner in 2008, the Pope has announced that this special year would be from June 28, 2008 to June 29, 2009. But the main focus of this announcement is to emphasize the key role Paul has played in making the gospel of Jesus Christ and the wider dimensions of his message available to the entire world. It means that, if it were

not for Paul, the universal dimensions of the gospel of Jesus Christ would not have become a reality as it is today. With his newly found freedom and emancipation from the cultural bondage of Judaism and with the liberating cultural heritage of his Hellenistic background, Paul made the universal gospel of Jesus Christ a still more universal reality in the wider Roman Empire, thanks to his timely encounter with the Risen Christ and the mission he received from him.

After the historic event of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church is very much aware of and is also more committed to its pastoral mission in the world. Consequently, the world is no more considered the enemy of the Church. After centuries of exclusive preoccupation with the inner nature of the Church with regard to its hierarchical and legalistic details, the Church is becoming very much conscious of its mission in the world and this awareness has inaugurated a new era of pastoral reflection in the Church as a whole and also among the various sections of the people of God. As a matter of fact, *pastoral* is a renaming of the concept of *service*, a concept which had become the key concept from the very beginning of the discussions during Vatican II. Theologically understood, the expression 'pastoral' is very dynamic and it connotes three levels of meaning, namely, the *personal*, the *diaconal* and the *kenotic* levels of the mission of the Church in the world. While the personal emphasizes the human dimension of the mission of the Church, the diaconal and the kenotic lay emphasis on the service and self-emptying aspects of the Church's mission. In fact, it goes to the credit of the writers of the Old and New Testaments to have developed such a rich biblical concept as pastoral care, which has gone into the very understanding of the divine-human relationship as well as the human relationship from a religious perspective.

Looking closely at the inner content of the concept of the pastoral mission of the Church from a biblical perspective, the most striking point is to see the convergent and complementary aspect of two ecclesiological passages in the Gospels of both Matthew and John. It has been customary to substantiate the entire theology of the founding and the nature of the Church exclusively through a single passage in the Gospel of Matthew, where the focus is on the faith of Peter (Mat 16:16-19). According to exegetes this story is a post-resurrection event presented

in as pre-resurrection one precisely because of the ecclesial preoccupation of this Gospel. Hence the parallel stories in Mark and Luke do not have this primacy passage at all. But in a very much similar passage in John it is the loving care and shepherding of Peter that stand out as the criterion of leadership in the Church (John 21:15-17). No mention is made here of the faith of Peter. Peter is instructed to take care of the sheep and the lambs that belong to Jesus. Moreover, the long community discourse in Matthew 18:1-35 is to be understood as a pastoral treatise on leadership in the Church. The leaders in the Church are exhorted to take personal care of the members of the community, going in search of the lost and the least, instructing those who go wrong and forgiving all. It is to be further pointed out that, according to Ephesians 2:20, the Church is constituted on the foundation of the apostles as well as the prophets. Hence the foundation of the Church is not to be understood as exclusively related to Peter. Paul, who was not one of the twelve apostles, was equally and more involved in the emergence of the Church as a universal reality as envisioned by Jesus Christ. This is the most important prophetic contribution of Paul for the Church of our times. So also the various pastoral aspects developed by Paul in his various communities with their cultural identities carry with them an ongoing message for the nature and mission of the Church in our times.

The Christo-centric Personality and Theology of Paul

As the most important step towards understanding the unique role Paul played in the evolution of the early Church we have to analyze the inner nature of the emergence of Paul as a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. Whereas the Twelve, the chosen disciples of Jesus, were all called from a specific context of their everyday life without any resistance or hesitation, Paul had an entirely different background, which, according to the Acts and the testimony of Paul, was directly opposed to such a discipleship. As a well-trained Pharisee, Paul was totally committed to the observance of the Torah and he was fully convinced that the Torah was the sure way of religious identity and authenticity. As part of this commitment to the Torah, Paul had recourse to all kinds of measures to destroy the

early Christian movement, which he understood as a real threat to the future of Judaism. It is at the climax of these efforts to eliminate this 'heresy' within Judaism that Paul was challenged by the risen Christ to reflect on his attitude and actions. Traditionally this story is known as the Damascus event, and this encounter of Paul with the risen Christ stands as the point of departure for the entire life and ministry of Paul. Though Luke tries to give it the nuance of a conversion (Acts 9:1-19a)¹, Paul himself refers to it either as a revelation of God (Gal 1:15-16) or better still as an encounter between himself and the person of Jesus Christ without any reference to time or place (Phil 3:4-14). This last passage also brings out the inner substance of the change that took place in the person of Paul with regard to his understanding of religious commitment.

A closer analysis of Phil 3:4-14 shows that it is an autobiographical narrative, and here we have Paul himself analyzing the change that took place in him as the result of an encounter with the risen Christ. Basically, it was a transition from Paul's Torah-centric understanding towards a Christo-centric understanding of religion and religiosity. It was not a change from one religion to another, but from one conviction to another conviction. Paul always wanted to be excellent in everything, including his religious commitment. But when he realized that the excellence he had arrived at through his conformity to the demands of the Torah was something inferior to the excellence which could be reached through a personal and experiential knowledge of Jesus Christ, who had faced the challenge of life in its in-depth seriousness of death, Paul gave up his earlier conviction and embraced this new conviction and committed himself totally and wholeheartedly to the person of Jesus Christ, now risen from the dead for ever. As a Pharisaic Jew it was easier for him to understand the meaning and message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is this Christ-centred personality that stands behind Paul's entire theology and his spirituality. A casual reference made by Paul that after the revelation of Jesus Christ, at once he went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus (Gal 1:17), shows that Paul purposely went into solitude and reflection in order to enter into the meaning of his future life, now seen from the mystery of the person of Christ.

Whereas the Torah was *something*, Christ is *someone* for Paul. A new "I-Thou" relationship was established and a new focus of perception and judgment was arrived at. Jesus, the Jew,² has now become the role model for Paul, the Jew. The world-vision of Jesus, the Jew, became the world-vision of Paul, the Jew. The generous attitude of Jesus towards the followers of other religions enabled Paul to enlarge the horizons of his world-vision and understand all humans as the children of God. During his public ministry Jesus had gone through the non-Jewish territory of Tyre and Sidon, thus meeting a Canaanite woman and extolling her faith (Mat 15: 21-28). Acting against the custom of avoiding the territory of Samaria during the passage between Jerusalem and Galilee, Jesus went to Galilee through Samaria, thus making the Samaritans realize that Jesus is the Savior of the world (John 4:4-42).³ The story of the Greeks from Galilee wanting to meet Jesus and the reaction of Jesus to his disciples as well as his own reflections about his Jewish identity are a convincing proof of how Jesus understood religious identity.⁴ Once Paul had realized that his own call was to take up this universal message of Jesus to the wider world, he did not want any human resistance to check it and he stood by his conviction at all costs. Hence the Risen Christ was the controlling power of his personality as well as his theology. What we analyze below are various articulations of this basic conviction of Paul and his consequent commitment to the cause of the gospel of Christ.

Paul: A Pastor-Theologian Defining the Church

The Acts of the Apostles has taken special care to establish that the universal dimensions of the mission of the Church are not something invented by Paul, but is part of the evolutionary process of what had already happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-42). Whereas the Pentecost was the occasion of the coming together of the dispersed Hellenic Jews to Jerusalem, the martyrdom of Stephen that happened some years later was a divinely arranged event which enabled the Hellenic Jewish Christians to go away from Jerusalem and start a new centre of operation for the centrifugal growth of the Church (Acts 11:19-26). In fact, this was a matter of surprise and an initial shock for the leaders of the Jerusalem Church,

which is suggestively expressed by the author of the Acts as: "News of this came to the ears of the Church of Jerusalem; and they sent Barnabas to Antioch" (Acts 11:22). The expression is suggestive of an embarrassment the leaders in the Jerusalem Church must have felt. But in their wisdom and prudence they delegated Barnabas, a Hellenic Jewish Christian from Cyprus, to visit this new community. Reaching Antioch, Barnabas found there a very zealous Christian community and he was much edified by this new experiment. Naturally, he saw the need of having a good support and assistance for encouraging this community to make it a new centre of operation. Herein came Paul, who had been going through a period of quarantine in Tarsus, much against his own newly given mission from the risen Christ (Acts 9:30). The coming in of Paul and the combined work of Barnabas and Paul resulted in the emergence of a dynamic community in Antioch, so much so that this community was able to assist the Church of Jerusalem during a famine that it had to go through (Acts 11:27-30). Though this is a historico-theological reconstruction of events developed by the author of the Acts of the Apostles, it reflects, at the same time, the inner dynamics of the growth of the Christian movement as guided by the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

The suggestive description in Acts 13:1-3 about the inner contents of the Church in Antioch as consisting of prophets and teachers and the further developments in the growth process of the Christian movement are the starting point of a process that is responsible for the ongoing mission of the Church which we are witnessing even in our own times. Central to the event narrated here is the initiative that is attributed to the Holy Spirit. The most striking point is that this Church was guided by prophetic teachers. It is to these prophetic teachers that the Holy Spirit gave the inspiration to venture on an expanding mission into the wider world. It is more likely to think of Paul and Barnabas proposing to the other leaders about the need and prospects of an outgoing mission from this new centre into the wider world. But the initiative was not a private one; hence the community prayed and fasted and with the blessing of the entire community Paul and Barnabas set out on their mission, first to Cyprus, the homeland of Barnabas, and then to other places. Two issues are to be taken into consideration. First of all, it was not from Jerusalem that this universal mission took place, but from a far-off

place in Syria, thus showing that God takes things globally and not locally. Secondly, it is equally important that the Church of Antioch never consulted the apostles in Jerusalem about such a mission outside of the Jewish territory. In fact, a consultation would have had its negative consequences. Hence it is precisely from Antioch that the Church takes on its widening dimensions. The entire credit of this adventure goes to Paul for his initiative and pioneering vision. From what we know about Barnabas and his later reluctance to take the hardships of such adventures (Acts 15:36-39), it is clear that the universal vision of the mission of the Church was the unique contribution of Paul. It is also important to note that the change of name from Saul to Paul mentioned in Acts 13:9 is related to his new mission among the Greeks and not to the conversion from Saul to Paul, which is a conventional way of understanding his two names.

Paul was a committed pastor and theologian in the early Church. Among his many sufferings for the sake of the Christian communities Paul refers to his “anxiety about all the Churches” (2 Cor 11:28) as his biggest suffering. The most important theological and pastoral role Paul played in the early Church was his strong stance in establishing the true identity of the religious movement as inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth over against a sectarian approach towards it that had developed in the Jerusalem Church. Stephen had started this protest and paradoxically, it was the mission and task of Paul to defend it to the point of his later on becoming a *persona non-grata* before the official Church of Jerusalem. Galatians 2:1-10 gives a clear picture of this pastoral and theological crisis in the early Church. As Paul states, “false brothers secretly brought in” (Gal 2:4) tried to persuade Paul to give up his convictions about the gospel, but he did not give in at all. In fact, Paul was the only one who remained strong in his convictions. The result of this confrontation was that there was a compromise and a division of labour about such a crucial issue. The leaders also made use of this opportunity to make a request to Paul that he should “remember the poor” (Gal 2:10) when he worked among the Greeks, and Paul was only eager to agree to it.⁵ As a matter of fact, the significance of this crucial event in the early Church has not been sufficiently understood, because it is the other presentation of the same event by Luke in the Acts as a smooth event, in which Peter presided over, that has caught

the attention of many readers of the New Testament (Acts 15:6-12). Luke wanted to give a kind of precedence to Peter in such important matters related to the growth process of the Church. But the trend in the Cornelius story in the same Acts (Acts 10:1-11:18) shows that Peter had his own reservations and negative attitude towards the entry of the Greeks into the community of the believers. Gal 2:11-14 also hints at the same conclusion.

Paul: The Great Defender of Human Dignity and Human Rights

The starting point of any meaningful discussion on the specific role played by Paul in the early Church is his basic conviction about the inbuilt dignity and rights of all humans, which made him to stand and fight for this conviction at all costs. Paul was convinced that what the Priestly Tradition (Gen 1:26-31) and the Yahwist Tradition (Gen 2:7, 15) wrote about the human reality is something that is to be defended at all costs. The covenantal tradition which he had imbibed as part of his Jewish training also enabled him to see the greatness of the human reality insofar as Yahweh had entered into a personal relationship with Israel. Paul also had realized that the various laws prescribed in the Torah for observance were not to restrict the freedom of the people but to inspire them to lead an authentic life. But this was not all clear to Paul because of his pharisaic mindset. Through his commitment to Christ, Paul came to realize the larger dimensions of human dignity and human rights, and he considered it his duty to defend this truth at all costs. As a result, for Paul, the Jews and Greeks, free and slaves, men and women were all equals. Citing a baptismal exhortation from the early Christian community, Paul says: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Paul realized that it was his duty and right to hold on to the universal values which Jesus had upheld during his earthly ministry even by transgressing the barriers created between the Jews and the Samaritans (John 4:4).

Paul wrote to the Galatians: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to

you... You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal 5:1-4). It was in his encounter with the risen Christ that Paul had understood the deeper dimensions of human dignity, and it was a radical departure from his earlier enslavement to the Torah of Moses. It was to defend this human dignity and rights that Paul had fought in the Jerusalem Council which we discussed above. But when Paul realized that the understanding arrived at in Jerusalem was violated and abused by some Jewish Christians in the territory of Galatia, he had no choice but to demonstrate the valid principles of human dignity underlying the gospel preached by Christ. The question of respecting human dignity was not only a matter of freedom from the Torah but also of Christian living. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "If someone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1). Paul wrote to the Romans: "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while others eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat. For God has welcomed them... Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds" (Rom 14:1-5).

However, Christian freedom does not mean a matter of license. The Christians have to be fully conscious of their call and the demands of that call. It was precisely here that Paul had to deal with a variety of issues related to human freedom. The Greek mind, characterized by its intellectual superiority and emancipating inclinations, tended to make each one aware of his and her identity to the extent of affirming and asserting it, neglecting the others. In fact, Paul had gone to Corinth after an initial shock he had experienced at Areopagus about this intellectual superiority consciousness when he explained the gospel of the resurrection to the Athenians (Acts 17: 22-31). So "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (1 Cor 2:1-5) Paul made a new experiment in going to another community which had no intellectual excellence. It was a risky venture into the unknown future. Corinth was a commercial city and consequently it had its own problems.⁶ Paul stayed there

eighteen months to educate that community and later on appointed Apollos to take care of it. But very soon Paul realized that this community also had radical problems, the main among them being its party spirit and consequent group quarrels.

It is in the context of this discussion on human dignity and human rights that we have to review the oft-discussed question of Paul being a misogynist and a misogynist, namely, that Paul did not give sufficient importance to women in the Church (1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33a-36) and also that he did not recommend marriage as a Christian ideal (1 Cor 7:1). In dealing with the undisciplined Corinthian community Paul had to be rather strict with the dress code in the gathering for worship, especially in the context of the cosmopolitan and commercial city of Corinth. But the reference to women keeping silent in the worship gatherings does not seem to belong to the original text and is considered as an interpolation at a later date.⁷ In 1 Cor 11:5 Paul refers to women praying and prophesying in the worship gatherings. On the other hand, it is beyond doubt that Paul had given great importance for the role to be played by women in the Church. The reference to Euodia and Syntyche as co-workers of Paul (Phil 4:2-3) and the recommendation he gave to Phoebe, the deacon of the Church of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1), a number of women whom Paul greets in his letter to the Romans (Rom 16:3-15) all prove that Paul recognized the important role women played in the Church. It is also related to the fact Paul had held in high esteem Prisca and Aquila in the Corinthian Church as well as Nympha in the Church of Colossae. Reference to 1 Cor 7:1 as a proof of Paul not encouraging marriage has been now proved as a misreading insofar as here Paul is referring to a slogan of the Gnostic Christians in Corinth who were against Christians getting married. On the other hand, Paul insisted on the need of Christian marriage and also the rights and duties of both husband and wife in the exercise their marital rights (1 Cor 7:2-7).

Paul: The Great Ecumenical Theologian of the Early Church

Ecumenism and wider ecumenism are concepts which have become very popular in our times. Although the Greek word

oikoumene, from which the English word ecumenism is derived, basically means the inhabited earth, during the New Testament times it was identified with the Roman Empire. However, it assumed a new meaning during the past centuries when the ecumenical movement got started and became a venture towards the unity of the Churches. During the second half of the twentieth century, when the world became conscious of its increasing religious pluralism, the concept of a wider ecumenism evolved and it is still taking deeper roots in sociological, philosophical and theological discussions. Even ecological concerns are now brought into the purview of ecumenical discussions, emphasizing thereby the original meaning of the word. In the context of the world becoming a global village, peoples and nations try to transcend their ethnical, religious, cultural and linguistic considerations in view of experiencing the benefits and blessings of human solidarity. Hence theologians are also very active in our times in seeing the wider dimensions of ecumenism as a concern of the Church.

It is precisely in this context that certain theological reflections of Paul emerge as ecumenically important contributions for contemporary theological discussions. What Paul wrote about Christ breaking the dividing wall of hostility between the two opposing groups of Jews and Greeks and bringing them together to form a new humanity (Eph 2:11-22) is a typical example of how Paul could theologically establish that the existing customs and practices of social and religious discriminations are to be removed through the power of the Christ Event. The emphasis on the new humanity (*kainos anthrospos*) (Eph 2:15) is remarkable insofar as it is the blue print of an ideal society the Church has to establish in the world. God reconciling the world to himself through Christ and entrusting the ministry of reconciliation to the apostles (2 Cor 5:18-20) and thereby constituting a new creation is a Pauline reflection that has important pastoral applications in our contemporary world of alienations and estrangements. A very significant contribution of Paul towards cosmic ecumenism is his reflection on the ultimate destiny of material creation, which, according to Paul, is its final transformation through the ongoing power of the Spirit of the Risen Christ (Rom 8:18-25). Whereas Judaism had speculated on the destruction of the present world order and the inauguration of a new

world order as an apocalyptic event, Paul tries to see the groaning of the present world order as moving towards an eschatological transformation as a result of the resurrection of Christ. Consequently the entire material creation is undergoing a process of inner transformation till its eschatological fulfilment when God will be all in all (*ho theos ta panta en pasin*) (1 Cor 15:28).

Paul: The Pastor-Theologian and Issues of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

Our analysis of the various aspects of Pauline personality as well as his theological reflections invite us also to have a closer look at how Paul dealt with issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxis when he had to face such issues in the various communities he himself or his close associates had founded. Paul realized that such issues are bound to happen (1 Cor 11:19), especially when various issues of the gospel were to be put into practice in different socio-cultural and religious contexts. But Paul had an inbuilt capacity to differentiate between the more important and the less important as well as those issues which had no relevance at all to Christian life. The various pastoral issues discussed in the first letter to the Corinthians are typical examples of how Paul faced such issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxis in that community. What is most important is how Paul approached such issues from a radical and not from a superficial and conventional perspective. With regard to the question of eating meat once offered before the deities of other religions, it was more a question of edification and concern for the others than a real question of orthodoxy (1 Cor 8:1-11:1). But the scandalous celebration of the Agape and the Lord's Supper was more a question of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, because it tended to destroy the very foundation of the Christian community (1 Cor 11:17-34). When Paul was asked to give clear answers to various issues related to Christian life, he had his own pastoral and catechetical approach to such issues, such as the questions related to marriage and virginity and the role and meaning of charisms in the community. Christian edification in a multi-religious and multi-cultural context was a crucial issue, which Paul wanted to defend at all costs. However, many of his simpler teachings are interpreted by theologians out of context and this fact

has brought in a lot of confusion about several issues of Pauline theology.

The major Christological issues discussed in the Deutero-Pauline letters to Colossians and Ephesians deserve special attention. Even if Paul was not the direct author of these letters, the issue, as such, seems to have a Pauline framework of reflection, especially because of its profound Christological overtones which are characteristic of Pauline theology. This is particularly true of Colossians 1:15-20, where we have one of the most sublime formulations of who Christ is. It is in the same perspective that we have to understand the Christological presentation of salvation history as having its origin, historical accomplishment and eschatological fulfilment in and through Christ (Eph 1:3-10). In fact, here we have a non-lapsarian approach to Christology and soteriology which should assume greater significance in contemporary theological discussions. So also the discussion on unity, diversity and growth into the maturity of Christ as the specific characteristic of the Christian community has a genuine Pauline trait, when compared with Romans 12:3-9. Paul's ability to relate practical issues to sublime theological ideals is given a clear proof in his letter to the Philippians. As such, the Philippians were Paul's best friends. His writing to them: "My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved" (Phil 4:1) is typical of a pastor who is seasoned by theological and personal depth. It is to them that Paul presents the kenotic Christ and he requests them to have the "mind of Christ" as the controlling power of Christian life (Phil 2:1-11). When he felt that theological arguments would fail to bring home to his readers the sublime ideas of his Christian intuition, he gave expression to his inner depth of spirituality through a hymn of love which has within it the solution of all pastoral problems then and now (1 Cor 13:1-13). After his in-depth analysis of the role and function of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in Christian life and Christian economy of salvation (Rom (8:1-30) Paul exclaims: "If God is for us, who is against us?.. Who can separate us from the love of Christ?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8: 31-39).

Paul: Social Concerns as Theological Concerns

A much related and closer approach to Paul as a Pastor-Theologian is, when we evaluate the ministry of Paul from the perspective of his social concerns, and these are spread out in his several of his genuine letters. In fact, the linking of social concerns and theological concerns is something characteristic of our times, especially since Vatican II. Chapters, such as, “The proper development of culture”, “socio-economic life”, and “The life of the political community” in *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II are typical examples of the merging of social concerns and theological concerns as related to the mission of the Church in our contemporary world. The same documents states: “Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God” (art. 2). This is a clear way of our present-day understanding of the merging of the sacred and the secular. In fact, it is the articulation of what Jesus had tried to establish during his earthly ministry, but it was all forgotten during the centuries when the missionaries were burning with the zeal for the souls and forgot all about the earthly dimension of Christian life. Thanks to this new incentive and initiative taken by the official Church, liberation theologies of all sorts are developing in different part of the world, including India.

It is here that Paul emerges as a theologian who had a clear and definite stance on the social concerns of the people he had to deal with, whether they were cultural concerns, or gender concerns, or economic concerns. When Paul realized that cultural issues were brought into the centre of theological concerns, thus demanding the denial of cultural issues for the sake of the supposedly theological issues, Paul had to stand firm and defend the cultural freedom of those to whom the gospel was preached. This is precisely what happened in Paul’s defence of the freedom of the Greek Christians from the Jewish custom of circumcision and the observance of the Torah. In other words, it was not a question of Paul denying the meaning of the Jewish practices, but of affirming the right and freedom of the Greeks in the acceptance and practice of the Christian faith and praxis. Though Paul was equally or even more committed

to the conviction about the superiority of the Jewish Torah over all other religious practices, the enlightenment he received from Christ and later reflected on during the silent moments of his life, challenged him to give up his old convictions and stand for new values and new principles of behaviour. We have already referred to Paul's basic convictions about the creative role of women in the missionary activity of the early Church. In fact, it was a continuation of the dynamic role several women disciples had during the earthly ministry of Jesus, an important information we get from the Gospel of Luke (Lk 8:1-2).

Time and again it has been argued that Paul did not do anything to remove one of the major social problems of the Roman Empire, namely, slavery. On the other hand, Paul is said to have encouraged this practice, advising the slaves to obey their masters and telling the masters to treat the slaves with sympathy and understanding. So in Eph 6:5-9 as well as in Col 3:22-4:1 Paul is said to have advised the slaves and masters in such a manner that they were supposed to remain at that level and the slaves were not expected to have a better future than what they had experienced with their masters. Here a clear reference is to be made about the Proto-Pauline and the Deutero-Pauline letters in the Pauline Corpus. The above passages are all found in the Deutero-Pauline letters. It is true that in his own letter to the Corinthians Paul had advised the slaves to remain satisfied with their own state as slaves (1Cor 7:21). Then we read: "If a chance for liberty should come, take it" with a possible different reading also: "But even if a chance of liberty should come, choose rather to make use of your servitude" (NEB). The argument of Paul is clear, from a theological point of view: "Whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ" (1 Cor 7:22). Paul's ideas may look strange to our own way of thinking because his theological world stood much above our own mundane thinking and behaving. Freedom and slavery are all relative concepts as long as people enjoy the inner freedom of the children of God, and Paul was more concerned about this fact.

This is precisely the world of thinking Paul presents to us in his genuine and shortest letter to Philemon. Though short, this letter

opens before us a world of challenging reflection to show how Paul tried to initiate a slow but powerful way of inner transformation among the masters and slaves in the Roman Empire. Paul's appeal to the Christian Philemon, the master of the slave Onesimus, who had recently become a Christian, to accept him as a brother, as if Philemon was receiving Paul himself, who had brought Philemon to faith in Christ, is one of the most powerful appeals Paul had given to establish an egalitarian society. Paul did not want to act as a revolutionary, especially in the context of making the Christian movement as an agent of upsetting the Roman socio-economic system. At the same time, Paul had sown the seeds of an inner revolution which became the basis of later attempts for the establishment of a society based on equality at all levels. However, it is true that several medieval theologians had defended the divine establishment of slavery, precisely to defend the colonial systems of enslaving the conquered people throughout world. It was during Vatican II that the Roman Catholic Church has once and for all defended the issue of human dignity as the basis of religious freedom.

A discussion on the social concerns of Paul has to necessarily include a reference to Paul's concern for the poor, a cause which he had set to his heart as of vital importance, as Paul himself states in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 2:10). Coming under the category of 'remembrance'⁸, Paul had taken it as a vital part of his apostolic ministry because he knew very well that preaching the gospel was not only a question of spiritual salvation but also one of empowering humans to have a dignified life. In accordance with the request the Jerusalem authorities had placed before him, Paul worked very hard to collect a financial subsidy for the poor Christians of Jerusalem and Judaea and he pleaded with the Corinthian community to share their wealth with these poor Christians (2 Cor 8:1-9:14). In fact, he had taken special care to have this help reach the Church of Jerusalem not as his gift but as the gift of the donor Churches. He had advised the Corinthians to have their own representatives selected to carry their gift to Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:3). However, by the time this gift was to be taken to Jerusalem, Paul had received news that the Jerusalem Church was not likely to receive this support for the simple reason that Paul and his theology had by then become unacceptable to the authorities of Jerusalem (Rom 15:31). Here we have a typical

example of how ideological differences result in the denial of a legitimate and sublime human cause, something typical of the so-called religious administration.

Paul: Indian Biblical Theologians and the Indian Scenario

In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* published in 1998 Pope John Paul II has invited Indian theologians and philosophers to engage themselves in a re-articulation of the gospel in the Indian context. He wrote: "In preaching the gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded. Today, as the gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries. My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamics of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India, particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind. The first of these is the *universality of the human spirit* (italics mine), whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures. The second, which derives from the first, is this: in engaging with great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church of the future, who will judge herself enriched by all that has come from today's engagement with Eastern cultures and will find in this inheritance fresh cues for fruitful dialogue with the cultures which will emerge as humanity moves into the future. Thirdly, care will need to be taken lest, contrary to the very nature of the human spirit, the legitimate defence of the

uniqueness and originality of Indian thought be confused with the idea that a particular cultural tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions".⁹

Never has any Pope described in such beautiful words the richness of the Indian philosophical and theological traditions. The Pope has invited Indian theologians to take up the challenge of articulating biblical and theological concepts giving due respect to Indian thought patterns and taking into account India's rich religious and cultural heritage. At the same time, Indian theologians must remain open to other articulations, especially the early Hellenic ones, because they are also part of the treasure of the Church's tradition. Sufficient attention must be paid to the contributions of the Greek, Latin and Syriac Fathers of the Church. Likewise, Indian theologians must appreciate the theological traditions and contributions of other countries and peoples. The human spirit is universal and its articulations are also universal. That is why the Pope says that no cultural tradition should remain closed in its difference which tries to affirm itself by opposing other traditions. As Pope John Paul II has pointed out in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, Indian theologians have to be fully aware that Asia, "the cradle of world's major religions" whose "people take pride in their religious and cultural values" is also a land of "religions showing signs of great vitality and a capacity for renewal". These religions also bear witness to "deep thirst for spiritual values". The Pope wrote: "The task of proclaiming Jesus in a way which enables the peoples of Asia to identify with him, while remaining faithful both to the Church's theological doctrine and to their own Asian origins is a paramount challenge"¹⁰ The words of the FABC are also very relevant here: "The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions, in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own."¹¹

What Indian theologians need today is a greater sense of identity, a deeper sense of selfhood and legitimate pride to take upon themselves the responsible task of being the theologians of the kingdom of God in a country which has its own philosophical,

theological and religious heritage. The principle of adaptation and inculturation is of great significance not only for the missionary in the traditional sense of the term, but also for the theologians. The church is *in* history and this means, in turn, that a sound theology of the church is also a living reality and one in touch with the actualities of the age in which she finds itself. Hence the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* recommends: "Each nation develops the ability to express Christ's message in its own way. At the same time, a living exchange is fostered between the Church and the diverse cultures of people.... With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire people of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage".

The early Church Fathers saw in Greek philosophy the work of the Logos and thus worked hard to establish a relationship between Christianity and Greek philosophy. In the medieval period Scholastic theology depended very much on Aristotle and efforts were made to reconcile the Christian doctrine of God with the teachings of Aristotle. What are the contributions of other religions and cultures in India for the formulation of an Indian Christian theology worth the name? What Pope Leo XIII said in 1893, when he erected the Papal Seminary of India and Ceylon in Kandy, should always remain as a reminder to the church in India and to her theologians: "O! Children of India, you are the administrators some of your own salvation". The concept of salvation about which the Pope spoke in 1893 has undergone radical changes in our times and it now includes many more nuances at the social, religious, cultural and economic levels. Hence the Indian theologians have to become aware of the great task they have to take up, and carry it out with a renewed sense of dedication and commitment and thereby contribute their share for the realization of the kingdom of God in this land of religions and cultures.

Paul the great missionary of the early Church is a model *par excellence* for the Indian biblical theologians in their efforts to translate the Christian gospel in the language and idioms of this vast subcontinent with its religious and cultural pluralism. In the

same way as Paul was first of all a scribe trained for Judaism and later on he became a scribe trained for the larger interests of the kingdom of God in the wider Roman empire, Indian biblical theologians have to decipher the wide spectrum of the concerns of the kingdom of God in this country. Jesus has already referred to the quality of such scribes insofar as they have a treasure within them from which they can take the new and the old (Mat 13:52). What is of vital importance is to have a pastoral sense and commitment in the same way as Paul had it as the *élan vital* of his life and activities. Leadership in the Church is walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd. The writer of the first Letter of Peter wrote it in clear terms: "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gains but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock. And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away" (1 Pet 5:1-4). The Pauline Year is the *kairos* given to the Church in India and to her theologians and exegetes to have a better awareness of what Paul has contributed to the universal Church and thereby to play a more responsible and creative role within the rich and pluralistic context of the Asian subcontinent. Deutero-Isaiah exhorted the returnees from the Babylonian captivity: "Widen the space of your tent, extend the curtains of your home. Do not hold back! Lengthen your ropes, and make your tent-pegs firm, for you will burst out to right and to left" (Is 54:2-3). This exhortation is very much applicable to the Indian theologians and exegetes of our times who are also challenged to go out of their centripetal world of theological reflection to the wider world of God.

Notes

- [1] In fact, the traditional and even the present-day understanding of the "conversion" of Paul and the change of his name from "Saul" to "Paul" as a sign of his conversion have no biblical basis. Even after this so-called conversion, the author of the Acts refers to his name as Saul. According to Acts 13:1-3, it is Barnabas and Saul who are delegated from the Church of Antioch to preach the gospel outside of the Jewish territory. In the course of this narrative, when Paul stands as the apostle of the Greeks, the author of the Acts transfers on him his original Greek name, Paul. It is also this name Paul prefers in all his writings. In fact, the change of name as related to the

change of mission is in tune with the biblical tradition in the case of Abraham, Jacob and Peter, and also the practice of the universal Church, including the naming of the Pope after his election.

- [2] In a recent book, *A Marginal Jew*, New York: Doubleday, Vol I, 1991; Vol II 1994. John P. Meier has demonstrated the kind of Jewish identity Jesus of Nazareth had practiced during his earthly ministry, very often going against the conventions and practices of Judaism. Cf. Joseph Pathrapankal, *The Christian Programme*, Dharmaram Publications, 1999, pp.142-146.
- [3] The statement of the Evangelist that Jesus "had to go through Samaria" (John 4:4) hints at the prophetic compulsion through which Jesus made this courageous action for the cause of his gospel.
- [4] Joseph Pathrapankal, "Jesus and the Greeks (John 12:20-28): A Semiotic Study on Religious Identity" in *Enlarging the Horizons: Studies in Bible and Theology*, Vazhoor: Sopanam Publications, 2008, pp. 82-103.
- [5] "Apostolic Commitment and `Remembering the Poor: A Study in Gal 2;10" in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in their Textual and Situational Contexts*, Essays in honour of Lars Hartman, ed. by T.Fornberg and D.Hellholm, Stockholm, 1995, pp. 1001-1018.
- [6] Joseph Pathrapankal, "From Areopagus to Corinth (Acts 17:22-31; 1 Cor 2:1-5): A Study on the Transition from the Power of Knowledge to the Power of the Spirit" in *Mission Studies*, vol. 23, 2006, pp. 61-80.
- [7] The NRSV translation of the Bible has printed 1 Cor 14:33a-36 within bracket, to make it clear that it is not part of the original letter of Paul. According to scholars, the author of the pseudo-Pauline 1 Tim 2:8-15 could be responsible for this interpolation.
- [8] "Remembrance" in the biblical sense is much more than a psychological exercise of recalling a past event. It is a re-presentation of the past event in such a manner that the past becomes the present and something happens as a result of this remembrance. The Israelites remembering the past history of their deliverance from Egypt were reminded that they have to make the past a present experience as they were exhorted to lead a life in accordance with the blessings they had received from God through that deliverance. Hence "remembering the poor" also meant a commitment of the person to do something concrete and meaningful for the poor.
- [9] *Fides et Ratio* art. 72; [10] *Church in Asia* art. 8
- [11] FABC Statement, April 1974. Cf. Gudencio B. Rosalels and Catalino G. Arevado, eds, *For all the Peoples of Asia*, No. 12, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, p. 14.

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- (Contd from p.29) Jacob and Peter, and also the practice of the universal Church, including the naming of the Pope after his election.
- [43] In a recent book, *A Marginal Jew*, New York: Doubleday, Vol I, 1991; Vol II 1994. John P. Meier has demonstrated the kind of Jewish identity Jesus of Nazareth had practiced during his earthly ministry, very often going against the conventions and practices of Judaism. Cf. Joseph Pathrapankal, *The Christian Programme*, Dharmaram Publications, 1999, pp.142-146.
- [44] The statement of the Evangelist that Jesus “had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4) hints at the prophetic compulsion through which Jesus made this courageous action for the cause of his gospel.
- [45] Joseph Pathrapankal, “Jesus and the Greeks (John 12:20-28): A Semiotic Study on Religious Identity” in *Enlarging the Horizons: Studies in Bible and Theology*, Vazhoor: Sopanam Publications, 2008, pp. 82-103.
- [46] “Apostolic Commitment and `Remembering the Poor: A Study in Gal 2:10” in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in their Textual and Situational Contexts*, Essays in honour of Lars Hartman, ed. by T.Fornberg and D.Hellholm, Stockholm, 1995, pp. 1001-1018
- [47] Joseph Pathrapankal, “From Areopagus to Corinth (Acts 17:22-31; 1 Cor 2:1-5): A Study on the Transition from the Power of Knowledge to the Power of the Spirit” in *Mission Studies*, vol. 23, 2006, pp. 61-80.
- [48] The NRSV translation of the Bible has printed 1 Cor 14:33a-36 within bracket, to make it clear that it is not part of the original letter of Paul. According to scholars, the author of the pseudo-Pauline 1 Tim 2:8-15 could be responsible for this interpolation.
- [49] “Remembrance” in the biblical sense is much more than a psychological exercise of recalling a past event. It is a re-presentation of the past event in such a manner that the past becomes the present and something happens as a result of this remembrance. The Israelites remembering the past history of their deliverance from Egypt were reminded that they have to make the past a present experience as they were exhorted to lead a life in accordance with the blessings they had received from God through that deliverance. Hence “remembering the poor” also meant a commitment of the person to do something concrete and meaningful for the poor.
- [50] *Fides et Ratio* art. 72; [51] *Church in Asia* art. 8
- [52] FABC Statement, April 1974. Cf. Gudencio B. Rosalels and Catalino G. Arevado, eds, *For all the Peoples of Asia*, No. 12, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, p. 14.

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