THINKING IN A NEW WAY

HOW AND WHY PAUL INVENTED "CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY"

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RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

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There are two questions we must address right from the start. First, what do I mean by the phrase “Christian Theology”? Second, what do I mean when I propose that Paul ‘invented’ it?

To the first: I am talking here primarily about an activity; a vocation, a task, an exercise – not, in other words, about the content of a dogmatic syllabus. I am arguing here, as in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, that Paul engaged in, reflected upon, and did his best to inculcate in his hearers, an activity which, he believed, was vital for the health and witness of the church. What he wanted was that all followers of Jesus would, in principle, be learning to think in a new way.

This is of course at the heart of what some today refer to with the word ‘apocalyptic’. Paul believed that in Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, and supremely in his death and resurrection, Israel’s God had unveiled his new creation; that Jesus’ followers were called to be part of that new creation; and that meant thinking in a new way. The content of that thought mattered vitally, but learning to think in the new way mattered above all. And, for Paul, this vocation and activity which I loosely call ‘Christian Theology’ was *loadbearing*: without it, the church would not be, could not be, what it was called to be.

What was this new way? For Paul, it was a matter of learning to live within Israel’s scriptures and the overall story which they told – the story which, Paul believed, had reached its *telos* in Jesus and had now exploded into new life. It was a matter of learning to pray in the Jewish way now reworked around Jesus and the Spirit. It was a matter of learning to live intentionally

in the new ways which, already indicated in scripture, were now made available to the large company of Jews and non-Jews alike who found themselves grasped by the gospel.

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Jesus himself is both the start of that new creation and the Lord who gives his own Spirit so that his people can continue the project. You see, from Genesis 1 onwards it's clear that the Creator God wants to rule his world through wise, image-bearing human beings.

There is a Trinitarian base for all biblical political theology: the Creator wants to work in the world by his image of justice and mercy being reflected through obedient, humble, wise humans. The Davidic king is seen in some texts as the true Adam, and in others (as in Psalm 72) as the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises.

The 'Age to Come' Has Broken In

The classic texts in which Paul outlines this task, this vocation, are well known. In Romans 12, taking a deep breath after the strenuous exposition of chapters 1—11, Paul appeals for a life of total dedication to God: the presentation of the whole self, the 'body', in a new kind of living sacrifice. 'Do not be conformed,' he says, 'to the present age; but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern and work out in practice what God's will is, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' (Rom. 12.1f.) In other words: the new age, the 'age to come' spoken of by apocalyptists and Rabbis alike, had broken in; and those who through the gospel found themselves caught up in this new age were called to a new kind of thinking, with the mind being transformed. It is interesting that Paul has to tell them to 'be transformed'; in other words, it doesn't happen automatically, an important point to which we shall return. No doubt he would say that the gospel and the Spirit have done the basic ground-work, but the follower of

Jesus has to be intentional about learning to think, not just to behave, in accordance with the new age. And that is at the heart of his inauguration of 'Christian Theology'.

The letter to the Philippians offers a sustained account of the 'mind' of the new community. For the moment we just note that the well-known (and sometimes puzzling) command in Philippians 2.5 ('have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Messiah Jesus') is a command to do theology in this sense: to think within the Christologically transformed creation, the world over which the crucified Jesus already reigns as Lord.

Other examples crowd in. You will already be thinking of 2 Corinthians 5, the statement that there is now a new sort of knowledge because if anyone is in the Messiah there is a new creation. And in 1 Corinthians 1—3 we find another sustained exposition of the new kind of thinking which comes into sharp focus in the breathtaking claim at the end of chapter 2, that 'we have the mind of the Messiah'. What I am referring to as the beginnings of 'Christian Theology' is precisely the cultivation, direction and development of the Messiah's Mind.

My second introductory comment has to do with the claim that Paul invented something. One might hear this claim in terms of the older, traditional Jesus-and-Paul debates: was Paul the true founder of Christianity, and so on. Paul himself says that the foundation is Jesus himself, with apostles as people who build on the foundation. (Ephesians 2 says something different; this is not ipso facto an argument against Pauline authorship, but that is beside my present point.)

When we see what Paul was trying to do in teaching the churches to think in the Messiah, to think within the new age, he both was and wasn't doing something Jesus had done before. Yes, Jesus challenged Peter to think, not as humans think, but as God thinks. Yes, in Luke 24 Jesus opened the minds of his followers to understand the scriptures. Yes, Jesus was constantly trying to get his hearers to think differently about the kingdom of God; hence all those subversive parables. But though there are many continuities there with the tasks Paul set himself, I still think Paul was doing something substantially new.

The Newness of Paul's Task

The newness of Paul's task relates directly to his consciousness of the vocation to be the Apostle to the Gentiles; to be, in other words, the one who would take the play which Jesus had written and bring in actors of every sort to swell the large cast that was needed. The task Paul had in mind was likewise in continuity with, and in radical discontinuity with, the Jewish world of his birth and upbringing.

The Jewish world knew many debates, but mostly they were not about who God was or who his people were; those were taken for granted. And the ongoing debates about how God was going to bring his purposes to completion was as much a political as a theological topic, though that distinction is of course out of place in the first century. As Jews to this day have commented, Jews do not normally do 'theology' in the way that Christians do. They can ask and answer theological questions, but theology *as a task* is not seen as loadbearing in the Jewish communities in the way it is, and has been from the start, within Christian communities.

So was Paul's sense of a new task a matter of leaving the Jewish world and undertaking a fundamentally alien, fundamentally gentile, activity? Not at all. The Greek world knew the word theologia; but in Aristotle and elsewhere it refers to one sub-branch of 'physics', the study of whatever there is in the world of physis, 'nature'. For Paul, the one God was not part of the world of nature; he was its creator and lord. Paul could address the issues of 'physics', and also of the two other ancient divisions of philosophy, 'ethics' and 'logic', but in all cases he transformed them in a decidedly Jewish fashion. It begins to look – at least from this preliminary point of view – as though the task I am calling 'Christian theology', as undertaken by Paul and urged upon his hearers, was yet one more symptom of his belief that the people of God as redefined in and around Messiah and Spirit were very Jewish, seen from a non-Jewish point of view, and yet also thoroughly transformed. Paul would have said that his transformation had to do with the new age for which many, perhaps most, Jews of his day had longed and which he believed had been inaugurated by Jesus.

Thus, though one could say that Paul was picking up this task from Jesus himself – and I assume he would have agreed – Paul was engaging in it in quite a new way. Jesus had not tried to generate and sustain a Jew-plus-Gentile community. He had not, as Paul said he was doing, been 'taking every thought captive to obey the Messiah'. Paul was implementing what Jesus had *accomplished*; and I am suggesting that part of that task of implementation was precisely the developing and urging of this *activity*, learning to think 'in the Messiah'.

It is of course possible – my last note within this introduction – that there were great teachers of theology in the church before Paul. I do not regard this as likely. True, if Philippians 2.6-11 is pre-Pauline then someone with remarkable theological insight and linguistic versatility penned it in the very early period. But we do not know that, and though the passage is a wonderful piece of dense theological formulation the use Paul makes of it is more explicit again in terms of teaching people to *think* in the new way. Anyway, with these introductory comments I move to my central two sections. If this is what I mean, for today at least, by 'Christian Theology', why did Paul invent it, and how did he do so?

Why Did Paul Invent It?

The central argument of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* is that Paul invented and developed both the task of Christian theology and its specific content to meet some very specific and pressing needs in the early church. It is because those needs were church-specific that we should not expect to find parallel movements in either the Jewish or the non-Jewish world of his day. These were new tasks which the new community had to work at in a new way.

My main argument goes like this. In almost every letter we can see Paul urging two things upon his churches: unity and holiness. Paul is well known of course for the doctrine of justification, but there are three or four

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passages in the whole corpus which deal with that direction, whereas there are literally dozens of appeals for unity and holiness. Of course, the post-Reformation churches have caused us some headaches here, because the reforming movements of the 16th Century generated all kinds of new disunity which were accepted as part of the price of recovering the gospel, and because the emphasis on justification by faith often meant a de-emphasis on holiness, in case the pure faith be corrupted again with works. But for Paul unity and holiness are vital in letter after letter and passage after passage.

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But how are they to be achieved? Here I cheerfully own up to some anachronistic thinking of my own. As a bishop I spent some years working for unity and holiness in the church, and I know how extraordinarily difficult they are. They are difficult in themselves; in combination they often appear completely inaccessible. That is, it is comparatively easy to work for unity if you don't care about holiness; you just adopt a laissez-faire anything-goes strategy. And it is comparatively easy to work for holiness if you don't care about unity; you just go on splitting the church over each moral disagreement. The trick is to work for both at the same time. How can that be done?

My Pauline answer is that you do it by *teaching people to think Christianly*, teaching them 'Christian Theology' as a task, as a vocation, as an assignment. Only if and when they are doing that will either unity or holiness be even thinkable; but, when once they have been thought, as part of that new-mind new-creation thinking process, they may become a reality.

We need to be clear about one thing in particular at this point. Paul was not attempting to provide doctrine and ethics for every occasion. He does not cover every topic. He is writing on the principle in our contemporary saying,

'Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day, teach someone to fish and you feed them for life'. Paul could give very specific instructions when it was urgently needed; but for most of the time he is trying to teach his hearers the difficult art of the new-age mental transformation, of the renewed mind. The new humanity, he wrote in Colossians 3, is being renewed in knowledge according to the creator's image. That was Paul's aim. He put up several signposts to show the direction of travel, but then it was up to his communities to go down the road in a settled and sustained act of theologically informed choice and will.

This might be seen as simply pragmatic. Paul could not possibly say everything in each letter that he might want to have said. We must imagine that in many cases the letters represent not only miracles of composition but, in parallel, miracles of omission. There are many passages where I wish he had gone on just another page or two . . . but that is how it is. But my point is that it wasn't simply a matter of Paul's obvious inability to write a first-century version of Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, plus a similarly scaled work covering all possible ethical dilemmas. That would have resulted in a church where all you have to do is to go to the shelf, pull off the relevant volume, and look up the answer.

That was not Paul's way. His letters – and in this respect they are exactly like all the scriptures, in my view – are a way of saying, 'Here's where to start; this is the direction of travel; now go and figure out the route for yourself.' He is, in other words, teaching his hearers to think theologically, to 'do Christian theology' as the shared task, the scriptural, prayerful task through which they will grow up into a maturity of thinking and hence of everything else as well.

Philippians 2: Working It Out

Perhaps the best examples of this, stated explicitly, is Philippians 2.1—18. The command of verse 5 (*touto phroneite en hymin, ho kai en Christo Iesou*) holds together the introductory exhortation to unity in verse 4 and the remarkable poem of verses 5-11. How can one possibly obey the high-as-the-sky demand of unity, thinking the same thing, being in full accord and of one mind, and so on? Paul's answer is: through the Messiah's mind. Humility and self-giving, self-abandoning love is the only way to go. But this needs to be worked out in a thousand situations for which Paul cannot give precise

instructions. That is why he says, in 2.12-13, that they must *work out their own salvation in fear and trembling, because the one at work in them, to will and to do his good pleasure, is God himself*. Despite generations of anxious reformation-tradition readers, Paul's command to 'work this out' has nothing to do with a moralistic contribution to one's own grace-given salvation. That is not Paul's topic here. His point is that in the Messiah you have been given the gift of a *soteria*, a 'salvation', which comes straight out of the Isaianic tradition echoes in 2.6-11 but goes way beyond anything thought of before Jesus, and which confronts the half-century and more of Roman imperial propaganda which offered imperial subjects, and Caesar-worshippers, a 'salvation' which as many have pointed out was a kind of global protection racket. Paul had not had time in Philippi, anything like, to teach the young church any details about what their type of 'salvation' would mean in practice. He had set them an example, however briefly, to which he refers in chapter 4: what they had learned, received, heard and seen in me, they were to go on doing. But there were many other issues they faced; and for all of them they had to learn to think in the Messiah, to engage in what with hindsight we call 'Christian Theology', as a task of the whole church.

Philippians 2 continues, of course, with one of Paul's sharpest exhortations to holiness. The community are to live as resurrection-people within the as yet unrenewed world: echoing Daniel 12, Paul declares that they are to shine like lights in the dark world. This is as close as he comes to talking of an evangelistic witness on the part of the little communities to whom he writes. But my point at the moment is that the whole longer paragraph, 2.1-18, consists precisely both of a sustained exhortation to unity and holiness and, as its centre and driving heart, the dense expression of theology, scripture-soaked, prayerful, Messiah-centred, which provided the pattern for the unity and the energy for the holiness. The Christ-poem, in other words, is not a detached piece of theological poetry. I do not know whether it was written prior to Paul (by another candidate for the title of inventor of Christian Theology?) or by Paul himself before writing Philippians, or by Paul himself while writing this very letter. I do know that as it stands at present it serves exactly this purpose: that, if you want to generate and sustain unity and holiness in the church, the best way of doing it is to be soaked in the mind of the Messiah.

The other earlier example from Romans 12 makes the same point. Immediately after the opening flourish, the exhortation to be transformed by the mind's renewal, Paul launches into one of his variations on the theme of the church as one body in the Messiah; and from there he moves into the ground rules, the basic rules of thumb, for Christian living. Part of my point is that he knows it's no good just giving people rules. The rules make little or no sense in the old world – just as the resurrection of Jesus makes no sense in the old world, and Paul would of course have seen the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as the death of the old world and the coming to birth of the new. Unity and holiness are awkward, odd, difficult to the point of impossibility, and actually nonsense within the old world. But they are the very hallmarks of the new world; and that is why, if people are to live appropriately in the in-between times, the now-and-not-yet times, they must be transformed by the renewal of the mind. And, as I say, that doesn't just happen automatically. Part of the point of it is that the messianic and spirit-driven new humanity is precisely renewed humanity, with the mind renewed to be fully awake at last; God wants people, not puppets.

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No Personality Cults

Two key passages in 1 Corinthians come in to the same framework. In 1 Corinthians 1—3 Paul is dealing with the problem of personality cults in the church. Underneath this problem he discerns the problem of different kinds of wisdom: the wisdom of the world, which Paul renounces, and the hidden wisdom revealed in the gospel. And the gospel is of course the message of the crucified and risen Jesus, a scandal to Jews and folly to Gentiles but to those who are being saved the messianic power and wisdom of God. Christian theology, developed specifically in the service of the unity of the church, is all about embracing the foolishness of God which is wiser than human wisdom and being held firmly in place by the weakness of God which

is stronger than human strength. Here is Paul teaching the church not only how to think Christianly (and so avoid the cheap disunity of factional fighting) but how to think about thinking Christianly: to reflect on what it is that they are being required to do, to think their way round the fact that there is a new kind of wisdom, to be dispensed among the 'mature'. I shall speak later about where Paul sees this project engaging with the larger questions of the day, the cultural and philosophical issues to which, I believe, his own project made a decisive and intentional contribution.

Just a few chapters later, however, we see a sustained and remarkable piece of theological teaching, or meta-theological teaching. The question of meat offered to idols, in 1 Corinthians 8—10, used to be marginalized in popular teaching because it seemed quite alien. But the argument Paul mounts in those three chapters is a stunning piece of *teaching the church to think theologically in order to fund the ecclesial vocations of unity and holiness.* Paul is faced with the challenge to unity: if some Christians regularly eat idol-food and others do not, this will cause, and has probably already caused, serious division. He wants to avoid that at all costs. But he is simultaneously faced with the challenge to holiness: if Christians, agreeing with Paul that starting with the Shema and finishing with Psalm 24, Paul is teaching his hearers to think as kingdom-of-God people, that is, as people who live within the scriptural and prayerful world in which there is one God to whom all things belong, idols don't exist and that therefore meat once offered to them

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still belongs to God the creator, then Paul knows only too well that some Christians will find their way back into the idol temples, and into the amoral subculture that goes with them, which would be the kiss of death to their baptismal profession and the vocation to holiness which it entails.

This is the context for some of Paul's most dramatic theological teaching, but again my point is as much about his inculcating the habit of thinking Christianly as it is about any particular dogmatic innovations. I have in various places highlighted the extraordinary reformulation of the Shema in 1 Corinthians 8.6, and I mention it here to remind us that Paul's very Jewish, and yet very much reworked, theology is about the life of prayer, which for the Jew meant among several other things the regular recitation of the Shema, to which recitation the later rabbis sometimes referred in terms of taking on oneself the yoke of the kingdom of God.

Paul will expound the present and future kingdom later in the letter, in chapter 15. The present passage, chapters 8—10, contributes to this dramatically, insisting upon the sovereign rule of the one God over the whole world, not least the world of idols, so that Psalm 24, one of the great scriptural statements of the unique kingship of Israel's God, is the natural text for Paul to quote in his peroration at the end of chapter 10. Starting with the Shema and finishing with Psalm 24, Paul is teaching his hearers *to think as kingdom-of-God people*, that is, as people who live within the scriptural and prayerful world in which there is one God to whom all things belong. At the same time, as with his dramatic Christological reworking of the Shema in 8.6,

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he is teaching them *to think as Messiah-shaped kingdom-people*, that is, to allow the fact of the Messiah's cross and resurrection to reshape not only their reflection on what they should do but also their reflection on the communitarian context within which they do it. And these are the theological tools with which he shows them how to navigate the complex waters between the Scylla of a dualistic rejection of the world and the Charybdis of an uncritical embrace of it. Eat the meat, yes, if you know why; but don't go into idol temples and above all don't engage in the normal practices associated with them. One of the great advantages of a sociologically aware reading of passages like this is that, as with the so-called new perspective, one can quite easily avoid the old post-reformation trap of thinking that because Paul opposes the law he has thereby relativized all ethics.

I could go on to many more examples of places where Paul is not only teaching people what to do and think but teaching them to think for themselves, developing that scriptural, prayerful and communal habit of thinking as new-creation people within God's inaugurated new world. In the big book I have explored the letter to Philemon, which might not normally be thought of in this way, but which I have argued is all about Paul teaching Philemon to think in the Messiah and to work out for himself what he must do – which is why some commentators have found it quite difficult to see what exactly Paul is driving at! And the prayer at the start of the letter encodes this same principle, though it's hard to translate. Paul is praying that the *koinonia tes pisteos sou*, the partnership proper to the faith which Philemon holds, may be active and at work to accomplish the *realization*, the *epignosis*, of every good thing which is 'in us into the Messiah'. That, I believe, is a shorthand for saying that Philemon must think through and work out what the *koinonia* means in practice, what it will mean that God is at work in him – and in Onesimus! – to will and to work for his good pleasure. The appeal is not unlike that of Philippians 2.12-13. Anyway, my first main point is that if Paul has invented something which with hindsight we can call 'Christian Theology', this is why he has done it: to sustain the church as the united and holy people of God, which can only be brought about through the transformation of the mind.

I now move, therefore, to my second main point, which is: so *How* did he set about doing this?

How did Paul 'Invent Christian Theology'?

In one sense, of course, the very writing of the letters is the answer to the 'how'. The letters are demanding, intellectually, spiritually and culturally. People often ask me, 'how did Paul expect his hearers to understand all that dense material straight off, especially if they didn't know the scriptures like he did?' – and the answer, of course, is that there were teachers in the early church, and one must assume that one of their main functions was to teach the scriptures. But we are also justified in assuming that whoever brought the letter from Paul would be the probable first reader, and the probable first expositor. After all, someone who had been with Paul when he dictated the letter might be supposed to have an inside track on what he was talking about. I suspect that the letters would have been read again and again – the shorter ones, perhaps two or three times on the first day – and they formed in themselves a challenge to the community to think in new ways, to grasp new patterns of truth, and, not least, to go beyond the specific issues discussed and to think outwards into new areas of life, not covered in the letters, to which the same kind of thinking needed to be applied. That, at least, I have suggested, was Paul's aim throughout.

How to Think

But there are certain specifics as to the 'how'. These are obvious and basic but perhaps need to be put on the table. For a start, Paul wanted them to think prayerfully, and the prayer in question was anchored in the praying life of Israel. I have already mentioned the Shema, as quoted and then adapted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul wanted them to think as people who prayed the Psalms, but again and again of course they were the Psalms as finding a new and unexpected focus in Jesus. Psalms 2, 8 and 110 come at once to mind, but of course there are many others, not least those cited in Romans 15. And then, in one of the most spectacular prayer-soaked writings from the first century, there is the letter to the Ephesians. I have said elsewhere that I regard the continuing usually unargued prejudice against Ephesians as an unfortunate hangover from the liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth century. But whether or not you agree with that, we are clearly dealing with someone very early who knew Paul and his writings well and was channelling his thought remarkable effectively. Anyway, the whole of the first half of Ephesians – chapters 1 to 3 – is held in place by praise and prayer, beginning with the great Berakah, the Jewish-style blessing on God for his mighty acts in creation and redemption. It continues with the prayer for the church, that

the church will know who it really is. It ends with the long summary of Paul's prayer that the church will know the Messiah's unknowable love and be filled with the divine fullness. And it centres upon the image of the church as the new temple, united in worship and common life through the dramatic redeeming action of God in the Messiah. There is a beauty, an overall symmetry, about these chapters which is I think reflected in 2.10: *autou gar esmen poiema*, for we are God's poem, God's artwork. Poised between worship and intercession, forming the new Temple in which Jew and Gentile come together in the Messiah, the vision of a theologically reflective community is held in place by the vocation to embody the creative artwork of the one God.

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My point at the moment is that for Paul the 'how' of theology had to do with prayer, and I shall give a couple more examples presently. But already we can see the obvious companion theme coming through strongly: for Paul, the inculcation of theology as the central and centring activity of the church was *scriptural*. He saw Israel's scriptures as a continuous and continuing narrative, shot through of course with patterns and types and models but as a whole far more than that: a single story which he believed had reached its *telos* in the Messiah. (Indeed, any Jew who believed that this or that person was the Messiah would almost automatically believe that this must be where scripture had been going all along; just as the Qumran scrolls testify to a belief, even in anticipation of a Messiah, or perhaps two, that this movement was what scripture had been talking about all along.) Just as Josephus, commenting on Deuteronomy 32, said that Moses was there prophesying about things that would happen *and that were happening in his own day* – in other words, that the Pentateuch was to be read not simply as the 'back story' of Israel but as the complete story of Israel – so Paul was again and

again narrating his hearers into the story of Israel, declaring triumphantly that the Messiah was indeed the *telos* of the Torah and going on to prove it by quoting Deuteronomy 30 and 32. This is what I mean, primarily, when I say that Paul was teaching his churches to think Christianly: that they were to understand themselves as those 'upon whom the ends of the ages had come', the moment when God's age-old secret plan was finally revealed in all its shocking splendour. This is clear in the passage I just quoted from 1 Corinthians 10, but it is alluded to all over the place, not least of course in Romans and Galatians where the promises to Abraham have now come true in the Messiah, promises about the family and the inheritance, promises which evoke the *pistis* which is the badge of the community. The 'Christian theology' which Paul was inventing and which, as an activity, he was eager to inculcate, was about learning to think and live within this narrative, not some other. God had acted shockingly, surprisingly, world-transformingly, as he had always said he would. The apocalyptic moment is not the result of a steady process of evolution; it is the result of the dramatic fulfilment of ancient promises and, with that, the fulfilment of the hopes many times deferred but still pondered and even calculated. Ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature is full of sequences of all the bad things that are going to happen, after which the new age will dawn. It is anything but a long slow journey upwards into the light. But, as one can imagine Rabbi Akiba saying of Bar Kochba, and *mutatis mutandis* the supporters of Simon bar Giora in 69 or Judas the Galilean at the end of Herod's reign, it must be possible to say that the time had fully come. And that is what Paul says of the sending of the son in Galatians 4.4.

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Paul's Method of Forming Christian Theology

Paul's method of inculcating Christian theology as a task was, then, to get his hearers to think as praying, scripture-soaked people, invoking the God of Israel now made known in and as Jesus and the Spirit and narrating the story of Israel as having found its *telos* in the same way. The scandal of the cross was not that it broke any sense of a Jewish story but that the radically new thing made shattering sense of that story, generating fresh fulfilments of many aspects of that narrative, not least the long-awaited and specifically messianic theme from the Psalms and Isaiah according to which Israel's coming king would bring justice and hope to the nations.

But Paul's inculcation of Christian theology was not only related to his sense of Israel's traditions of prayer and story. It also engaged, by implication but I think strongly, with his non-Jewish world. Paul was, after all, the apostle to the Gentiles, not, or not primarily, to the Jews. And when in 2 Corinthians 10 he speaks of 'taking every thought captive to obey the Messiah', that looks to me like a statement of theological method; and it ought to be possible in principle to ask how that method worked out.

After all, one of the dangers both with a so-called salvation-historical reading of Paul and with a so-called apocalyptic reading is that one ends up with a private narrative, an enclosed world. God does the new thing, whatever it is, and that generates a strange new form of existence without visible contact with what went before. The old has passed away; everything has become new. From that point of view, Paul might be read in line with some readings at least of the early Barth: a wonderful edifice if you're inside, but it's not clear whether there is any front door. But that was not Paul's way. For him, the point of new creation was that it was new creation: when he speaks of the renewal of the whole created order in Romans 8, or of God being 'all in all' in 1 Corinthians 15, or – of course – of the Messiah being the one through and for whom all things were created, in Colossians 1, he is expressing the characteristically Jewish belief that Israel's God is the God of the whole creation, rethought around the belief that in the Messiah this same God has addressed and redeemed that whole creation. When we imagine Paul engaging with the philosophical traditions of his day, therefore, this would never be a matter of saying, in effect, that everything the philosophers thought was wrong and that they should leave it all and embrace something totally different. Of course, that note must always be struck as well: Paul,

declaring that his past privilege was just so much skybala, wanted his Philippian hearers to be able to say the same about theirs. But in the next breath he could tell them to think about whatever was true, noble, honourable and of good report. The creator had not left himself without witness in the creation. Part of the 'how' of Paul's theological project had to do with the constant implicit engagement with the pagan world of late antiquity. How did that work out?

In that world, as we know, there were the three divisions of thought: physics (what there is), ethics (how to behave), and logic (how we know things and how we reason from what we know to what we do not yet know). The three go together: ethics is the behaviour which makes sense in the world as we find it to be, logic is about knowing or reasoning to the truth about that world. For Paul, these were signposts; to understand the new creation, it would be no bad thing to understand the present one. For Paul, the new world had come to birth in the resurrection of the Messiah, and his new immortal physical body, animated by the Spirit, was the prototype of the whole new creation. That is part of the point of Romans 8. For Paul, in other words, there was a new physics: the new world that had come to birth in Jesus; there was a new ethic, which consisted in the behaviour which makes sense within that new world, and there was a new knowing, which was, as I said at the start, what happened when the mind was transformed so as to grasp the new reality. But the new physics was the transformation of this present world, not the creation of a new one *ex nihilo*; the ethic was the transformed living within the present world, not a detached or isolated way of life shielded from the world; and the new knowing was a matter of believing and discerning that the new had indeed broken into the old, like the morning star shining when the night still seemed dark.

“For Paul, in other words, there was a new physics: the new world that had come to birth in Jesus; there was a new ethic, which consisted in the behaviour which makes sense within that new world, and there was a new knowing, which was, as I said at the start, what happened when the mind was transformed so as to grasp the new reality.”

My case is before you: Paul invented Christian theology because only when the church is engaging in this task is there any hope of those elusive but mandatory virtues, unity and holiness. And the way he invented it was by teaching people to think prayerfully, with the Jewish prayer tradition reworked around Jesus and the Spirit, and to think scripturally, with the scriptural narrative likewise reconfigured. And because all this added up to new creation, they were to do so in a constant engagement with the wider non-Jewish world, trumping the old physics, ethics and logic but taking it up within the new, taking every thought captive to obey the Messiah. This was what Paul was trying to teach people to do. I have set out in the book the detail which emerges – that is, monotheism, election and eschatology, the great Jewish doctrines, each one radically reworked around Messiah and Spirit. What I have tried to do today is to insist that none of this makes the sense it makes within what Paul like so many Jews thought of as the 'old age'. These truths are the wisdom which the rulers of this age never imagined, the things you only see in the light of the glory of God revealed in Jesus; and yet that glory does indeed, and will indeed, fill the whole earth.

> "The way Paul invented Christian Theology was by teaching people to think prayerfully, with the Jewish prayer tradition reworked around Jesus and the Spirit, and to think scripturally, with the scriptural narrative likewise reconfigured."

Romans 9-11: Lament and Praise

One final example and one final comment. Perhaps the greatest of all Paul's sustained expositions is Romans 9—11, his long and profound meditation on God's purposes for Israel according to the flesh. Whatever we say about the meaning of the climactic passage in 11.25-31, we must I think say three things about this as an example of Paul's theological method, of the way he wanted to teach people to think.

First, Romans 9—11 is carefully and formally structured, opening and closing with prayer; but, as with so many prayers in the Psalmic tradition, it opens with lament and it ends with praise, with the intercession in the middle held within these two. This cannot be accidental: here, at the very moment when Paul is exploring Israel's traditions, he is drawing on those same traditions in order to do so.

Second, he is here of course expounding scripture, and doing so in line with the many Jewish retellings of Israel's story that began with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, continued with Moses and the Exodus, went through the monarchy and the prophets into the horror of exile, and then – as many second-temple retrievals of Deuteronomy made clear – came out the other side into the return from exile, and covenant renewal, spoken of in Deuteronomy 30, though still leaving the problem of Israel's disobedience as in Deuteronomy 32. That then leaves Paul with the challenge of an entirely new situation: no prophet had spoken of what might happen if the Messiah came and Israel as a whole failed to recognise him. Paul thinks through this new challenge in Romans 11, and I have argued elsewhere that he does so in the light of the Messiah, whose death and resurrection form the pattern for Israel's own.

But, third, as he does so, he knows very well that the gospel in which Israel's scriptural destiny is radically fulfilled is the gospel which will also fulfil the deepest hopes and longings of the Gentile world; and his closing shout of praise, though obviously rooted in scripture, looks across to the dominant Stoic culture of his world, and says, in effect, 'Your highest aspirations are fulfilled – through the God of Israel!' 'From him, through him and to him are all things.' At the very moment when Paul is being most Jewish, he is articulating the hope of the world. But that hope will not come about through the world pursuing its own dreams in its own way. The following verses, Romans 12.1-2, insist that what counts is precisely not being conformed to this present age but being transformed by the mind's renewal. And that brings us back where we began.

One final comment. In Paul's writing we often find passages which scholars have deemed poetic. It is hard to know what sort of poetry they are, though the well-known passages in question are certainly framed in a higher register, with symmetry and assonance and many signs of careful composition.

We cannot tell whether Paul composed these himself, but one does not simply add a poem to a dense and careful argument like someone bringing home a Chinese jar and putting it randomly on a shelf. I wonder if, perhaps, Paul saw these as themselves signs of new creation, embodying the principle I mentioned a moment ago, of the new emerging within the old as a sign of its eventual transformation. Part of his inculcating of something which, with long hindsight, we call 'Christian Theology', may be that even the writing itself might reflect the possibility of new beauty emerging from standard forms. After all,

there's no good reason why St Paul should not
have done what many other writers do:
hiding a verse within his supple prose,
weaving the formal and the common words
into a sleeping tableau. There it stands,
still and still moving, waiting for the breath,
the reader's wakening voice. No mere appendage
(a far-fetched foreign ornament); but whispering
the truth that new creation's on the way:
autou gar esmen poiema. His 'artwork',
a poem doubled. Thus, beneath the flow
of exhortation, argument and prayer
we sense a hidden stirring. Words, words, words:
the dry bones waiting for the promised breath.

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