

This week we turn toward understanding Paul's "theology." There are a number of points to be made and that really need to be discussed in dialogue. I will list several; there are others. We are limited by the context in which we find ourselves.

After two weeks of some "heavy stuff" concerning Paul's ministry, we now move in a different direction. My purpose is not indoctrination. To employ a trite illustration, I didn't come to bring you a "mess of fish" but to lead you in learning some things *that will help you* to become a better "fisherman" or "fisherwoman." I want to make some points and illustrate them from Paul's letters. SO,

Here are some things you need to know, in order to fish in Paul's pond.

1. One needs to understand the meaning of the words **ESCHATOLOGY** and **APOCALYPTIC**.

ESCHATOLOGY—Literally, a word about "last things." Don't, however, misunderstand in terms of things last in time or the "end of the world." Understand in terms of that which is ultimate, final in the sense that it can not be superseded.

APOCALYPTIC—Literally, a "revealing" or an "unveiling." The term may refer to a type of literature, as the book of Revelation. An apocalyptic viewpoint, however, reflects revelation or the unexpected inbreak of God to right things that are wrong. Jesus's central theme in the Synoptic Gospels was the concept of the "Kingdom of God." He proclaimed God's Kingdom was breaking in through his ministry. When we sincerely pray the Model Prayer, "Your Kingdom come," we are praying for apocalyptic fulfilment of God's rule—"on earth, as it is in heaven."

PAUL'S POND: Paul spoke of the Gospel of God in Christ. God was the author of that Gospel; Christ was the content. God's Gospel was comprehensive, involving victory over all powers in the entire cosmos opposed to God. It was the *reclamation of earth*, not its abandonment. The Gospel of God marked the inauguration of his final rule over his entire creation. Paul's understanding of the Gospel was both eschatological and apocalyptic. The final victory of God had been ushered in—not with Jesus's crucifixion, but with Jesus's *resurrection*. Caesar could kill. Only God could raise from the dead.

2. One needs to understand the Jewish theological conception of the so-called "**TWO AGES**."

In Jewish doctrine, the **PRESENT EVIL AGE** was an age ruled by pervasively evil powers opposed to God's rule. While Satan might come to mind, personified powers were *far* more pervasive and affected the entire creation or cosmos, not just human life. Forces, powers, and realities of evil were personified. Ancient peoples lived in a world they believed was ruled by powers, divine and otherwise. Again, Jesus's message was about the coming "Kingdom of God." A Jewish prayer included the wish "May His Kingdom come during your lifetime." For the earlier Jesus, the Kingdom was being inaugurated in his ministry.

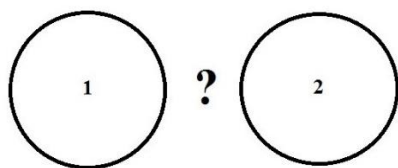
In the view of apocalyptic Judaism, the Present Evil Age would be followed by the **AGE TO COME**. The two ages were separate, but sequential. With apocalyptic victory—“may it be in your lifetime,” God would usher in a final and ultimate age. The creation and cosmos, broken and infected by evil forces, would experience a new freedom of renewal and recreation.

PAUL’S POND: Paul’s theology is eschatological, informed and underpinned by the Jewish doctrine of the “Two Ages.” The suggestion of “two ages” implies a time of fulfilment, which is exactly what Paul found “in Christ.”

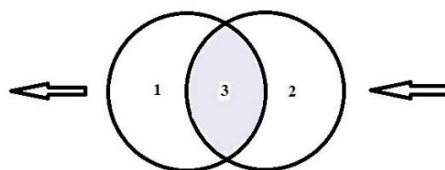
For Paul, the **Present Evil Age** was characterized by *Sin, Death, Law, and Flesh* as personified realities. Paul was far more concerned with “Sin” (capital “S” and singular) than he was “sins” (small “s” and plural). See Romans 6:23, again, and maybe understand the verse for the first time. Paul says that Sin (singular) pays wages and brings Death. Elsewhere in Romans 6, Paul speaks in terms of being free from “Sin,” not from “sins.” See 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. And, for the record, Paul did not understand “flesh” as evil. “Flesh” was our weak domain, but it was not something evil from which to escape.

The **Age to Come** is characterized by *Righteousness/Rectification, Life, Grace, and Spirit*, likewise as personified realities.

Paul modified this Two Age conception in Christ by understanding the present time as a third, interim **Age of Transformation**. The Jewish model involved two separate and sequential ages. Paul understood that the Gospel of God in Christ marked a time of transition. Paul and his converts lived in the overlap of the Two Ages, in the Age of Transformation. Victory had been won, even Death itself had been conquered with Jesus’s resurrection. The Present Evil Age would soon be no more. It was a time of re-creation and new creation in Christ. Read Romans 8 with the understanding of personified powers and Paul’s conception of the Jewish view of Two Ages, now coupled by the third Age of Transformation. Here, visualization helps, such that the Jewish view may be contrasted with Paul’s understanding of the Gospel of God in Christ.



Jewish Conception of the Two Ages



Paul’s Conception with Age of Transformation

The Present Evil Age had been eclipsed. Victory over the powers had been achieved. Powers that oppose and thwart creation, humanity, and the very purposes of God are now either defeated or “on the run.” God’s final triumph of the Age to Come rested in the near future.

I dare say one has heard much about the Parousia or so-called “second coming of Christ.” Paul spoke of the “Telos” beyond that would follow. I dare say you have never heard of the “Telos”

(the “End”). See 1 Cor 15:20-28, found in a chapter that gives attention to the resurrection and that also echoes the Two Ages conception (1 Cor 15:54-57).

Paul had an inaugurative eschatology that would soon come to full fruition. Once one becomes attuned to the underlying Jewish perspective of the Two Ages and Paul’s Age of Transformation, one begins to unlock the meaning of so many Pauline passages and to correct so much misunderstanding of Paul in the religious marketplace.

3. Paul’s theology is first of all ***theocentric***, not *anthropocentric* and not even *Christocentric*.

Paul focused upon God and what God has done through his Gospel. Paul had a *theology*, before he ever had a *Christology*. While we frequently speak of the “gospel of Christ,” Paul spoke in terms of the “Gospel of God.” God is the *author*, Jesus is the *content*.

PAUL’S POND: Look again at Romans 1:1-7. Think about its content. Think about what Paul actually wrote. Think about what he did not include that may have been popularized in contemporary religious or theological teaching.

4. Paul primarily wrote to churches and not to individuals.

A first and major point in interpretation is to realize that Paul basically wrote to churches and not individuals. His theology is collective and not individualistic. What he has to say is not a “roadmap” on how to get to heaven. Rather, what he has to say is a collective gospel word of how to live together “in Christ” with a new identity as a child of God.

PAUL’S POND: Look at Paul’s salutations and final greetings. Let me illustrate further. The word “you” in English is ambiguous. It is problematic in biblical translations. Occurrence may be interpreted as singular, when in actuality Paul uses a plural pronoun. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, the pronouns are plural—not singular. How often do we interpret individually and moralistically in terms of physical bodies, when Paul is actually speaking of the church. If English translations would follow our lead here in the South, “you” if singular and “y’all” if plural, that would clarify a number of misinterpreted Pauline texts!

4. Paul did not write “theology” for theology’s sake.

Paul was not a systematic theologian who sought to create Christian doctrines. Paul was called by God to proclaim a gospel of inclusion to gentiles. He was a pastoral theologian who founded and cared for churches. He was one who had experienced and who called for life “in Christ.”

PAUL’S POND: Roughly speaking, Paul’s letters have what could be called a “theological” portion and a “practical” portion. Scholars may refer to the theological portion as ***the indicative***. The “indicative” is what God has done in the Gospel. The practical portion is often termed ***the imperative***. The “imperative” is what we are to do, how we should live, in the light of the Gospel, in terms of our identity as children of God.

6. Paul had a different world view than we do—I mean a really different world view.

I used a map of the Mediterranean world last week to point out that Paul’s world looks different if one turns it 90 degrees, such that “east” is now at the top rather than “north.” But now let me go further. Paul had a biblical perspective of what is known as a “three-storied universe.” “Heaven” above was where God dwelled. “Earth” was the realm of human life and endeavor. And, the region “under the earth” understood variously as the realm of the dead or as a place of punishment. While we still employ the language of “up” and “down,” “heaven” and “hell,” we literally know we live in a much larger universe in which neither the sun nor the earth, nor even the Milky Way Galaxy rests at the center. You don’t believe in a “flat earth.” By all appearances, Paul and the people of his world did.

PAUL’S POND: Philippians 2:5-11 provides illustration for several things, but consider the conclusion. God has exalted the risen Christ, such that every knee in Paul’s “cosmos” will acknowledge Christ’s Lordship.

7. As a method of approach to scripture, stop taking individual verses out of context.

Paul *did* use scriptural illustrations from the Old Testament. Paul did not engage in “proof texts” in the interest of building a “systematic theology” or some doctrine of human creation. Paul wrote letters to churches basically as a means of pastoral care and affirmation of a life-saving gospel that he termed the Gospel of God. Understand individual verses in Paul in the light of their larger context.

PAUL’S POND: Paul wrote a letter to the Roman Christians, but in no sense did he seek to create an “Roman Road” to salvation for individuals. Verses like Romans 3:23, 5:8, 6:23, 10:9-10 taken out of context have been abused in usage that obscures, denies, or neglects both Paul and scripture itself. In Romans 3:21-31, Paul’s emphasis is upon the action of God’s rectification of both Jew and gentile. In Romans 6:23, Sin is a power that partners with Death, triumphed by God’s gift of Life “in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The emphasis is not upon our own moral failures.

8. A major point that may in fact offer a corrective to some theological doctrines is the fact that our first introduction to Paul’s theology is found in his salutations—“Grace to all of you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

PAUL’S POND: Paul does far more than just say “hello,” in verses we frequently “skip over” to get to the “real stuff.” The “real stuff” of the Gospel is to be found precisely in Paul’s salutations.

It is in the salutations that we find the Gospel of God in a nutshell. It is in the salutations that we see Paul’s conception of God and the nature of God’s Gospel. Note how God is described. He is never described as a harsh Judge in need of some kind of appeasement, satisfaction, or “perfect sacrifice.” God is only and always described as a “Father” who is the source of “grace”

and “peace.” We learn the song “Jesus Loves Me” as a child and we know John 3:16. Some theological doctrines, however, only focus upon the “punishing God.” Read again what Paul says in Romans 8:28, 38-39.

Note that there is never any “Trinitarian” formulation; identity is given only to God the Father and the *Lord Jesus Christ*. And, there is never any mention of the “cross.” Jesus is described as “Lord” and “Christ.” Those two identifications for Paul are based on *the resurrection*, not Jesus’s death. Apart from the resurrection, Jesus might only be a dead “movement founder,” but for Paul he would not be “Lord” and “Christ.” Paul did not worship a dead savior through some type of theological transaction. Paul served a living Lord. So do we.

9. In fact, although it is Paul who is most often associated with a “cross theology” in the New Testament, the language of “cross” occurs relatively seldom in Paul’s letters.

PAUL’S POND: The early Christians, Paul included, had to interpret the meaning of Jesus’s death on a Roman cross. That was a given historical fact. One might be surprised to see exactly how few times outside the historical narrative of the Gospels the word “cross” or “crucifixion” actually occurs in the entire New Testament. Paul mentions the “cross” only ten times as a noun and “crucifixion” only eight times. Paul does not even mention the cross in the letter to the Romans! Cross-language occurs only once in Romans, when Paul refers to *our own* “crucifixion.” He asserts we have been “crucified together” with Christ, that we have “died” with him (Rom 6:6-8). He certainly assumes Jesus’s death, but he does not mention the “cross” even in Romans! And when he does mention the “cross” specifically, it is primarily with the idea of *our cross*!

10. A central theme in Paul’s letters is the concept of being “**in Christ**.”

“In Christ” is pervasive through all of Paul’s letters, occurring some 164 times in one form or another (e.g., “in Christ,” “in him”). Paul’s letters praise God for His Gospel “in Christ,” as they set forth what it means to be “in Christ” and how one should live “in Christ.”

PAUL’S POND: To give an example, the theme of “justification by faith” of Reformation fame pales in comparison to being “in Christ.” Justification by faith appears in the context of Romans and Galatians, context in which he has had to combat the Nomistic Evangelists. “In Christ” occurs throughout his letters; it is basic to his identity, his gospel, and his ministry.

Paul uses the expression “Gospel of God,” although we tend to use the expression “Gospel of Christ.” Grace is the basis of God’s Gospel, his action in Christ the content, and peace is the result.

Paul was a Jewish monotheist. It was the Jewish God who had acted through the Gospel to fulfill his promise made long ago to Abraham. Jesus was God's agent through whom the promise of faithfulness was fulfilled and through whom God had overcome all opposing forces of evil that had come to stand over against the will and intention of God.

To begin actually to read Paul is to clear up a lot of misconception in the religious and theological marketplace—as well as in personal understanding. There are different theologies represented in the New Testament. But if we wish to understand *Paul*, we must read *Paul* and not impose other theologies upon him.

Next week, we shall break for “Super Bowl Sunday.” If your team hasn't already lost, may your team win. After that, we shall spend a final three weeks pursuing some Pauline themes by studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We'll do “some fishing” in Paul's “Ephesian” pond.