



THE PAULINE CORRESPONDENCE: ITS MODE & MESSAGE

Part 3 of 3

In *Parts 1 & 2* we discovered that Paul's call and commission, as the pioneer apostle to the Gentiles, was unique and normative for the church universally. We will now explore these implications for the apostolic *mode* and *message*.

Mode

As the pioneer – and thus proto-type – apostle to the Gentiles Paul modelled God's strategy for the expansion of the Gospel to the nations, this being achieved through proclamation. Thus, the preaching and teaching of the Gospel is the apostolic work. Integral to this is the Holy Spirit's division of labour between two interdependent spheres of ministry: the church and the work. In the apostolic mode the church proceeds from the work; the proclamation of the message is the prophetic catalyst that births and matures the church.

The 'church' and the 'work'

These two spheres came into distinct contrast in the birth of the Gentile apostolic mission from Antioch: "In the *church* at Antioch...the Holy Spirit said, 'Separate Paul and Barnabas to the *work*...'" (Acts 13:1-2). Paul and Barnabas were separated from the *church* in Antioch (the local) to the *work* (the trans-local). From this point Paul moved throughout the nations, city-by-city, planting and nurturing the corporate Christ of each city.

The *work* is a trans-local apostolic sphere (beyond the local city) whose mode and mandate is shaped by the apostolic message of the *oneness* of Christ's body. Remember that the *work* is distinguishable from the *church*—the work being trans-local (beyond the local city) and the church being local, that is, the church of the city. Called to the work, Paul, with his team, moved trans-locally across many cities building the local—the church of the city.

Shaped by the apostolic message, apostles and their teams will build the local city-church but never a trans-local church (i.e. a regional, national, or international association of churches—aka a denomination). Remember that Scripture does not model a configuration of the church beyond the city. When this occurs denominationalism sets in—franchise agendas and incipient centralisation. A church network inevitably requires some measure of central co-ordination and thus becomes denominational. Even so, the apostles and their teams might provide a relational connection with the churches in their sphere across multiple cities for one-off assignments (e.g. the Jerusalem offering).

Historically, the apostolic work was gradually replaced by the emergence of the "monarchical bishop"—that is, one of the co-equal elders of the city arose hierarchically over the other elders, and under them the deacons. This became normative for the church, slipping through the reformation, modelling our present system of church ministry hierarchy of senior pastor, elders, and deacons. The notion of ministry "office" – that is, *organisational position* – as a somewhat priestly ministry replaced that of ministry as an *organic function*. Additionally, archbishops emerged over the bishops of the various cities, establishing a central control, and eventually denominationalism.

The Pauline revelation and writings emerged prior to these historical misdevelopments; and so, the decision must be made as to whether they are truly apostolic and binding. Major traditions of the Christian church have decided not, in my view, to our detriment, consigning the church to perpetual immaturity and dysfunction.

It is time to do business again with the Pauline *mode* and *message* and to recover fidelity to the covenant God and his purposes.

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Message

We have observed the Holy Spirit's release of Paul into the apostolic mode—that is, the proclamation of the message. If, as we have claimed, the message gives birth to the church and is integral to its maturity the integrity of the message is vital. Thus Paul's pedantic protection of the purity and potency of the message.

Keynote

As the pioneer apostle to the Gentiles, Paul posed a military dilemma that "if the trumpet give an *indistinct sound*, who will prepare for battle?" (1 Cor 14:8). Without a clear trumpet message we are unprepared for spiritual warfare, and thus the advance of Christ's reign in the earth. Throughout his whole correspondence Paul is concerned for the message (Acts 20:27; Rom 16:17; 2 Cor 4:2-3; 11:3-4; Gal 1:6-7; 1 Tim 1:3, 10; 6:3; Tit 1:1-3), that it be distinct and clearly stated, sounding the right notes so as to prepare God's people for the advance of the Gospel and increase of the Kingdom in the nations. Currently within the church and our culture-at-large there is a major spiritual conflict concerning God's ultimacy and his revelation to humankind.

The challenge is, therefore, to discover the keynote of Paul's message. Among all the notes that he sounds – justification by faith, the revelation of the mystery, the fullness of times, the Adam-Christ parallel, the church as the Body of Christ – which is the fundamental or central idea that governs them all? A building's foundation is not visible and yet it is intrinsic to its structural integrity. Likewise, is there a foundational idea in Paul that, while not highly visible, is foundational to his overall message? If so, by virtue of Paul's *once-and-for-all* role as the foundation apostle for the Gentile mission, it will be strategic for the victory of Christ and his Kingdom in history.

And so, as we delve into the Pauline correspondence we discover the New Covenant as fundamental. While it is only explicitly referenced twice (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6 ff) it provides the backdrop to Paul's grasp of the transition in redemptive history from the *natural* to the *spiritual*—from tables of *stone* to those of the *heart*; and thus, the redefinition of the people of God away from a natural to a spiritual identity: "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. ..." (Rom 2:28-29), and those who are "of Christ" are "Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). No longer are the criteria of God's people ethnic and external, they are now spiritual and internal. Abraham becomes the father of all those who believe (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:7). In fact, the only true Jew under the Old Covenant was the one who, like Abraham, was justified by faith not by works (Rom 4:1-12). The latter was always an aberration caused by Israel's hardness of heart and unbelief; it was never God's intent, the law being given as a way of life and covenant blessing (Lev 18:5; Rom 7:10; 10:5-13; Deut 30:11-20), not as a way of justification (Rom 3:27-31). Consequently, contrary to much incorrect teaching, the Old and New Covenants possess *continuity* in purpose, but only *discontinuity* in administration of that purpose—God's purposes remain constant through the generations (Ps 33:11; 105:8; 106:31). Hence, the New Covenant only shifts from Israel's aberrant emphasis on a *law of works* to a *law of faith*, which was always God's design as demonstrated in Abraham; and thus, shifts from the letter to the Spirit (2 Cor 3), although the *letter* is not the law (or the enscripturated word) as misconstrued by so many, but rather Israel's dysfunctional use of the law for justification. To reiterate, God only ever gave the law for Israel's sanctification—for them to live by and thus attract God's covenant blessings (Deut 28), never for their salvation or justification. Accordingly, the law as God's moral government flows through into the New Covenant—there is no conflict between Law and Gospel.

So, how did Paul arrive at this harmony between Old and New Covenants? The answer to this penetrates the New Covenant motif to his underlying idea. All his other motifs and emphasises flow from this. For Paul, everything hinges in a revelation of the unity and ultimacy of God—of the one, true, and living God. Once this is apprehended the unity of the Bible and its revelation – and thus redemptive history – is self-evident.

As a student of the Old Testament scriptures, Paul was grounded in this revelation of God:

But the Lord is the *true* God;
he is the *living* God...

Jeremiah 10:10

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, ***the Lord is one.***”

Deuteronomy 6:4 (cited Mk 12:29)

35 To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is ***no other*** besides him. 39 know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is ***no other.***

Deuteronomy 4:35, 39

10 Have we not all ***one Father?*** Has not ***one God*** created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? 15 Did he not make them *one*, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the ***one God*** seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

Malachi 2:10, 15

4 Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is ***no God but one.***” 6 yet for us there is ***one God***, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and ***one Lord***, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

1 Corinthians 8:4, 6

This keynote revelation of the unity and ultimacy of God grounds and informs the various other notes sounded in Paul's message.

Covenant continuity

First, it flows out in Paul's emphasis of covenant continuity—one covenant with various administrations. As there is no other God, he alone governs history and humankind; and this he does by sovereignly and graciously revealing himself and covenanting with man to be his God and they his people (Ex 6:7; Lev 11:45; Rom 9:25-26). As already observed, the New Covenant, for Paul, was not in conflict with the Old Covenant; God's covenant purpose and moral government flow on through under a new administration of the Spirit (2 Cor 3; Rom 3:31; Mtt 5:17-19), ensuring ethical continuity, and thus reestablishing the law of God as the standard for church and society. As we explained in *Part I*, revelation unfolds progressively.

Consequently, the covenant made with Abraham moves forward through Moses and is fulfilled in *one* offspring, Christ—*God is one* over them all, exercising one covenant through its various administrations; the Law was not contrary to Abraham, it was “added” as a progressive revelation “because of transgressions”:

16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to ***one***, “And to your offspring,” who is ***Christ.***

19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. 20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but ***God is one.***

Galatians 3:16, 19-20

Paul not only discerns covenant continuity from Abraham through Moses to Christ, but also from Adam to Christ. The parallel of Adam and Christ, as the two representative heads of humanity, is definitive in Paul's explication of redemptive history (Rom 5:12-21). The *oneness* of God is back of the *oneness* of Adam and Christ as the covenant heads of humanity, the former unto condemnation and death, but the latter unto justification and life, guaranteeing victory in time-space history:

16 And the free gift is not like the result of that **one** man's sin. For the judgment following **one** trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. 17 For if, because of **one** man's trespass, death reigned through that **one** man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the **one** man Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:16-17

Gospel universality

Second, *God is one* over both Jew and Gentile, establishing through Paul the universality of the Gospel, and thus, his purpose for history and the whole of humanity. This was the unique revelation of Paul, as we saw in *Parts 1 & 2*, which he explicates in Romans and defends in Galatians; it is what he refers to as "my gospel".

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since **God is one**—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Romans 3:29-30

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for **the same Lord is Lord of all**, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.

Romans 10:12

4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is **one God**, and there is **one mediator** between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

1Timothy 2:4-6

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both **one** and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing [*put out of gear*] the law of commandments expressed in ordinances [*ceremonial laws*], that he might create in himself **one** new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in **one** body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Ephesians 2:14-16

Eschatological victory

Third, the unity of God ensures Christ's eschatological victory in history. God's purpose for history is to bring everything together in Christ under his government. Contrary to defeatist and escapist eschatologies, promising a quick exit for a failed church at the end of history (through the so-called "Rapture"), Paul's revelation of Christ is such that he sees history culminating in Christ's reign over all things in heaven and in earth through the church not only obeying, but also successfully completing, the mandate he gave to "disciple the nations, teaching them to *obey* all that he has *commanded*" (Mtt 28:18-20); and this, because he has been given "all authority in heaven *and in earth*"—the law-word of

Christ the King will be obeyed throughout the nations, prevailing over the governments of men before history ends (Is 2; Ps 2; 110):

9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration [*lit. house-law*] suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the **summing up of all things in Christ**, things *in the heavens and things on the earth*.

Ephesians 1:9-10

8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, 10 so that **through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities** in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:8-10

Ecclesial catholicity

Fourth, the unity of God in Christ demands that his body be one. As *God is one* how can a divided and schismatic church ever hope to reflect him with any degree of integrity to the world? Christ prayed that we might be one so that the world would believe that the Father had sent him (Jn 17). Our divided and competitive denominational system guarantees that the world will never believe. It is a blasphemy and a reproach, a violation of who he is and of his purpose, and a grief to his heart. The once-and-for-all apostolic canon establishing the *oneness* of Christ's body is clear, the only question remaining—will we continue in blatant rebellion against God the Father and his Son, Christ Jesus, and his revelation through his holy apostles? There is a way forward, if we are willing.

4 There is *one body* and *one Spirit*—just as you were called to the *one hope* that belongs to your call— 5 **one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all**, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:4-6

11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 **until we all attain to the unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

Ephesians 4:11-13

10 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? ...

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Nonetheless, Paul acknowledges that some divisions are necessary so as to distinguish the authentic from the false. Not all divisions are equal; some are due to ambition and schismatic motivations, while others to the quest for that which is true. The history of the Christian movement displays both.

18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

1 Corinthians 11:18-19

There is a place for moving out from those who obstinately refuse God's revelation of truth. When the synagogues, for example, resisted Paul's preaching of the kingdom of God he left them to turn his attention to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6). As a truth-seeker one must be willing to bear the reproach with Christ outside the camp (Heb 13:12-13).

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Conclusion

In summary, we have discovered in *Part 1* that the Pauline revelation was the climax of a progressive revelation promised by Jesus (Jn 16:12), and in *Part 2* that it was unique to Paul, distinct from the other apostles, and that it was designed under the superintendence of God to provide the whole counsel of God to the church universally. In *Part 3* we have discovered the Pauline *mode* and *message*, uncovering the unity and ultimacy of God as the keynote of Paul's unique revelation.

In conclusion, we are unwise to ignore the import of the Pauline correspondence and revelation. The ascended Christ fulfilled his promise to guide his disciples into "*all truth*" through the call and commission of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. Any diminishing of Paul must be firmly resisted and seen for what it is—subtracting from the word of God in violation of his command:

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.

Deuteronomy 4:2 (12:32; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18-19)