

The Pauline Correspondence: A Progressive Revelation

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Paul Writing His Epistles, Valentin de Boulogne, 17th Century

Part 1 of 3

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

Proverbs 4:18

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

John 16:12-14

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:11-12

God reveals himself and his purpose to humankind according to the principle of *progressive revelation*.

Based on this principle, God's revelation to Paul serves as the consummation and fullness of the divine self-disclosure. The Pauline correspondence is therefore to be handled in the fear of God, recognising it as "a revelation of Jesus Christ".

Nonetheless, contemporary theology has sadly pitted Jesus and Paul against each other. The caricature presented is one of Paul preaching a gospel of *justification* versus Jesus preaching a gospel of the *kingdom*. For those nurtured in various evangelical streams that teach justification as *the* central dogma (or motif) of Scripture the sudden rediscovery of Jesus and his preaching of the kingdom of God can be both unsettling but also liberating. This has unnecessarily led to a neo-evangelical schism between Paul and Jesus, thus the call has gone out to "*return to the simplicity of Jesus and the kingdom*". While this sounds a spiritually virtuous quest – which in itself it is – nonetheless, as postured by many, is a serious error for reasons I will enumerate.

First, it is argued that Paul rarely references the term "*kingdom of God*". In response, he does in fact refer to the kingdom fourteen times. Even so, it is a barren biblicism that builds a doctrine on a word count. With this approach we would not have the doctrine of the Trinity nor the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ in the one person. In fact, Paul uses various synonymous motifs of the kingdom such as "an administration suitable to the fullness of times" (Eph 1:9), Christ's "glorious inheritance in the saints" (Eph 1:18), and his being "seated at the right hand...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...as head over all things to the church..." (Eph 1:20b-22). For the students among us I would encourage the study of Gerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos who have both written on the *kingdom* and *Paul* without putting them in conflict, showing the kingdom of God as the core motif of Scripture.

Second, one cannot help but suspect a *low view of Scripture* subliminally lurking behind the supposed conflict between Jesus and Paul. Whether this is by design or by default is beside the point. It implies that Scripture is in conflict with itself. This is usually the result of the Higher Critical approach to Scripture that denies divine inspiration, viewing it as humanly constructed and culturally bound. Without divine authorship it is merely a mishmash of conflicting agendas and viewpoints. Even when divine authorship is conceded but human agency is overplayed the end result is the same—competing and conflicting texts. Thus Paul and Jesus do not see eye to eye. By contrast, we, like the Thessalonians, receive the Scriptures – and thus the Pauline correspondence – "not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1Thes 2:13).

Third, as already mentioned, the knowledge of God is *progressively revealed* to humankind: "... *the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day*" (Proverbs 4:18). God acts in history, but these events are only subsequently interpreted and more fully understood; for example, the book of Genesis records the creation, fall, and call of Abraham but their significance, while interpreted in measure by the Pentateuch itself and by the prophets, are only fully explicated by Paul in the New Testament in the doctrines of original sin and justification by faith. What begins as a seed in the Old Testament grows to a mature doctrine in the New. According to Augustine's truism: "The new is in the old *concealed*; the old is in the new *revealed*". As God gives increasing light, the unfolding story of the Bible thereby generates propositional truths—doctrines. Thus, while the Old Testament anticipates – through promise, covenant, type, and prophecy – the climax of

God's redemptive act in Christ, the New Testament records its fulfilment in the Gospels and Acts as history but then unpacks its substance in the Epistles as doctrine.

Fourth, even among the apostles *Paul's revelation was unique* and a further unfolding of truth. Peter recognised the Pauline letters as Scripture, but also as "hard to understand":

...There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

2 Peter 3:16

As a progressive revelation, Paul's teachings were not immediately familiar territory for the other apostles, especially Peter. Paul was constrained to confront him publically in Antioch over his withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14). This was because his "conduct was not in step with the *truth* of the gospel" (v 14); and this, despite Peter's rooftop vision in Joppa of the great sheet lowered from heaven filled with unclean animals, signifying that the way was now open to the Gentiles, as his experience in Cornelius' household was soon to confirm—that is, the outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentiles (Acts 10). While Peter was used by God to falteringly open the door to the Gentiles, it was uniquely the Pauline revelation that kept it open. So much so, the apostles recognising the grace on Paul's life, endorsed his ministry to the Gentiles (Gal 2:1-10). Even so, Paul's revelation was not through any human agency, but directly bestowed by the Lord: "For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12b). He could genuinely claim that the other apostles "added nothing to him" (Gal 2:6b). He had moved on in the unfolding – but now full – revelation of the Gospel. Thus, while Peter received the revelation as an *event* (Cornelius' household), Paul received it as a *doctrine*.

The Lord, in his upper room discourse, foreshadowed this unique role of Paul. As he was preparing them for his imminent death and ascension he explained:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

John 16:12–14

Clearly, Jesus *earthly* ministry, as recorded in the Gospels, did not unveil "*all* the truth". This awaited his *heavenly* ministry—his ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus' earthly ministry he was "sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mtt 15:24; 10:5-6) and thus his refusal to receive the Greeks at the feast (Jn 12:20-24); but through his heavenly ministry and the agency of his body on earth – the church – he was sent to the nations (Ps 2; 110; Mtt 28:18-20). And so, as the first post-ascension apostle, Paul was especially set apart to receive from the Lord a fuller revelation of the Gospel that had been previously withheld: "I *still* have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into *all* the truth..." (12-13a). Under the revelatory inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul took that which was the Lord's and declared it to the church. Even so, this revelation was so unique to him he could claim it to be "*my* gospel" (Rom 1:9; 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8). Now, finally God's people were being "guided into *all* truth"—"the *whole* counsel of God" had been revealed (Acts 20:27). While Jesus is the consummate word of God *incarnate*, the Scriptures – and especially the Pauline correspondence – are the word of God *inscripturate*. There is no conflict between Jesus and Paul, the latter merely explicates and amplifies the former. Paul's unique revelation definitively opened the door to the Gentiles, extending the reign of Christ and his kingdom to the ends of the earth. Setting it free from its Judaistic constraints, the Gospel's universality was established through Paul for its advance in history to *all* tribes, peoples, and languages.

In conclusion, let us heed the warning not to be "ignorant" or "unstable" by "twisting" Paul's words—it will only lead to our "own ruin" (2 Pet 3:16). Clearly, popular theologies – or we – are unwise to distort the "revelation of Jesus Christ" through Paul.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Proverbs 9:10

[Part 2 will explore an overview of the "Pauline correspondence: Its Design & Distinctive"](#)

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