

4. Paul's Religious Revolution

Among the facts that are most clear about the apostle Paul is that he was both a revolutionary in the life of the new Christian community and a revolutionary in the life of the Roman empire. Because Paul is so early and so determinative in the development of the Christian religion, it is difficult to separate him from all the interpretations that theologians through the ages have made of him. Like Jesus, David, Moses, Lo Tzu, and the Buddha, Paul, the original historical person, gets lost in the things said about him by others. John Dominic Crossan in his book *In Search of Paul* points out that even within the New Testament itself, we have at least three different answers to the question, "Who was Paul?"

(1) There is the picture of Paul that can be gleaned from the letters most scholars now consistently identify as letters actually written by Paul – here they are listed in the order of their approximate dates: 1 Thessalonians (51), Philippians (52-54), Philemon (53-54), 1 Corinthians (53-54), Galatians (55), 2 Corinthians (55-56), and Romans (55-58)

(2) There is the picture of Paul drawn by Luke in the book of Acts. (Acts was written after Paul's death, perhaps as early as the late 60s, perhaps later.)

(3) There is the picture of Paul we can glean from the letters written in his name after his death: Ephesians, Colossians, and 2nd Thessalonians; the pastoral letters 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus; and Hebrews, the most different of all the books in this list.

When I use the word "Paul" in this chapter, I will mean the person who wrote that first list of letters. The Book of Romans is Paul's master pull together. Rather than focusing on specific issues arising in specific places, Romans is a somewhat systematic organization of Paul's entire thoughtfulness about the revelation that came to him through the event of Jesus, the Christ, and through the witness of that community who first interpreted Jesus as the Christ. It is interesting to me that Paul calls this revelation an experience of the resurrection to a come-lately like him. I find this encouraging to me in my notion that we much later adherents of this heritage can also experience the resurrection and join with the original witnesses in this transforming event that enabled them and enables us to be "in Christ" as Paul frequently calls this "revelation."

So I am going to attempt to untangle some of the webs of confusion that have settled around Paul. I will do this by decoding for our times some specific passages from Paul's letters. I will begin with what Paul says about the God of history in the opening chapter of Romans.

Everybody Knows God!

The following passage from Paul's letter to Rome deals directly with the what Paul means by the word "God." In Paul's text I will use an "X" as a substitute for the word "God." I then propose to solve this portion of Paul's letter for the meaning of "God" as Paul used that word. (I am using J.B. Phillips translation of Romans 1:18-24, and for clarity I am adding a few parenthetical phrases.)

Now the holy anger (awesome fury) of X is disclosed from Heaven (the realm of Mystery) against the godlessness and evil of those persons who render truth dumb and inoperative by their wickedness. It is not that they do not know the truth about X; indeed X has made it quite plain to them. For since the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of X, e.g. X's eternal power and divinity, have been plainly discernible through things which X has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving these persons without a rag of excuse. They knew all the time that there is

X, yet they refused to acknowledge X as such, or to thank X for what X is and does. Thus they became fatuous in their argumentations, and plunged their silly minds still further into the dark. Behind a façade of “wisdom” they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory (awesomeness) of the immortal X for an imitation image of a mortal human, or of creatures that run or fly or crawl. They gave up X: and therefore X gave them up to be the playthings of their own foul desires

So, what content for X does Paul’s text assume? If we assume that God is an idea in a human head that makes sense of everything (or at least many things), we can see that such a substitution does not fit the text. “X” is clearly an active power not an idea. Furthermore, any idea of God that humans create illustrates what Paul is pointing to with his phrase “an imitation image of a mortal human.” Any image, model, or art piece that humans have created is not X. X is not created by humans. X is the Power that is creating humans and the possibility of all human creations.

Why can Paul say that humans already know X? This is so because what Paul means by “X” encounters us as the Eternal (i.e. boundless) power that is “discernible” in all the things that are commonly seen and known. Paul also claims that something called the “divinity” of X is “discernible” in all the things that are commonly seen and known. By “divinity” he means some sort of commonly experienced glory, majesty, or awesomeness that goes with the enormous power already mentioned. X is “invisible” but the effects of X are not invisible. Everything that has the power of being is empowered by X. Humans cannot get their minds around X, but their “deep inner beings” discern the presence of X. Clearly, X is the Awesome Mysteriousness that is creating, supporting, and ending every visible thing. The failure of humanity is not a lack of experience of X, but the refusal to come to terms with X and to worship X as their life meaning. Such worship means nothing more nor less than being realistic, for X is Reality with a capital R. Such capitalization is symbolic of a boundless and inescapable Power not created by human hands and minds. X is not “a reality” created by humans to fit their preferences. X is *the* Reality that undermines every reality created by humans. X is the Infinite Truth that judges all our finite efforts toward truthfulness as well as all our overt lies.

Paul uses the word “heaven.” This is a key word in Paul’s metaphorical system of thinking about profound experience. In fact it is a key word for Jesus and all the other teachers and authors in the biblical collection. But “heaven” is not part of our metaphorical vocabulary today. “Heaven” has died as a useful metaphor. We now know that there is no transcendent space in a literal sense – no angels, no devils, no gods and goddesses, no Big Person up there to take care of us. We no longer live in a double-deck universe. Furthermore, we can no longer helpfully use the double-deck metaphor as a metaphor for talking about Ultimate Reality. We need to use other metaphors, and millions of us already do so.

Nevertheless, many if not most of us today have difficulty understanding how those who lived in past eras could talk about their primal experiences using the double-deck mode of talking. Most people think that those ancestors took supernatural space literally, as contemporary fundamentalists attempt to do. But the ancients were not taken up with our modern categories of “literal” and “non-literal.” They lived quite comfortably in their double-deck universe. There was ordinary space and there was “divine” space. They may or may not have noticed that this double-deck picture was merely a metaphor created by the human mind. In any case, the metaphor served them well as a way to talk about the profound matters of their existence. It may be hard for contemporary people to grasp that Luther, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine were not literalists, but “existentialists” who knew (in their own way) that the double-deck metaphor was a metaphor. Jesus was also this kind of existentialist. When Jesus prayed “Our Father who art in heaven” he was saying in his culture what it would

mean for us to say in our culture, "Like a good parent to us are You, Oh Awesome Mysteriousness shining through every rock, hair, and leaf of nature." The great saints of the past were not dumber than us: they simply used a different metaphorical language.

When we clearly understand this shift in metaphorical language, we can translate Paul's text into twenty-first century talk without losing what Paul was pointing to in his own life and without requiring ourselves to pretend that we can use his metaphorical language. With our own language we can point in our own lives to the very same dynamics of existence that Paul was expressing.

Today as then, everybody knows X, the same X that Paul was talking about. But few of us acknowledge X and worship X as the core meaning of our lives. It is still true that the masses of our age have given up X and therefore X has given them up to be the playthings of their own foul desires. "Foul desires" covers more than our drug addictions and our sex addictions. Our core foulness has to do with our desire to be the creator of our own reality, rather than allowing our true lives be given to us by X.

And what is X? X is the Reality for which we are making a substitution when we create our own reality. Birds do not try to create their own reality. Squirrels do not try to create their own reality. They perceive and interpret their experience with mental products we might call multi-sensory reruns. They do not use the type of mental products we call symbols. For example, four is a symbol used by humans to see a common quality between four clouds, four days, and four dogs. Humans (using the symbols of mathematics, language, art, and religious forms) have the capacity to put together a mental picture that can be substituted for reality. Our ability to do this is a great and useful gift, but it also presents us with a temptation not faced by birds and squirrels. The temptation is to live in terms of the pictures we have created rather than the Reality we are attempting to picture. Our yielding to this temptation makes us the most dangerous species on the planet. Our yielding to this temptation means that we worship our own creations, a state of living that Paul interprets as rebellion against Reality, the Reality for which we have built a substitute. While it may seem almost inevitable that humans confuse their own pictures of reality with Reality, Paul is saying that there is no excuse for it. Furthermore, Reality "responds" to our unrealistic substitutions with the consequences that derive from our trusting in those substitutes. We don't get rid of Reality or the Power of Reality by building our substitutes for it. Since we have given up Reality for substitutions, Reality gives us up to the consequences of our living with substitutes. Paul sees this substitution process as the primal root of the corruption of the human species. In this text he calls it "foolishness." In other places he simply calls it "sin." Let us hear Paul's words again:

Behind a façade of "wisdom" they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory (Awesomeness) of the immortal X for an imitation image of a mortal human, or of creatures that run or fly or crawl. They gave up X: and therefore X gave them up to be the playthings of their own foul desires

So when we see humanity waging wars in defense of their religious creations, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires. When we see humanity abusing and belittling persons who do not fit into their cult-group of beliefs and morals, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires. When we see humanity destroying the planet in the name of free enterprise, economic growth, a still bigger population of humans, a style of wastefulness and consumer obsession, and other substitutes for sober realism, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires. When we see humanity killing the truth tellers of their times rather than listening to them and changing their

ways, we are seeing humanity in the state of having been given up by X to be the playthings of their own foul desires.

In other words, this is the core problem of humanity: having given up Reality for substitutes, and thus being stuck with the substitutes that we have created. The consequence of this is that Reality has given us up to be the plaything of our substitutes, that is, our unrealism. And, according to Paul, there is no excuse for this. Here are Paul's words on excuses:

It is not that they do not know the truth about X; indeed X has made it quite plain to them. For since the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of X, e.g. X's eternal power and divinity, have been plainly discernible through things which X has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving these persons without a rag of excuse.

Reality is mysterious to the finite human mind, yet our elemental consciousness can experience this Mysteriousness. Though this Absolutely Mysterious Reality is beyond our mental reach, this Mysteriousness is discernible. It is commonly seen and known. Mysterious Reality is not an *idea* that we have thought up or have not yet thought up. Mysterious Reality is not a mere *idea*; it is more like a truck crashing into the side of our car. Mysterious Reality reaches us through some snake biting our toe, some cancer growing in our bowels. Mysterious Reality reaches us through a large host of pleasant things as well. Reality encounters us in the "miracle" of having been born at all. Reality comes to us through the gift of our amazing body and its intricate functioning. Reality is the entire Mystery of empowered "actualities" that we cannot avoid. There is no excuse for making substitutes for Reality and then (1) forgetting that they are substitutes and thereby entering into the illusion that these substitutes are Reality or (2) using these substitutes as our ground for fighting against Reality.

By "fighting against Reality" is meant viewing Reality as our enemy because Reality does not operate by our values. Violent destruction is as much a part of Reality as surprising creation. A mega-star violently explodes. A volcano, flood, storm, or fire destroys a whole town or city. A cheetah runs down an antelope and eats it. A band of humans slaughter another band of humans. People often protest that any Reality that empowers or permits such violence cannot be "good" enough (by our standards) to deserve our worship. So we create some other "being" to be our "good," our "God," our "worship." Perhaps we imagine that this self-created "being" is real enough and powerful enough to interfere with the course of nature on our behalf. Paul wants us to know that these gods of our own creation do not even exist. There is no divine being coming to rescue us from Reality. Our fight with Reality is far worse than useless. Reality always wins. Fighting against Reality is a hopeless way to live. As Søren Kierkegaard so intricately describes, fighting Reality results in despair. There are many forms of despair: unconscious despair; painfully conscious secret despair; restless plunging into sensuality or noble work; suicide; defiantly creating and defending a fake self; defiantly becoming a living proof to our selves that Reality is no damned good. All of these states of despair are needless; and the alternative is close at hand – namely, humbling ourselves before Reality in trust that the Reality that is actually confronting us is providing for us the best case scenario for our lives. According to Paul this is the "faith" that saves us from the despair (hell) we have been cast into because we have worshiped our creations rather than that Final Creative Force from which we cannot escape.

So what is "God" in the texts of Paul? It is that Mysterious, Awesome, Unrelenting, Inescapable Reality that has posited us, sustains us, and will inevitably eliminate us from the course of history. This X, this God, is a daily confrontation that everyone knows who is willing to know what they know. But is this "knowing" not a belief in some

alien Big Other that takes away our freedom and responsibility? No, it is not a belief at all. It is just a conscious noticing of the WAY LIFE IS. We can simply notice that the Reality that is actually confronting us is putting us in being with our freedom and our responsibility. Our primal act of freedom is choosing to be free rather than vegetating in all our excuses and withdrawals and compulsions. Our primal act of freedom is choosing whether or not we will be our freedom, choosing and assuming responsibility for our choosing among our real options (possibilities) toward the future. This freedom is part of our obedience to Reality. To serve Reality is not acquiescence to the status quo. The status our lives is never "quo." Our options are limited and the consequences of our actions are not completely predictable, but we do have options and we do choose among those options, either in responsible freedom or in flight from that freedom.

The inexcusable "sin" of which Paul is accusing us is our rebellion against the true limits and possibilities of our lives in favor of some substitute, some unreality that we have created to match our preference for a life that is different from the one that we cannot escape. This self-created attitude results in bondage, not freedom. When we are in our freedom, we are free to rebel against Reality, but this rebellion creates bondage. When we use our freedom to rebel against Reality, our freedom is spent: we are delivered to an unfreedom, a bondage, a life of being the plaything of our own foul desires. As strange as all this may sound to our simplicity-loving minds, a devotion to the Final Determining Power liberates us to be our full freedom. Being "determined" to be free does not mean that we are a tale already told, just waiting to unfold. No, our freedom will create part of the tale. The Determining Power is determining us to be freedom. When we rebel against this Power we create for ourselves some sort of box in which we live, separated from Reality and from the reality of our Freedom. And this box is an alive state of living, a compulsive, defensive, destructive slavery from which we will have to be rescued or we will end up in the hell of despair.

Some will complain that this "God" of Paul's is not personal. This is not true. It is very personal for Paul. It is his devotion, his papa/mama, his cause, his drive, his life, his personal worship even unto and during death. The vision of a big Person in some parallel universe that assists us to rebel against Paul's X is a sheer illusion not held by Paul. In terms of the most common beliefs in God, Paul is an atheist. He does not trust in the gods that humans create. He only trusts the UNCREATED SOURCE of his and our lives.

If we define "existing" as emerging or "showing up" out of nothingness, then Paul's God does not exist. Paul's God is the Source of all existing things, processes, events, happenings, possibilities, pasts, futures, as well as our freedom to share in the unfoldment of these existing things. Paul's God is that Void, that No-Thing-Ness, out of which all existing "things" "show up," have their day, and then pass away. And it is not just Christians who have worshiped this God. All humans face this Finality that "jealously" opposes our primal devotion anything less. The Old Testament texts are not understandable without this understanding of God. And Paul, like Jesus, is a thoroughgoing disciple of Moses and the prophets.

Reconciled and Reconciling Others

What does it mean for "God to be in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." (2nd Corinthians 5: 19) This saying of Paul's has been much preached upon, but clarity about the meaning of this formula has been much confused.

Let us assume that by "God" in this sentence Paul means what we just explored in the last section. He is saying that the inescapable Eternal Mystery that we persist in trying to escape was in Christ reconciling the world of humanity to that Eternal

Mystery that is positing the world and humanity. Paul does not say that the Eternal Mystery became Jesus, a historical figure. To say that “incarnation” means that the Eternal became a finite person is superstition. The incarnation means something else. Jesus was God only in the sense that the Eternal became Present in this flesh and blood person in a way that was healing to humanity. *If we do not understand what it means for one of us to be the place where the Eternal becomes Present in a way that is healing to humanity, then we do not understand how this was true for Jesus.*

When Jesus dies upon the cross, this is not the dying of the Eternal Mystery. The cross is the outpouring of the life of Jesus in obedience to the Almighty aspect of the three-faced experience we call “The Trinity.” Jesus, as he is pictured in the story of the Garden of Gethsemane, is quite clear about this. “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

So what does it mean for the Almighty to be in Christ reconciling the fallen world to the Almighty? It is clear that Paul associates the man Jesus with the title Christ, but “Christ” has a wider meaning when Paul says that the community of those who accept Jesus as the Christ are “in Christ.” Further, to be “in Christ” means that we share in his crucifixion and in his resurrection. How is that so? What is crucified and what is resurrected in the ongoing drama in which all of us can participate?

We can begin by saying that our crucifixion means that our expectations for a Messiah who would save us from the terrors of Almighty God was rudely slain by the God who is God. Jesus was and still is a disappointment in terms of being a Messiah who would rescue us from the tyranny of the Roman Empire, or from the British Empire, or from the U.S. Empire, or from racist society, or from civilization’s momentum toward ecological doom. In terms of such expectations, Jesus was and is a failed Messiah. His death (as well as his life and teachings) killed our expectations of the arrival of someone (or some event) that would rescue us from the grim and grimy tasks of resolving our own earthly affairs. Furthermore, those among us who have given up our expectation for a false messiah are going to be swimming upstream, for the fallen world is taken up with false expectations of many sorts. Here are some: When I get a new job, then I will be really living. When I find a proper mate, then I will be really living. When my children finally leave home, then I will have life at last. When my health returns to normal then ----. When some pill or doctor or faith healer cures my most troubling pain then ----. There is no such Messiah on the way. For Jesus to be your Messiah means you have renounced all such messianic expectations. With a Jesus sort of Messiah there is just NOW with its possibilities and responsibilities. There is just us who, like Jesus, face the challenging demands of the Almighty God to expend our lives for something worth expending it for, and to do so before our life simply expends itself. Jesus in his teachings again and again explained that clinging on to whatever we think our life needs to be, has been, or is hoped for, will mean the loss our true Life. We who are “in Christ” move from clinging to flinging. We who are “in Christ” are flung and are flinging ourselves into experiencing the resurrection of the Full Life that was in Christ Jesus. And this Life takes place, not tomorrow nor yesterday, but Now.

So being “in Christ” means flinging our life into the Now of our own times. This means flinging ourselves into the ecological crisis or whatever else calls us in our moment of living on this Earth. For Jesus it meant questioning the moralistic use of the the Mosaic Law. Jesus called people to simply fling themselves into a forgiveness that was universally present. It did not matter how messy was the past: Now the kingdom of God was being offered to us as our true home – the entry into which means flinging ourselves into an ever-forgiving fresh start that is present in each and every living Now in which we are being posited by the Ever-Present, Eternal, Almighty, Mysteriousness.

Here is the New English translation of 2nd Corinthian 5:19-20 in which Paul spells out his vision about being in Christ:

What I mean is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. We come therefore as Christ's ambassadors. It is as if God were appealing to you through us: in Christ's name we implore you, be reconciled to God!

Paul is saying that we who have been reconciled are now called to be the reconcilers. This means taking God's side (Reality's side) in the ongoing conflict with humanity's complaints against Reality. Taking God's side is seen as compassion for the complainers. It means seeing that the true Life of the complainers depends upon the complainers being reconciled to God. Reality is not going to change to please the complainers. The complainers have to do the changing. (1) Step one of this change is not stopping our complaining, it is simply admitting that we are wanting to substitute something for our real lives. We are basically and deeply complainers. We can pray prayers of complaining if we like. Many Psalm writers certainly did. But the completion of step one means seeing that our complaining against the Enigmatic Power shining through nature and history is an estrangement from our own reality, the reality of others, as well as from the Final, Overall, Mystery, Depth, and Greatness of Being. For reconciliation to occur, this understanding of our "fallenness" or "corruption" needs to be confessed. (2) Step two in our reconciliation to X (to Reality) is realizing that Reality welcomes us home to Reality in spite of our lifetime of complaining against Reality and acting out our complaints in various forms of malice toward others and ourselves. (3) Step three in our reconciliation is surrendering our complaining and instead flinging our lives into a Life of reconciliation with Reality – making Reality our God. Only after this reconciliation (this shift from Reality our enemy to Reality our friend) can we begin to understand the love Reality has for us. Reality loves us by insisting upon our realism and welcoming us home to a fresh start in realism as opposed to carrying on in a lifetime of futile fight with Reality and thus living in the despair, hopelessness, malice, and slavery to obsessions that a fight with Reality includes.

When Reality is in us reconciling the fallen world to Reality, we are going to encounter the same rejection from most of humanity that Jesus encountered. In the Gospel of John, John's fictitious Jesus explains to his disciples that the disciple is not above his master. If humankind rejected and persecuted the master, they will do the same to the disciple. This arrangement of things is Reality's (God's) forgiveness toward the fallen world of complainers against Reality. As followers of Jesus we get to be Reality's forgiveness through our weakness of being vulnerable to the rejection of humanity, a humanity that hates Reality and prefers malice and murder and even their own despair to being reconciled with Reality. Some portion of humanity will, nevertheless, respond to the reconcilers. Some will repent and join the "Kingdom of God." They will become reconciled and reconcilers. They will take their place in the Reign of Reality, picking up their own measure of suffering (i.e. their own cross) which will be worked out by "Reality" as their lot in being part of the reconciling body of Christ. They will pray with Jesus, "Not my will, but Thy will be done."

Martin Luther King, Jr. provides us an example and some understanding of what it means to reconcile humans to the Almighty, to Reality, to God. We may have had difficulty sorting out what it means for Jesus to have died for our sins. But clearly Martin Luther King, Jr. died for our sins, for our racial estrangement. Whether we citizens of the United States were conscious or unconscious bigots who oppressed a portion of our citizenry, or whether we were among those who allowed ourselves to be outwardly and/or inwardly oppressed, King died for our sins. If we were willing we were "born of Martin's Spirit and washed in his blood." King knew that he was risking his life. He knew he might be killed. He did not know when or how or

whether, but he was aware that he might not enter the promised land. Nevertheless, he was willing to lay down his life that others might enter that land. The exact same dynamic applies to Jesus. We, humanity, (not Jews, not Romans, but humanity) killed the best of what humanity could be. The characteristic sin of that time was not racism toward African American, but a type of ingrown arrogance with regard to law and moralism. Jesus challenged his times to the core, and he and delivered many to new life. That part of Jesus' times that was not willing to accept his challenge, shed his blood. That blood was shed for us. The Almighty Reality was in Christ reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty Reality. The Almighty was in Martin King reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty. The Almighty was in the Moslem, Malcolm X, reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty. The Almighty was in the Hindu, Gandhi, reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty. We need to add to this list women like Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and many others who flung their lives into the estrangement of their times. The Almighty Reality can be in any one of us reconciling fallen humanity to Almighty Reality. We are exploring here a universal dynamic of history, not a mere Christian dogma.

Blessed Assurance Martin is mine, Susan is mine, Jesus is mine!

Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!

Heir of salvation, purchase of God,

Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Jesus, Martin, Susan, Malcolm, Harriet, my Paul, my _____

all the day long.

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Healers all the day long.

The Ethical Teachings of Paul

Like Jesus' ethical teachings, Paul's ethical teachings were rooted in his love of the Forgiving Reality to which Paul was reconciled by the proclamation to him of Jesus as the Christ. Like Jesus, Paul is a devoted member of a Hebraic culture that emphasizes ethical teachings. And like Jesus, Paul's ethical teachings were space and time specific. Paul's teachings are different from those of Jesus because they are specific to a different time and space. While the time span is only about 27 years between the death of Jesus and Paul's first letter, the difference in location is more distant. Paul is ministering to the Hellenistic/Hebraic synagogues of the Roman Mediterranean, while Jesus was a rural Gallilean for whom travel to Jerusalem was a big trip. Paul was a citizen of the Roman empire, spoke and wrote Greek, was significantly educated in not only the Hebrew scriptures but in wider affairs of the Roman world. Jesus did not live in that "social space." His mission was to the "lost children of Israel." Only very indirectly was Jesus' mission an attack on the whole Roman world. Paul, on the other hand, was setting in motion a movement of human beings moving westward with a reversal of values almost directly opposite to the values that were moving eastward from Caesar Augustus' Rome. Perhaps Paul would have gone on to Spain had he lived to do so.

In such a context Paul was building a network of communities. Any of us who have done or attempted such things know how difficult that is. Paul possessed a powerful message relevant to many people and Paul was a tireless and capable champion of his cause. And Paul had a sense of urgency about his work. As Jesus had seen before him, Paul saw that Eternal life (the Kingdom of God) was breaking in upon us through the astonishing healing of the lives of people in the present. Paul also saw that the general culture and patterning of the Roman dominated world was based on lies and was

therefore under judgment by the God of history. Rome was indeed doomed by Reality, though not quite as soon as Paul imagined. Nevertheless, Paul had respect for the laws of the Roman world and saw such order as the gift of God for the present. He could not and did not call for an explicit social revolution. But he did call for an inner transformation and a style of communal living that were revolutionary within those specific circumstances and, over the long haul, made a huge difference.

Paul has been criticized by modern feminists for continuing a number of patriarchal customs, but the inner heart of Paul's community work actually gave great honor to women. Women were among his most important coworkers, and he did not tolerate disrespect toward them by their husbands. Indeed, he taught that a husband should see his wife as worthy of the same sacrificial and abounding love that Christ has for his Church. And Paul was not an ascetic, though for himself he gave up marriage for the sake of his urgent task. The sexual rules he recommended for these new communities can be viewed as conservative by modern standards, but in his situation a workable order for those fragile communities was the overriding value.

Paul has also been criticized for not being stronger in opposition to slavery, but here again within his world his heart was amazing compassionate on this topic. He could not undo the institutions of slavery in the Roman world. But he could encourage Christians to free a slave or for slaves and masters to express faithful love toward one another. These steps would not have been adequate for the United States of the 1870s and 1960s, but to understand Paul we need to try to view his heart operating within his circumstances.

But, on the topic of not requiring male Gentile converts to be circumcised in order to be full members of the Body of Christ, Paul was firm to the point of risking his life. Paul was clearly committed to the notion that within the family of true service of the Living God, all humans are equally treasured. *This universalism is a revolutionary element of Paul's attitude.* And it is upon such foundations, initiated by Paul, that we have seen in recent times the emergence of the abolition of slavery, the civil rights revolution, women's empowerment, and, yes, even some equality and respect for gay and lesbian persons. Paul was indeed confused about this last group, but it is nevertheless true that the Pauline attitude of universal respect played its part in gay and lesbian liberation.

Mostly, Paul's ethical teachings center around the down-to-Earth practical issues of maintaining good working order among his emerging communities of still healing human beings. That he succeeded with this and inspired many others to continue such work has resulted in great benefit, including benefit to our current controversies with regard to the current hangovers of patriarchal and hierarchical patterns in Christian practice. It is our job, not Paul's, to complete these ethical implications of the Christian breakthrough.

The Pauline Century

Paul was important for the rest of the first century. The writings of Mark, Matthew, and Luke-Acts were extensions of the Pauline revolution in religion. Mark can be credited with inventing the Gospel, a new form of biblical literature. This was a literary work of theological intent, not a biography, not a random collection of older tradition. Mark put together a story with a theme. Basically, his story hangs together around this much repeated question: "Who is Jesus?" In the center of Mark's Gospel, Peter suggests that Jesus is the Christ, but Peter does not know what this means. Peter does not understand how it could be that the Christ should suffer and die at the hands of the establishment. In Mark's story the wonder of calling Jesus the Christ unfolds to the very end in which a "resurrection" happening frightens a group of women who are struck speechless about this overwhelming experience. Also, Mark has Jesus call 12

disciples and heal 12 sick Israelites including a 12 year old girl and a women with a 12 year flow of blood. Clearly, Mark is creating a metaphorical story about the birth of a new Israel, a new 12. Mark is creating a work of art not a scientific biography of Jesus.

Matthew puts together a longer work of art that deals with problems that are appearing among the more law-loving Judaea wing of the Christian movement. Luke puts together another long version plus a second volume, "The Acts of the Apostles." Luke has a different style than Matthew or Mark. He is addressing the more skeptical, Gentile wing of the Christian movement.

The writings of Paul, Mark, Matthew, and Luke all witness to the richness, the many layers, and the broad diversity that characterized the second historical stage of the movement that came to be called "Christian." A third historical stage begins with the writing and publishing of the letters and Gospel according to "John." We will explore this turning point in the next chapter.