

## **Critical Events Influencing Paul's Theological Development**

All the critical events that influenced Paul's theological development during the thirty or more years of his ministry can neither be known nor adequately analyzed. Certain events, however, when considered against Paul's background as a Pharisee, would appear to have served as catalysts in the development of his new theology as a Christian Rabbi.

In some cases, the events can be deduced from the differences between Paul's thinking as a Pharisee and his thinking as a Christian. In a few cases the events can be deduced from data in Paul's letters. More often than not the events are deduced from the tone of Paul's arguments and from the reactions of his audience. Since the critical events are for the most part mirrored in Paul's reaction to them in his letters, we will list them according to their probable chronological order as they appear behind the facades of the letters.

- 1-Paul's vision of the risen Christ—the critical event.
- 2-The naïve expectation of an imminent Second Coming of Christ.
- 3-The rejection of the resurrection of the body by the Greeks at Corinth.
- 4-Paul's close brush with death at Ephesus and his realization that Christian existence is to be patterned on the suffering life of Christ.
- 5-Paul's encounter with false apostles at Corinth, which leads him to a more profound concept of apostleship and its relationship to the cross.
- 6-A controversy with Jewish Christians about the Mosaic law and Christian liberty, which forces Paul to theologize in depth on the relationship between faith and justification.
- 7-The Jews' rejection and the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel, which leads to the falling together of the theological data in Paul's mind to bring home to him an understanding of the place of the cosmic Christ in the Church and in the Father's plan of salvation history.

1. With regard to Paul's vision of the risen Christ, the reader should remember that Paul as a Pharisee already believed in resurrection of the dead. It was a pharisaic doctrine with Old Testament roots in Dan. 12; 2 Mac. 6-7; Wis. 1-4. The Pharisees believed not only in the fact of a bodily resurrection but in the resurrection of the dead as a sign of the coming and completion of God's promised kingdom. Paul's vision of the risen Christ did not initiate but rather confirmed his pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the dead. What Paul's vision of the risen Christ meant to him, however, went far beyond a simple confirmation of his belief in resurrection; it convinced him that Jesus was sent by the Father,

that Jesus was the Messiah, and that with Jesus' resurrection there had begun the beginning of the end—the turning point of all history, the time when God would fulfill his messianic promises to Israel and the world.

2. Paul's naïve expectation of an imminent Second Coming of Christ flowed from his understanding of Jesus' resurrection as the sign and guarantee that God was about to bring to consummation his plan for the salvation of the world. How soon would this happen neither Paul nor anyone else in the early Church knew, but they all expected it to happen shortly. And Paul himself felt for a good while that he would be alive for the second coming of Christ (1 Thes 4:16-17; 1 Cor 15:51-52). The parousiac fever of the early Christians is not easy to understand but it was very real. It affected Paul in his early preaching and is evident in his entire letter, especially 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, and Philipppians.

3. The rejection of bodily resurrection, as opposed to "soul" resurrection, by the Greeks and early Gnostics caused Paul to defend the bodily resurrection of Christians. Paul's own background as a Jew led him to think of the person as a body-person. The Greeks thought of the person as made up of two principles: soul and body. They considered the body the prison of the soul. This led them to reject the teaching of the resurrection of the body. Paul's response to their objections is found in 1 Cor 15 and in parts of 2 Corinthians.

4. Paul's close brush with death at Ephesus, reflected in Phil. 1:12-26 and 2 Cor. 1:8-11, had a double effect on him: it made him realize that he might not be alive for the parousia and that following Christ meant more than sharing in his victory—it also meant sharing in his sufferings and death. This later realization was the more significant. It led Paul to a more profound conception of Christian existence and its relationship to the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Growth in Christ meant sharing in Christ's sufferings. This is a central theme of Philipppians and 2 Corinthians.

5. Paul's encounter with false apostles at Corinth led him to reflect on the purpose and meaning of apostleship and on the characteristics, which distinguished the true from the false apostle. He came to realize that an apostle was called not only to preach Christ but also to pattern his life on the life of the suffering Christ, and thus to preach with his life the central message of the gospel. He expounds his conception of the "true apostle" in 2 Corinthians.

6. To understand Paul's controversy with Jewish Christians about law, liberty, and justification by faith alone, the reader has to remember that there very likely was a time when Paul himself, as a strict, practicing Pharisee, defended justification by observance of the law. His devotion to the law as law, however, shriveled when he came to realize that man is justified by faith and is freed from the law by Christ. Not all Jewish Christians saw this as clearly as Paul did. When Paul himself first realized the difference and the significance of justification by faith as opposed to justification by work, we cannot know. He had no doubts about it, however, by the time he came to write Philippians, Galatians, and Romans.

7. Paul's Pharisaic belief that Gentiles could be saved only by and through their entrance into the Jewish religion must be taken into consideration if the reader is to understand the impact upon Paul of the Gentiles' acceptance and the Jews' rejection of the gospel. How early he realized that it was the Gentiles as a group and not the Jews as a group who were accepting the gospel, we do not know. At some point in his career, probably in the middle fifties, Paul was forced to accept the fact that "the first (the Jews) would be last and the last (the Gentiles) first". Once he had accepted that, he began to theologize anew on the Father's plan of salvation. This led him to the synthesis we find in Romans, the most profound and the most theologically important of all his letters.