

## WHY ARE WE TO TREASURE PAUL?

If there is any person of stature and importance in the early church, after Jesus, that person is Paul. Yet the second letter of Peter in the NT itself, tells us how from the beginning Paul was held in esteem, and yet was also in the storm of controversy: "Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of (the time of salvation) as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction"

2 Pet 3:15-16.

People often criticize Paul. Some accuse him of redesigning Christianity for his own purposes, away from the simple teaching of Jesus. Others are annoyed by some of his statements about women. He requires them to wear veils at worship and he tells them to be silent in the churches. Such statements seem not to show respect for women and to put them into inferior positions. Similarly, on the topic of human sexuality, Paul seems to have minimal respect for marriage. He says it is better to marry than to burn with passion, but he prefers celibacy. Finally, most of the letters of Paul have strong directives from him, often with explicit assertions of his authority and with little room for discussion on the part of his readers.

Paul is a strong personality and his letters indicate that people either loved him or hated him but were scarcely ever neutral or indifferent toward him. Yet we must appreciate that he addressed all of his letters to specific problems of specific communities and often in the heat of battle. His occasionally strong statements need to be kept in context, need to be properly interpreted, and must be balanced by his total vision of Christianity.

In spite of the difficulties and the controversy surrounding Paul, there are important reasons for studying him. Paul can be described as the **first theologian**, at least as the first to write down his reflections about the meaning of the risen Christ. The letters of Paul are our earliest written texts in the New Testament and are the largest body of documents after Luke's combined gospel and Acts of the Apostles. He was the **right person for the right time**. Raised a Jew in Gentile territory, he was eminently suited for his time to help bridge the gap; between Christians of Jewish background and the ever increasing numbers of those of Gentile background. Through his writings **Paul offers us concrete examples** of how a Christian come to resurrection faith, changes his or her life by it and lives in ongoing commitment and discovery. It is a gift to us that this strong personality comes through in his letters. That enables him not only to

leave abstract teaching, but to embody and express for us in a real, live person the struggles, the joys, the fears and the hopes of Christianity.

### **Why are we to treasure Paul?**

First, we are to treasure him as a **missionary**, he evangelized new Christians. So, he was a **fisherman**.

Second, we are to treasure him as **pastor**, he looks after those who have adopted this new life. So, he was a **shepherd**.

Third, we are to treasure him as a **thinker**, he applies what he has learnt as a product of the Greek world in which he was brought up.

Fourth, we are to treasure him as a theologian, as mentioned above, he applies the fruit of his learning as one “zealous for the traditions of his ancestors”.

And fifth, we are to treasure him as a mystic, since he lives in union with the Christ who was sent by God.

### **What makes Paul important?**

-Paul is important to the NT itself. Out of twenty-seven of its documents, thirteen are ascribed to Paul. His written work on this reckoning constitutes about **one-fourth** of the whole of the NT. Moreover, Paul's epistles are the **earliest documents** within the NT, so that they take us nearest in time to the origins of Christianity.

-The work of Paul in the early Church is of crucial significance in the early days of Christianity. As a **dominant formative influence** in the growth of early Christianity, Paul deserves the closest scrutiny.

-The epistles of Paul have been of extraordinary importance in the later history of Christianity. It could be argued that some of the **most creative movements** in the history of the Church have been born of a rediscovery of Paul, for example, St. Augustine, Marin Luther, and the whole Protestant movement.

-AS Christians, we continuously read Paul as a Second Reading in the liturgy on most Sundays of the year, and as part of the two-year cycle form which the first readings are taken in the Weekday liturgy.

### Humanity In Christ

Christ's salvific activity has brought about a new union of humanity with God. Paul calls it a "new creation", since it has introduced a new mode of existence into human history in which Christ and the Christian enjoy, as it were, a **symbiosis**. Human beings share in this new life by faith and baptism, which incorporate them into Christ and his church; this incorporation finds a unique expression in the Eucharist.

### Faith and Love

The experience whereby a human being begins to apprehend the effects of the Christ-event is for Paul "**faith**". This experience is a reaction to the gospel, to the "**preached word**". Paul's most elaborate treatment is found in Romans 10, a chapter that must be studied in detail. The experience begins with a "**hearing**" of the gospel or of the "word" about Christ and his salvific role. This hearing results in an **assent of the mind**, which acknowledges that "Jesus is Lord" in one's existence. It ends, however as the "**obedience of faith**", but which really means "a hearing-under" and connotes for Paul the "submission" or the "commitment" of the whole person to God in Christ. "If with your lips you acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and with you heart you believe that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). Thus, the faith that one is asked to put in God or Christ is **not a mere intellectual assent** to the proposition that "Jesus is Lord". It is a **vital, personal commitment**, engaging the whole person to Christ in all his or her relations with God, other human beings, and the world. It is thus an awareness of the difference the lordship of Christ has made in human history. This awareness underlies the statement of Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and even now the physical life I am living I live through faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Such a faith far transcends the OT idea of fidelity. It is a full acceptance of Christian dedication to the exclusion of all reliance on self or on what Paul calls "**boasting**" (3:27). The basis of this experience is a new union with God in Christ, a **certain reality** that is not immediately perceived by human consciousness but must be **allowed to pervade the psychological level of existence** so that one's conscious activity is guided by it. This is the integrated Christian life that Paul envisages.

Such faith is a gift of God, just as is the whole salvific process. This is the underlying notion in the whole discussion of Abraham's faith in Rom 4. But since

God accosts a human being as a responsible person, that person can accept or reject his gracious call. Faith is thus only the acceptance or the response on the part of the human being who realizes that the initiative rests with God. The one who does not respond is regarded by Paul as disobedient and committed to "the god of this age" (2 Cor 4:4), hence culpable and "perishing".

In the polemical contexts in which Paul rejects the "deeds of the law" as a means to justification, he stresses that this justification comes through "faith". However, the full sense of that faith demands that the Christian manifest it in conduct through deeds of love. "In union with Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor the lack of it means anything, but only **faith working itself out through love**" (Gal 5:6). This is why Paul continually exhorts his Christian converts to the practice of all sorts of good deeds, why he includes a hortatory section in almost every one of his letter.

Christian faith is not only a freedom from the law, from sin, and from the *sarx*-self, but also a freedom to serve others in love or charity (Gal 5:13). For Paul love (*agape*) is an openness, an outgoing concern and respect of one person for another/others in concrete acts that result in the diminution of the lover's "self" (Phlm 9-12; Gal 5:13; Rom 12:9-13). It is a way of Christian life that is extraordinary (1 Cor 12:31), surpassing even all the charismatic manifestations of the Spirit. Interpreters may debate about the character of 1 Cor 13, whether it is hymnic or a rhetorical description, but one finds there Paul's praise of love in Christian life: its indispensability, its 11 characteristics (positive and negative), and its perdurance and superiority. **But love is also for Paul the summation of the law** (Rom 13:8-10); Gal 5:14). In other words, the person motivated by a faith that works itself out through love is not in reality concerned about "the deeds of the law", but finds himself or herself doing all that the law has required. In this way faith for Paul turns out to be more than a mere assent to monotheism. The root of such love is the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and ultimately the love of the Father; for the "love of God" is poured out into our hearts (Rom 5:5; 8:28), and thus it is just as much a grace of God as faith itself. Such service of other is not accomplished without the activity of God in human beings: "God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). This is why Paul formulated the hymn to the love of God made manifest in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:31-39) and speaks of the **controlling love of Christ in Christian life** (2 Cor 5:14).