

# PAUL AMONG JEWS AND GENTILES

## 1 Paul Among Jews and Gentiles

Paul lived his life among Jews and Gentiles. That is not a surprising or particularly controversial statement. As a Jew he had grown accustomed to dividing humankind into those two parts. In some of his letters the very structure of his argument is itself accounted for by that dichotomy. Often, moreover, his reference to “all” is synonymous with “both Jews and Greeks.” According to his own words he is the Apostle to the Gentiles; in writing to Rome, he speaks of his obligation to both Greeks and barbarians, yet in fulfilling that obligation he is much aware of the Jews and their role in God’s plan (Romans 1:14–16). In Acts Paul is programmatically portrayed as the Jew, the ex-Pharisee who brings the gospel to the Gentile world and that book does not end until Paul has made it all the way to Rome, the seat of power in the Gentile world.

On further reflection, however, the title of this book and this essay—*Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*—is not quite as innocent or bland as it may appear. It will be my contention in these chapters that the main lines of Pauline interpretation—and hence both conscious and unconscious reading and quoting of Paul by scholars and lay people alike—have for many centuries been out of touch with one of the most basic of the questions and concerns that shaped Paul’s thinking in the first place: the relation between Jews and Gentiles.

Especially in the Protestant tradition—and particularly among Lutherans—it is Paul’s Epistle to the Romans which holds a position of honor, supplying patterns of thought that

are lifted into the position of overarching and organizing principles for the Pauline material. Paul's presentation of justification by faith has such a role; to some this serves not only as the key to Pauline thought, but as the criterion for the really true gospel as it is to be found in the whole New Testament, the whole Bible, and the long and varied history of Christian theology.

The following chapters will demonstrate how such a doctrine of justification by faith was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promises of God to Israel. Their rights were based solely on faith in Jesus Christ. This was Paul's very special stance, and he defended it zealously against any compromise that required circumcision or the keeping of kosher food laws by Gentile Christians. As the Apostle to the Gentiles he defended this view as part and parcel of the special assignment and revelation that he had received directly from God. In none of his writings does he give us information about what he thought to be proper in these matters for Jewish Christians. Himself a Jew, but with a special mission to the Gentiles, Paul is never heard to urge Jewish Christians to live like him in these respects. When he admonishes parishioners to imitate him he seems always to refer to himself not using his privilege or freedom to the full (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). When he rebukes Peter in Antioch, it is not for Peter's practice of keeping a kosher table but for Peter's changing his attitudes under pressure from Jerusalem (Gal. 2:11ff). For as Paul says in Romans, "Let everyone act with full conviction" (14:5), and "for all that is not out of conviction is sin" (14:23). In respect to his defense of the rights and the freedom of *Gentile* converts, Paul has provided ample and full documentation in Galatians, a letter to which we shall return.

All this does not sound much different from what we are used to hearing. How or why then do I claim that in our traditional understanding we have lost touch with the image of Paul among Jews and Gentiles? For one simple reason;

while Paul addresses himself to the relation of Jews to Gentiles, we tend to read him as if his question was: On what grounds, on what terms, are we to be saved? We think that Paul spoke about justification by faith, using the Jewish-Gentile situation as an instance, as an example. But Paul was chiefly concerned about the relation between Jews and Gentiles—and in the development of *this* concern he used as one of his arguments the idea of justification by faith.

Such a shift in focus and perception blocks our access both to the original thought and the original intention of Paul. It leads to distortions of our historical description of Paul's ministry and to misunderstandings of Paul as a person. It leads to a misconstruction of the problem Paul intended to solve by his observations on faith and law and salvation. The fact of the matter is that if we read Paul's answer to the question of how Gentiles become heirs to God's promises to Israel as if he were responding to Luther's pangs of conscience, it becomes obvious that we are taking the Pauline answer out of its original context.

The lost centrality of "Jews and Gentiles" is most clearly to be felt in a study of Romans. What is Romans about? Why did Paul write this letter at that crucial point in his career when he was through with the East, had gathered the collection for the Jerusalem church (cf. Gal. 2:10), and was delivering it prior to setting out for the West via Rome? My guess is that it was not his purpose to write a theological tractate on the nature of justification by faith. No. Here is rather the Apostle Paul among Jews and Gentiles, introducing his mission to the significant, but to him unknown, church in Rome. He wants to make clear to them how his mission fits into God's total plan and scheme. It is of more than passing interest to note how this letter differs from that to the Galatians. There the discussion was about *Judaizers*, i.e. Gentiles infatuated with Jewish ways. In Romans, on the other hand, Paul speaks about *Jews*.

This is not the place for an extensive analysis of Romans, but it may be helpful to remember how Paul's *apologia*, his

presentation of his mission, becomes a panoramic view of how his Gentile mission fits into God's total plan, and how that perspective finally brings him to the point where he sees that Christianity is on its way to becoming a Gentile church. Simultaneously he sees that God has mysterious and special plans for the salvation of Israel. This, the mystery of Israel's separate existence, Paul proclaims to the Gentiles "lest you be conceited" (Rom. 11:25) in an uncalled-for feeling of superiority.

To me the climax of Romans is actually chapters 9—11, i.e., his reflections on the relation between church and synagogue, the church and the Jewish *people*—not "Christianity" and "Judaism," not the attitudes of the gospel versus the attitudes of the law. The question is the relation between two communities and their coexistence in the mysterious plan of God.

It should be noted that Paul does not say that when the time of God's kingdom, the consummation, comes Israel will accept Jesus as the Messiah. He says only that the time will come when "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). It is stunning to note that Paul writes this whole section of Romans (10:18—11:36) without using the name of Jesus Christ. This includes the final doxology (11:33—36), the only such doxology in his writings without any christological element.

Such random observations about Romans make it quite clear that in this letter Paul's focus really is the relation between Jews and Gentiles, not the notion of justification or predestination and certainly not other proper yet abstract theological topics.

It is tempting to suggest that in important respects Paul's thought here approximates an idea well documented in later Jewish thought from Maimonides to Franz Rosenzweig. Christianity—and in the case of Maimonides, also Islam—is seen as the conduit of Torah, for the declaration of both monotheism and the moral order to the Gentiles. The differences are obvious, but the similarity should not be missed: Paul's reference to God's mysterious plan is an affirmation of a God-willed coexistence between Judaism and Christianity in which the missionary urge to convert Israel is held in check.

It goes without saying that Paul's primary focus on Jews and Gentiles was lost in the history of interpretation, and when it was retained, the church picked up the negative side of the "mystery"—Israel's "No" to Jesus Christ—but totally missed the warning against conceit and feelings of superiority. Once this mystery became inoperative in the central thinking of the church, the Jews being written off as God-killers and as stereotypes for wrong attitudes toward God, the road was ever more open for beautiful spiritualizations of Pauline theology. Romans became a theological tractate on the nature of faith. Justification no longer "justified" the status of Gentile Christians as honorary Jews, but became the timeless answer to the plights and pains of the introspective conscience of the West. And Paul was no longer seen "among Jews and Gentiles" but rather as the guide for those perplexed and troubled by the human predicament. His teaching was now detached from what he had seen as his task, his mission, and his aim—to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Once the human predicament—timeless and exercised in a *corpus christianum*—became the setting of the church's interpretation of Paul's thought, it also became less obvious that there was in fact a great difference of setting, thought, and argument between the various epistles of Paul. As his teaching of justification was removed from its setting within the relationship between Jew and Gentile and became part of his teaching about salvation, the difference between Jews in Romans and Judaizers in Galatians also came to have little interest. Further, it became difficult and irrelevant to notice that the Corinthian or the Thessalonian correspondence had a yet totally different vocabulary, problematic and intention. It was possible to homogenize Pauline theology since the common denominator could easily be found in generalized theological issues, and the specificity of Paul's arguments was obscured. In 1 Corinthians, however, we have a fascinating window into "Paul among the Gentiles." In the chapters that follow we shall note with some precision how rich and varied Paul's thinking is, and how such awareness requires attention to the setting as to Jews and Gentiles.

Yet the question arises: How can letters which Paul directed to specific churches in specific situations be the word of God for the church at large and in all times? It is intriguing to recall that one of the earliest discussions that has survived, that of the Canon Muratori, a Latin list of the New Testament books deemed to be in the canon (usually dated in the second century, but recently placed in the fourth by Albert Sundberg), recognizes the problem involved in designating letters written to individual congregations as the word of God for all. Its solution is ingenious. In the Muratorian Canon it is noted that Paul addressed seven churches, and in the Revelation of John seven churches are addressed (chs. 1—3) as if addressing the church at large. It seems to follow that we can accept Paul's epistles as Scripture, on the basis of an analogy to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation. This is obviously a subsequent rationalization, but it explains how the mind of the church in Rome tried to explain to itself what was already a fact—that the collection of Pauline epistles was included in the canon. In a way the number seven was seen as being in conscious conformity to the pattern of God's own revelation in the Johannine Apocalypse, *ergo* Paul's letters are intended for the whole church, having a catholic (general) intention.

But once the individual letters were acknowledged as Scripture they quickly suffered homogenization. In the last section of this essay we shall have reason to reflect further on the value of keeping these letters distinct, at least for the purpose of making sure what questions the Apostle intended to answer. Even the divinely right answer is not heard aright if it is applied to the wrong question.

In what follows I have taken the risk of coining some slogan-like titles by which I hope to unmask Paul's original intentions. When I speak in this adversative form—"Justification rather than Forgiveness," "Weakness rather than Sin," or "Call rather than Conversion," etc.—I am not suggesting that Paul explicitly or implicitly was against, say, forgiveness. I am only using the word-study approach in a quite elemen-

tary fashion which is available to any Bible reader. And I use it for the purpose of showing how some of the things that we often seem to hear and perceive in Paul either are not there or are there for a very different reason or purpose than we assume. That is all. Thus I have used a method which is far from esoteric. My hope is that readers of the Bible will be able not only to follow the argument, but to take it and continue on their own. Our vision is often more obstructed by what we think we know than by our lack of knowledge. It is with that conviction that this book will be short on erudition and dogged in its insistence on a simple reading of the text.

## 2 Call Rather Than Conversion

Paul's experience on the Damascus Road is usually referred to as his Conversion. In Acts there are three accounts of this episode (9:1–19; 22:4–16; 26:9–19), and there is material in Paul's own Epistle to the Galatians (1:11–17). From reading these accounts it seems reasonable to speak of the event as a "conversion" since that is our usual term for such an occurrence. It appears that a Jew, so strong in his Jewish faith that he persecutes Christians, himself becomes a Christian through a sudden and overwhelming experience. Yet a closer reading of these accounts, both those in Acts and those by Paul himself, reveals a greater continuity between "before" and "after." Here is not that change of "religion" that we commonly associate with the word *conversion*. Serving the one and the same God, Paul receives a new and special calling in God's service. God's Messiah asks him as a Jew to bring God's message to the Gentiles. The emphasis in the accounts is always on this assignment, not on the conversion. Rather than being "converted," Paul was called to the specific task—made clear to him by his experience of the risen Lord—of apostleship to the Gentiles, one hand-picked through Jesus Christ on behalf of the one God of Jews and Gentiles.

On the assumption that what a man reveals about himself