

Preface

It is no exaggeration to say that the Apostle Paul dominates the New Testament. Thirteen of its twenty-seven books claim him as their author;* roughly two-thirds of another (Acts of the Apostles) has him as its main character; still another (2 Peter) briefly mentions him by name; and a compelling argument can be made that two others (James and Matthew) have Paul, his letters, and/or Pauline Christianity in mind in some of what they say.¹ Thus, it is not surprising that Paul has often been characterized as “the first Christian theologian.” Indeed, contemporary German New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann not only refers to him as “the most important figure in primitive Christianity and in the Church until today” but also labels him “the Founder of Christianity.”²

Although my own judgment is that these latter characterizations are hyperbolic at best and misleading at worst, it cannot be denied that Paul played a critically important role in the development and spread of what came to be known as “Christianity.” Moreover, his letters profoundly influenced the thought of such major Christian theologians as St. Augustine (354–430), Martin Luther (1483–1546), and Karl Barth (1886–1968); they played a key role in the Protestant Reformation; and they continue to form the basis for much of what we know today as Christian theology. Thus, I think Lüdemann is correct in insisting “that

*As will be noted in the Introduction, however, six of these books—1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians—are likely “pseudonymous” (that is, written not by Paul but by other authors using Paul’s name). Only 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans are generally regarded as authentically Pauline. As will also be noted in the Introduction, however, even these books, with the exception of Philemon, have almost certainly been edited, revised, and/or augmented in various ways.

both Christians and non-Christians must come to terms with Paul, in order to be able to redefine their place within or outside Christianity in the light of any new insights into the apostle's life and thought."³

Our knowledge about Paul comes almost exclusively from his own letters, which were composed approximately twenty to thirty years after the death of Jesus (c. 50–60 CE) and thus are almost certainly the earliest surviving Christian writings. Although the book of Acts purports to provide considerable information regarding Paul and his activities, it was likely written more than half a century after the lifetime of Paul,⁴ and we have no idea what source or sources the author may have used. Indeed, much of the material appears to be simply extrapolations from what Paul himself wrote in his letters, modified and amplified to suit the theological and apologetic agendas of the author.⁵ Later Christian writings purport to provide additional information regarding Paul,⁶ but, as in the case of Acts, such information is of doubtful historical value; indeed, most of it is clearly legendary. Thus, it is to Paul's letters that we must look if we wish to understand the apostle and his thought.

Roughly speaking, Paul was a contemporary of Jesus. Although he apparently was living in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' presence there, he almost certainly did not know Jesus during the latter's lifetime. Initially, Paul was a zealous Jew who, in his own words, "was violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). Something happened, though, that transformed him into an equally zealous proclaimer of the faith he had attempted to destroy. In his letters, he speaks of this "something" only in rather cryptic terms: "Have I not seen the Lord?" (1 Cor 9:1), Christ "appeared to me" (1 Cor 15:8), and God "was pleased to reveal his Son to me" (Gal 1:15–16).⁷ During the two to three decades following this experience, Paul traveled extensively in Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece (known as Macedonia and Achaia in New Testament times) proclaiming the gospel of Christ and establishing churches. In his letter to the Romans, which may be his latest surviving letter, he indicates his intention to go to Rome and then, hopefully, to Spain. Although the evidence is hazy, he almost certainly was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed in

Rome sometime in the early 60s CE (perhaps during the emperor Nero's "persecution" of Christians in 64 CE). Despite legends to the contrary, it is doubtful that Paul ever went to Spain.

Paul has always been a controversial figure. His own letters make it clear that this was true during his lifetime. In 1 Corinthians, for example, he hints at conflict between himself and Cephas (one of the original apostles, also known as Peter) and Apollos (a charismatic preacher who had gained a following in Corinth). In 2 Corinthians, he refers sarcastically to "super-apostles" who are questioning his own credentials as an apostle. In Galatians, he rails against people who are insisting that Christ-believers must also adhere to at least some of the provisions of the Jewish Torah ("Law"); here, he goes so far as to suggest that those who insist on circumcision for Gentile members of the church should go all the way and castrate themselves (Gal 5:12). Repeatedly, Paul insists, despite opinions to the contrary, that he is an "apostle" (that is, an authorized spokesperson for the Christian faith).⁸

Paul continued to be a controversial figure after his death. For example, the second-century "heretic" Marcion regarded him as the *only* true apostle of Christ, insisting that all of the other apostles had misunderstood Christ and his message.* At the other extreme, certain Jewish-Christians branded him "Satan's Apostle," maintaining that he had corrupted the original message of Jesus.⁹ It appears that the book of Acts was intended, at least in part, to show that neither of these characterizations of Paul was accurate—that he was indeed a great Christian missionary but that he not only was in complete accord with the original apostles but was, in fact, subordinate to them.

The debate regarding Paul continues even into modern times. Some have asserted that Paul transformed Jesus' simple message of loving God and loving one's neighbor into an elaborate mythological drama of cosmic salvation, from the religion of Jesus into

*Marcion was a charismatic figure who not only regarded Paul as the only true apostle but also drew a distinction between the creator God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the redeemer God and Father of Jesus and accepted only ten letters of Paul and a version of the Gospel of Luke (different from what became the canonical gospel) as Scripture.

a religion *about* Jesus,¹⁰ while others have insisted that he simply spelled out the post-resurrection implications of Jesus' message and activity.¹¹ Today, some maintain that Paul was misogynistic and/or homophobic, while others see him as radically egalitarian; some maintain that he was anti-Semitic, while others see him as a devout Jew who never rejected his Jewish heritage, faith, and practice; and the list goes on and on.

When people learn that I am a retired university professor, they typically ask me, "What did you teach?" When I tell them that I taught religion, they sometimes ask me what my specific area was within the study of religion. When I mention the letters of Paul, I often get an immediate response something like this: "Oh, I don't like Paul!" Sometimes this is said somewhat apologetically, the idea apparently being, "I know I *ought* to like Paul, but I just *don't*." At other times, however, it is said quite belligerently, with the implied question, why in the world would you want to study *that man's* letters? When I ask these people *why* they don't like Paul, I get a variety of answers. Some are quite *specific*: he accepted the institution of slavery; he called for unquestioning obedience to civil authorities; he was homophobic, misogynistic, and/or anti-Semitic. Others are more *general*: he was narrow-minded, prejudiced, stubborn, dogmatic, and/or obtuse; he was too different from Jesus; or simply, "I don't know *why*, but I just don't like him." The bottom line appears to be that Paul is simply not a "warm, fuzzy" apostle!

I am convinced, however, that some of the animosity toward Paul stems from the fact that, if people are reading Paul's letters at all, they are not reading them carefully enough, they are interpreting them on the basis of certain preconceived notions about Paul, they are not taking into account the cultural context in which the letters were written, and/or they are unaware of some of the conclusions of modern scholarship regarding the letters. I suggest, therefore, that a careful reading of the letters—without presuppositions insofar as this is possible and in the light of both the cultural context of the letters and the conclusions of modern scholarship—will uncover a number of surprises and that some of these surprises may help not only in reducing or perhaps even

eliminating some of the animosity toward Paul but also in resolving certain of the controversies regarding Paul and his letters.

This book is not intended, however, as an apology for Paul (indeed, it is possible that some of the material in the book may make him *less* rather than *more* likeable). My purpose is simply to call attention to a few of the surprises that a careful, scholarly reading of his letters reveals and thus, hopefully, to present a more accurate picture of Paul and his letters than has typically been assumed. I could have included some other surprises. For example, I could have written chapters entitled “Paul on the Kingdom of God” (unlike Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, he says *very* little about it), “Paul on Judaism” (he *never* rejects his Jewish heritage, *always* regards himself as a devout Jew, and insists that “all Israel will be saved”), or “Paul on the Conduct of Christian Worship” (for example, he not only accepts the practice of “speaking in tongues” but even declares that he can do it better than anyone else). The surprises I have selected for inclusion, however, are ones that I regard as both interesting and important.

In the Introduction, I shall offer some preliminary observations that I regard as crucial for a proper understanding of the letters of Paul. There may well be some surprises there. In the chapters that follow, I shall discuss ten of what I regard as the most interesting and important surprises relating to Paul’s letters. And so, I invite the reader to be prepared for some surprises from Paul.

Introduction

SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Before looking at some surprises from Paul, it is important to bear in mind certain preliminary observations about Paul's letters in general. Some of these observations may themselves come as a surprise, and if so, they will fit comfortably under the heading, "Some Surprises from the Apostle Paul." One or two of the observations, however, are so obvious that it might appear unnecessary even to mention them. Nevertheless, all of these observations—and their implications—are important for understanding Paul's letters.

Preliminary Observation One

- The letters of Paul were not written for us.

The first preliminary observation clearly comes under the heading of the obvious, and it was articulated beautifully a number of years ago in the comic strip *Peanuts*. Charlie Brown encounters Linus, who is wearing a coat and tie and holding a book in his hand. Charlie Brown asks Linus, "Where have you been?" Linus replies, "Church school. We've been studying the letters of the Apostle Paul." Charlie Brown observes, "That should be interesting." Linus responds, "It is, although I must admit it makes me feel a little guilty. I always feel like I'm reading someone else's mail." And Linus was right! When we read Paul's letters, we *are* reading someone else's mail. Thus, the first preliminary observation is this: The letters of Paul were not written for us, nor were they written for people like us. Although this observation is obvious, some of its implications for understanding the letters are often overlooked.

The letters of Paul were written almost two thousand years ago, on the other side of the globe, in a foreign language, to people whose worldview and general outlook on life were quite different from ours. There is a huge gap—we might even say a chasm—between us and Paul’s letters, and it is not just a chronological, geographical, and linguistic gap; it is also a scientific, philosophical, and cultural gap.

Most of us are well aware of the chronological and geographical gap, but it may be that the linguistic gap is often not taken seriously enough. Paul’s letters were not written in English; they were written in Greek—not modern Greek but the *koinē* or “common” Greek that was the *lingua franca* of the eastern part of the Roman Empire in the first century (and the difference between this Greek and modern Greek is at least as great as the difference between the English of William Shakespeare and modern English). Most people must read Paul’s letters in translation, and this means that they are not actually reading *Paul’s letters*; what they are reading is somebody’s *translation* of Paul’s letters. And translation is, of course, a highly subjective and inexact undertaking; it is an art, not a science. One can never be certain how best to render the ancient idiom in the current vernacular, and this means that translation is always and inevitably an *interpretation*. Even those of us who can read *koinē* Greek are actually translating the letters from Greek into English—and thus interpreting them—in our own minds because Greek is not our native language and we don’t actually *think* in Greek, at least not in any native and spontaneous way. In short, we simply have no immediate and direct access to Paul’s letters in the way the original recipients of these letters did. We encounter the letters only through someone’s (either our own or someone else’s) translation—that is, interpretation—of them. Therefore, the linguistic gap between us and the letters is really quite formidable! And, incidentally, this is why it is a good idea to consult more than one translation when reading Paul’s letters. This at least provides more than just *one* translation/interpretation of the Greek.

It is also important to note the scientific, philosophical, and cultural gap. There are many aspects of this gap, but one is par-

ticularly important. It was the German scholar Rudolf Bultmann* who, more than seven decades ago, most pointedly called it to the attention of scholars and, eventually, to many educated lay-people. According to Bultmann, the New Testament documents (including Paul's letters) presuppose, reflect, and express what he called an ancient "mythological" worldview—a worldview that is radically different from what he termed the modern "scientific" worldview. The major difference between the two worldviews is that the modern scientific worldview assumes a *natural* cause for everything that happens while the ancient mythological worldview is open to the possibility and even the likelihood of *supernatural* causes. This means that, for the mythological worldview, such things as angelic visitations, possession by demons, virgin births, miraculous healings, resuscitations from the dead, and the like might be unusual and even surprising, but they certainly were not thought of as impossible or contrary to the laws of nature. But for most of us, with our scientific worldview, things are different. For example, most of us would be more than a little surprised if we were to open our newspaper and see a headline reading, "God Smites Wicked City with Hurricane." But for the writers of the New Testament this would not be a problem at all, because for them the universe was open and susceptible to just such supernatural interventions. In other words, most modern people simply do not understand the workings of the universe in the same way that the ancient writers of the New Testament did. Thus, if we are to understand and respond positively to the message of the New Testament, we must recognize this fact and somehow get beyond (or behind) what Bultmann called the mythological framework of the New Testament to the real heart of the gospel. In short, the New Testament must be "demythologized" if it is to be meaningful, believable, and compelling in the modern world. For Bultmann, however, demythologizing the New Testament did not mean *eliminating* the mythological features of the New Testament; it meant *interpreting* them. Bultmann's question was this: How

*Bultmann (1884–1976) is generally regarded as the leading New Testament scholar of the twentieth century.

can *we*, in terms of *our* worldview, say the same things that *they*, in terms of *their* worldview, were attempting to say? And he was convinced that the mythological elements in the New Testament could in fact be demythologized. For example, the “virgin birth” of Jesus could be viewed not as a biological statement about how Mary became pregnant but rather as an existential statement about the unique significance of Jesus.¹

Regardless of what we may think about Bultmann and demythologizing, however, we must keep in mind the fact that Paul’s letters were not written for us or even for people like us: there is a huge gap between us and the letters—a chronological, geographical, linguistic, scientific, philosophical, and cultural gap. This means that if we are even to begin to understand these letters, we must recognize the gap and make a serious attempt to bridge it.

Preliminary Observation Two

- The letters of Paul are genuine letters.

The second preliminary observation is almost as obvious as the first, and it is this: the letters of Paul are genuine letters. They are not sermons or essays or philosophical treatises. They represent genuine correspondence between Paul and first-century Christ-believers from whom he was physically separated and with whom he wished to communicate. They were written to address specific questions, concerns, problems, opportunities, and other circumstances that had arisen in the churches and that Paul felt needed his attention. For this reason, they are often referred to as “occasional letters”—letters composed for certain very specific occasions in the lives of these first-century Christians.* They can also be characterized as “stop-gap” letters: they were intended to serve simply as a substitute for Paul’s physical presence—to address matters in a preliminary way pending Paul’s arrival at some point in the (hopefully near) future.

An important corollary of this observation is that, as letters, they represent *only one side* of a dialogue between Paul

*It is not clear when the terms “Christian” was first used, and its use here may be anachronistic. Nevertheless, I am using it (and “non-Christian”) simply for the sake of convenience.

and his intended readers or hearers. They tell us what *Paul* has to say about the matters at hand, but at best they only *hint* at what the recipients may have been thinking, saying, or doing. In other words, Paul is responding to situations and circumstances about which we have little or no independent knowledge, and this makes it difficult for us to understand much of that he says. More than forty years ago, Colin M. Morris wrote a book entitled *Epistles to the Apostle*, with the subtitle *Tarsus—Please Forward*.² In this book, Morris composed letters that he supposed might have come to Paul from the various churches to which he wrote. He attempted to surmise what the specific questions, problems, or other circumstances might have been that prompted Paul to write his letters. It is a fascinating book, but for the most part it is pure guesswork. We simply do not know for certain what was going on in the churches to which Paul wrote his letters, or what was going on in the minds of individual Christians within these churches. We cannot be certain just what it was that Paul was responding to when he wrote the letters. And Paul himself might not have completely or accurately understood what was going on in the churches to which he wrote. All we really have is what Paul wrote. And because we do not have the other side of the dialogue, much of what Paul said is simply not clear to us today.

The fact that the letters of Paul are genuine *letters* also has a second corollary: these letters do not provide us with what we might call Paul's "systematic theology"—not even when we look at all of them. They do not give us an overall view of Paul's assumptions and beliefs—one that is comprehensive and logically consistent, something like John Calvin's *Institutes* or St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. The letters address only those topics that Paul regards as germane to the issues immediately at hand, and they do so in ways that are rhetorically crafted to elicit some specified or implied response on the part of the readers. In short, the letters of Paul are real letters, written to first-century Christians in the Roman Empire, addressing specific questions, concerns, issues, and circumstances in first-century churches, and they must be read and understood as such.

A third corollary of the fact that these are real letters is that they were not all written (or dictated) at the same time; the time

span from the earliest (almost certainly 1 Thessalonians) to the latest (perhaps Romans) is probably almost a full decade. And it appears that Paul's own views may have changed or developed during these years as he encountered different situations, underwent different experiences, and/or simply thought more deeply about certain matters. This is probably true, for example, with regard to his eschatology: in 1 Thessalonians, he obviously expects the return of Jesus within his own lifetime; in Philippians, however, he appears to be wrestling with the possibility or even likelihood that he will not live to see this happen.³ And the same may be true regarding other aspects of his thought. Thus, it appears that Paul's thought *developed and was shaped* in large part as a response to the various circumstances, issues, and problems that he and the churches faced.

Preliminary Observation Three

- Paul's letters were not intended to be scripture.

The third preliminary observation about Paul's letters may be a little less obvious than the first two, but it follows from the first two and is no less certain. It is this: *Paul's letters were not intended to be scripture*. For Paul, as for the first Christians generally, "scripture" meant the Hebrew scriptures—what Christians now call "the Old Testament." It was only later that letters attributed to Paul, four of the numerous gospels that were in existence, and certain other early Christian writings came to be regarded as scripture. Furthermore, like other Christians of his day, Paul expected the return of Christ—if not immediately, certainly in the relatively near future. Thus, he certainly had no intimation that people would be reading and talking about his letters two thousand years later. Paul was writing for Christians *of his own day*—addressing *their* questions, problems, and concerns. He was *not* writing for us. This does not mean, of course, that we cannot read Paul's letters with great benefit—that we cannot at times find that we are in fact addressed by what Paul has written. But this was not what Paul himself had in mind when he wrote the letters. He was writing *letters* for his own time, not *scripture* for all time.

Preliminary Observation Four

- We do not have all of the letters that Paul wrote.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth preliminary observations are less obvious than the first three, and they involve some rather technical aspects of New Testament scholarship. The fourth observation is this: *we do not have all of the letters that Paul wrote*. It would probably be safe to assume this, simply on *a priori* grounds, but such an assumption is not necessary. In 1 Cor 5:9, Paul says, “I wrote to you in the letter not to associate with immoral people.” He then goes on in verses 10 and 11 to clarify what he had written—explaining that the “immoral people” he had in mind were people who called themselves “Christians,” not non-Christians. In other words, before Paul wrote what we know as 1 Corinthians, he had written an earlier letter to the Christians in Corinth. This letter has not survived, and we have no idea what became of it.⁴ We also have no idea how many other letters Paul may have written that have not been preserved, nor do we know what became of these letters. They may even have been intentionally destroyed by people who found their contents in some way problematic. We have no idea what these other letters might have said, and we have no way of knowing whether, or to what extent, knowledge of these other letters might change our understanding of Paul and his thought. But the simple truth is that Paul wrote at least one letter that has not survived—and almost certainly more, perhaps many more. We have only *part* of Paul’s correspondence with first-century Christians.

Preliminary Observation Five

- Some letters attributed to Paul were probably not written by him.

The fifth preliminary observation is in a way the opposite of the fourth. Number four was that we do not have all of Paul’s letters. And number five is this: some of the letters attributed to Paul that we do have were probably not written by Paul. What we are talking about here is called “pseudonymity”—writing under a false name, a pseudonym. This was a rather common practice in ancient times. We have examples of it from the Greeks, the Romans,

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