

A “THEOLOGY” OF THE SPIRIT? THE SPIRIT IN PAULINE THEOLOGY

Our theology and experience of the Spirit must be more interwoven if our experienced life of the Spirit is to be more effective.

I well remember my graduate theology professor declaring emphatically: “*Everyone* has a theology [that is, some rudimentary view of God and the world on the basis of which they live]; the question is not *whether* you have a theology—you do—but whether you have a *good* one.”

Without apology, therefore, this is primarily a book on Paul’s *theology*, that is, how Paul understood God and his ways, and the role of the Spirit in that theology. For some, of course, a “theology” book on the Spirit is the kiss of death; and in many ways I am in that camp. But we lack a better word; and in the final analysis, the health of the contemporary church necessitates that its *theology* of the Spirit and its *experience* of the Spirit correspond much more closely than they have in much of the past.

Ordinarily theology has to do with a studied, reflective understanding of things divine, dealing with how the various matters we believe about God and God’s ways can be put into a coherent whole. But we do not find Paul reflecting on the Holy Spirit, any more than we find him reflecting on the significance of the Lord’s Table or on the relationships within the Godhead, which he

presupposes and which tantalizingly pop out here and there. As often happens with such foundational matters, we rarely look at them reflectively. They are simply part of the stuff of ongoing life; and what we say about them is often offhanded, matter-of-fact, and without argument or explanation.

Yet theology is what Paul is doing all the time. Rather than the reflective theology of the scholar or classroom, his is a “task theology,” the theologizing that takes place in the marketplace, where belief and the experience of God run head-on into the thought systems, religions, and everyday life of people in the Greco-Roman world at the beginning of the second half of the first century. Paul’s task theology is the more complex because it takes place in a racially and socially diverse environment. In part, therefore, the issues raised for Paul have to do with what the God of the Jews (the one and only God) was doing in history through Christ and the Spirit, which for Paul transpired within a primarily Gentile context.

Into this kind of setting Paul came preaching, experiencing, rethinking, and restating old and new truths, as he wrestled with what it meant for Jew and Gentile together to be the one people of God. In the process he was constantly “doing” theology, grappling with how the gospel works—and works out—in this new context that was so radically different from the more insular Jewish world in which the gospel first appeared in history.

Our present concern in this reading of Paul is with what he *says* about the Spirit, since his words are our primary window into his understanding. But we need to do more than just gather all the passages and test them against some set of doctrinal assumptions, for in the case of the Spirit we are dealing with the essential matter of early Christian *experience*. The only worthwhile theology, after all, is one that is translated into life; and Paul’s understanding of the Spirit is ultimately a matter of lived-out faith. The experience of the Spirit was how the early believers came to receive the salvation that Christ had brought, and how they came to understand themselves as living at the beginning of the end times. For them, the Spirit was both the evidence that God’s great future for his people had already made its way into the present and the guarantee that God would conclude what he had begun in Christ

(= Paul's eschatological framework). Thus the Spirit is foundational to their entire *experience* and *understanding* of their present life in Christ.

My concern is that we come to terms both with the experienced realities and with Paul's understanding of them, as much as we can do that fairly and with integrity.

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY WITH THE PAST

One of the primary issues in Pauline theology is that of continuity and discontinuity between the old covenant and the new—that is, between God's word to Israel, communicated by prophet and poet, and God's new word to his people through Christ Jesus, communicated by apostles and teachers. We read the letters of Paul as part of the New Testament, the record of God's new covenant with his people, effected through Christ and the Spirit. But in fact Paul did not know he was contributing to such a "new testament." For him the "new covenant" was not a written record at all but a historical reality, experienced anew at the Table of the Lord and realized on an everyday basis through the presence of the Spirit. The question then is, How is the new related to the old? Does it *supersede*, as a truly *new* covenant? Or does it *fulfill*, and in so doing carry with it much of what was there before? In order to understand Paul properly we must grasp how his perspective both continues and modifies the religious tradition in which he was reared, especially his understanding of his Old Testament roots.

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First, we must recognize his own sense of continuity with his heritage. Paul sees himself and his churches as being in a direct line with the people of God in the Old Testament; and despite his deep convictions about the radical implications of the coming of Christ and the Spirit, he regularly reaffirms that continuity. He includes a primarily Gentile church in the events of the exodus: “all *our* forefathers were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:1–2). To Gentiles who were in danger of submitting to circumcision he not only appeals to Abraham and the promises of the old covenant, but also asks frankly, “Tell me, you who wish to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” and then expounds the “true meaning” of Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, in light of Christ and the Spirit (Gal 4:21–31). Paul never speaks of a “new Israel” or “new people of God”; his language is “God’s Israel” (Gal 6:16), an *Israel* in continuation with the past but now composed of Jew and Gentile alike as the one people of God.

But just as clearly, there is significant discontinuity. The people of God have now been newly formed. Christ is the “goal of the law” (Rom 10:4), and the Spirit is “the promised Holy Spirit” (Gal 3:14; Eph 1:13). Christ’s death and resurrection have brought an end to Torah observance (living on the basis of the Old Testament law, Rom 7:4–6; 8:2–3); being led by the Spirit has replaced observance as God’s way of fulfilling Torah (Gal 5:18); indeed, the righteous requirement of Torah is now fulfilled in those who walk in/by the Spirit (Rom 8:4).

The Holy Spirit was an essential part of Israel’s promised future. For Paul the gift of “the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13) is the certain evidence that the future has already been set in motion. To see how the promise has been fulfilled by the Spirit, and how that affected the early church’s self-understanding, is part of the invitation to this fresh reading of Paul.

Since the Spirit plays this integral role in fulfilling the promised new covenant, it would be fitting to include a chapter in this book on the Pauline antecedents,¹ that is, on the role of the Spirit in the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism. Rather than do that, I have chosen to show throughout the book what their expectations looked like and how Paul understands the Spirit as fulfilling them.

FINDING THE ELUSIVE CENTER

A final introductory word concerns the long debate in scholarship as to what constitutes the “heart” of Paul’s theology.² The traditional view, fostered by the Reformers and perpetuated by generations of Protestants, is that “justification by faith” is the key to that theology. This view emphasizes Christ’s historical saving act on our behalf and our realization of it through faith. The inadequacy of this view is that it focuses on one metaphor of salvation, justification, to the exclusion of others.³ Such a focus fails to throw the net broadly enough to capture all of Paul’s theological concerns.

In response to this, others found as the center Paul’s “mystical experience of being *in Christ*.”⁴ This view shifted the focus from Christ’s historical work and its appropriation by the believer to the believer’s (especially Paul’s) ongoing experience of Christ. While in some ways this view served as a corrective to the traditional one, most contemporary Pauline scholars have recognized that both these approaches are somewhat limiting. The frequent result, however, has been to emphasize the diversity and “contingency”⁵ of Paul’s letters to such an extent that many scholars, reflecting contemporary postmodernism, despair of ever finding a genuine center to Pauline theology—or even of finding coherence in his theology at all.

I bring two convictions to these matters regarding Pauline theology. First, I am convinced that there is a stable core to Paul’s understanding of Christ and the Spirit, much of which he presupposes, based on his sense of continuity with the old, and all of which can be found in what he simply calls “the gospel.” For him there was a fundamental core content to the gospel—a content held in common with all other early Christians (see, e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–3, 11). The seeming variations in Paul’s theology, as I understand them, have to do with his working through the implications of that common content for the Gentile mission, to which he devoted the last two decades of his life.

Second, and in keeping with some of the present mood, I am convinced that the center is so elusive because the basic core of

Paul's theology covers too much ground for one to simplify it into a single phrase. It would seem far better for us to isolate the essential elements of his theology that lie at the heart of matters for Paul and around which all other concerns cluster. In my view, at least four elements are essential:


- The *church* as an eschatological community (that is, a community living in the “beginning of the end times”) made up of the new covenant people of God.
- The *eschatological framework* of this new people's existence and thinking.
- The formation of God's new people by the eschatological *salvation* accomplished through the *death and resurrection of Christ*.
- The focus of this people on *Jesus* as Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

To put this another way:

- The *foundation*: A gracious and merciful God, who is full of love toward all.
- The *framework*: The fulfillment of God's promises as already begun but not yet completed.
- The *focus*: Jesus, the Son of God, who as God's suffering servant Messiah accomplished eschatological salvation for humanity through his death and resurrection, and who is now the exalted Lord and coming King.
- The *fruit*: The church as an eschatological community, who, formed as a people by Christ's death and the gift of the Spirit, and thus restored into God's likeness, becomes God's new covenant people.

If this is a correct assessment of Paul's perspective (and indeed that of the rest of the New Testament), then we might further distill all of this. On the one hand, as will be pointed out in chapter 5, it seems impossible to understand Paul without recognizing *eschatology* as the essential framework of all his theological thinking; on the other hand, *salvation in Christ* is the essential

concern within that framework. Salvation is “eschatological” in the sense that final salvation, which still awaits the believer, is already a present reality through Christ and the Spirit. It is “in Christ” in the sense that what originated in God was effected historically by


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the death and resurrection of Christ, and is received and experienced by God’s people through the work of the Holy Spirit—who is also the key to Christian life “between the times,” until the final consummation at Christ’s *parousia* (“coming”).

It does not take much reflection to recognize that apart from the actual focus on Jesus Christ as Messiah, Lord, and Savior, the Spirit is a crucial ingredient to each of these aspects of the Pauline center. Thus my conviction

that the Spirit stands near the center of things for Paul, as part of the fundamental core of his understanding of the gospel. The experience of the Spirit is the key to his already/not yet eschatological framework; the Spirit is the essential player in the believers’ experiencing and living out the salvation that God has brought about in Christ; the Spirit both forms the church into God’s new (eschatological) people and conforms them into Christ’s image through his fruit in their lives; and the Spirit gifts them in worship to edify and encourage one another in their ongoing life in the world. It is fair to say that “Paul’s entire theology without the supporting pinion of the Spirit would crumble into ruins.”⁶

Finally, I must note that the aim of all this is not simply informational. I would be less than honest if I did not admit to trying to persuade. But persuasion in this case is not a matter of being right or wrong. My ultimate concern, for myself and for the contemporary church, is that we return to our biblical roots on this matter if the church is going to count for anything in the new millennium that lies just around the corner.

NOTES

1. Which is precisely what I did as an appendix in *GEP*, 904–15.

2. For a helpful overview of this debate, especially in its more recent expressions, see J. Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1989) 461–78.

3. “Justification” is a term drawn from the law courts. It is a natural metaphor to use when the Jewish law is in purview; indeed, it is used almost exclusively in such settings. Elsewhere Paul uses a variety of metaphors, drawn from a variety of social settings: for example, redemption (in the context of slavery), adoption (a family metaphor; see ch. 6 below), propitiation (taken from the sacrificial system), washing (also from Jewish religious practices), reconciliation (in the context of enmity between persons).

4. See *GEP*, 12, n. 13.

5. At issue for many is the relationship of coherence and contingency in trying to reconstruct Pauline theology. That is, can one extrapolate a coherent theological core from Paul’s letters to serve as a kind of Pauline “systematic” theology? Or does the ad hoc nature of the letters, which means that the theology is always being expressed in the contingency of that historically specific situation, preclude finding such coherence?

6. C. Pinnock, “The Concept of Spirit in the Epistles of Paul” (Ph.D. dissertation; Manchester, 1963) 2; cf. S. Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 203: “Paul’s doctrine of the Spirit is far more central and characteristic than his doctrine of justification by faith.”