

In full accord: Paul's social gospel

by [Nicholas Thomas Wright](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue



Valentin de Boulogne or Nicolas Tournier, *Saint Paul Writing His Epistles* (c. 16th century).

On June 2, 1953, the day England's Queen Elizabeth II was crowned, my parents gave to my sister and me a Bible each. It was a small but fat King James Version; that's the only Bible we knew in our church at that time. My sister, a year older than me, could read reasonably well; I had just learned to do so. I remember the two of us sitting on the floor, leafing through this great fat book and being rather appalled at the size of it. (It was quite a step up from *Thomas the Tank Engine*.) We had a feeling we should read something from it but didn't really know what. So, having searched through the apparently endless books of Kings and Chronicles as well as the Gospels and Acts, we came to one much shorter book, and we decided we'd read that. It was the first time I'd ever read anything in the Bible, let alone a whole book right through. And the book we chose was the letter to Philemon.

Philemon is a great place to start. Few works in Pauline theology, I think, start with Philemon. But perhaps we should. The little letter to Philemon gives us a bird's-eye view of what's going on throughout Paul.

Consider the situation. Here we have a slave and a master, who in anybody else's worldview in the first century would be pulled apart by the social and cultural forces which insisted that they remain in separate compartments. And Paul brokers a new kind of deal, the vulnerable deal by which the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon is to be restored. Onesimus has to go back to Philemon, not unlike the prodigal son going back to face his father. Paul is sending him back to where the trouble had happened. But Onesimus will not go back jauntily, with his head held high and a smirk on his face, saying "Paul says you've got to set me free—ha, ha, ha!" No, this is a deeply serious and vulnerable moment, and Paul wants Philemon to know just how serious this is for both of them.

The way Paul writes that letter is magnificent as a piece of practical theology. He stretches out one hand and embraces Onesimus: "Here he is, he's my child, my very heart. I've become a father to him in my imprisonment. I'd much rather keep him with me, but I really have to send him back." Next he stretches out the other hand and embraces Philemon: "You are my partner, my fellow worker, we're in this together—and by the way, remember you owe me everything." Then, standing there with outstretched arms, he says to Philemon: "If he owes you anything, put it down on my account."

In this letter, Paul does not mention the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But it is the cross of Jesus Christ, exemplified and embodied in Paul's ministry, that is bringing the master and the slave together. Paul is doing the unthinkable, bringing about what he says in Galatians 3 close-up, sharp and personal: in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, no male and female. This is what it means in practice. The cross is the place where the irreconcilable can be reconciled.

And if you start there, you have to ask, as a historian: what on earth is going on? Nobody else in the ancient world thought you could do that kind of thing. There are hints of the answer throughout the letter: there is a special, different God at work, not like the gods of the empire who dominated the horizon and believed in keeping the social structure of the world exactly as it was so that slaves had to stay as slaves—and if they tried to have it otherwise, they might get crucified. Rather, this is the God who sets slaves free; this is the God of the exodus, at work in a new way. This is the God who says, "I have heard the cry of my people, and I've come to do what I promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: to set the slaves free." And he does it through being crucified.

If you want the theology underlying the letter to Philemon, look at 2 Corinthians 5:11–21, which reaches its climax in that final verse: God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become, might embody, the covenant faithfulness of God.

When you go to the shelves and pick a volume on Pauline theology, chances are there will be a chapter on the church, but it will probably come toward the back of the book. When the writer has exhausted the topics of God, humans, sin, salvation, Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, the Spirit and so on you may finally get to a chapter on the church. And within that, as one subsection among many, perhaps you will find "the unity of the church," with an exploration of Paul's different metaphors—the body of Christ, the new temple and so on. I think that is just a projection onto Paul of certain types of Western Protestant thinking. When we read Paul in his own terms, we find that for him the one, single community is absolutely central. The community of Christ, in Christ, by the Spirit, is at the very heart of it all.

I love the doctrine of justification. It is hugely important. But it really occurs only in Romans and Galatians, with little flickers elsewhere. Wherever you look in Paul's letters, however, you see him arguing for and passionately working for the unity of the church. We've seen it, up close and personal, in Philemon. In Galatians the real thrust of the letter is that Jewish Christians and gentile Christians should sit at the same table together. That's not incidental; it's the main point of the argument. And in 1 Corinthians, of course, the unity of the church is one of the letter's main themes—all through, not just in chapter 12. "Is Christ divided? Of course not." The exposition builds to the picture of the single body with many members in chapter 12. Then, in case you wondered how that could happen, Paul writes a majestic poem on agape, or love. In 1 Corinthians 14, we see what that must look like in the worshiping life of the church; God is the God not of chaos but of order. And in chapter 15, all of this is rooted in the gospel which speaks of new creation, of the kingdom of God, because of the resurrection of Jesus himself from the dead.

Then, in Philippians, the question is raised: How are you going to "let your public life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 27)? The answer, in chapter 2: "Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (v. 2). In a group of three or four? Have you ever tried it in a group of 15 or 20? In a group of a thousand or more? It is very difficult. Don't imagine it was any easier in the first century. But don't imagine that just because we all find it difficult we can go soft on this central imperative. Rather, recognize that the only way to do

it is through what Paul says next:

Let this mind be in you, which you have in the Messiah, Jesus: he was in the form of God, but didn't regard his equality with God as something to exploit, but emptied himself, becoming obedient to death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the father. (Phil. 2:5-11)

There's the secret, the living heart of this new, revolutionary way of being human. That's why Paul can at once go on to urge: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in a dark world among whom you shine like lights" (vv. 14-15). You see the point: the unity of the church, the new way of humble unity lived out by the followers of Jesus, is to be the sign to the church that there is a different way of being human.

Or we could consider the letter to the Ephesians. The unity of Jew and gentile in Christ (Eph. 2:11-21) is the direct outflowing of that exposition of justification in verses 1-10. Then in chapter 3 this explodes in the glorious truth that through the church, the multicolored, many-tongued family, the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. It is the fact of a new family that declares to Caesar that he doesn't run the show any more, because Jesus Christ runs it instead. It is the fact of a new, single, united family that tells the powers of the world that Israel's God is God, that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. As long as we continue to collude with things that no Paulinist should ever collude with—fragmentation, petty squabbles, divisions over this or that small point of doctrine—the powers can fold their arms and watch us having our little fun while they still run the show. But when there actually is one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4), then the powers are called to account, and they will know it. Something new has happened, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And there's a cost, the cost of being different. That's why we have the challenge of marriage in Ephesians 5, in which the coming together of male and female—and what a challenge that always has been, and still is—symbolizes once more the coming together of Jew and gentile as well as heaven and earth. That is why it's so important that in our generation we struggle again for the sanctity and vitality of

marriage, not for the sake of maintaining a few outmoded ethical concepts and taboos but because this is built deep into creation itself, now to be renewed in Christ and the Spirit.

Then consider the ecumenical imperative in Romans itself. Those who have lectured or preached on Romans know what happens: you have the schedule organized, you know how you want it to go, yet somehow the exposition of the first eight chapters eats up the time allotted for chapters 9–11, and when you've dealt with those chapters in turn you hardly have any time left for chapters 12–16. But chapters 14–15 contain some of the most profound teaching anywhere in scripture on the unity of the church and how to maintain it. It isn't a detached topic; it grows directly out of all that has gone before in this letter. The hard-won, complex unity of the church, which results in the church's glorifying the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one heart and voice: that's what it's all about. Romans 15:7–13 is the climax of the letter's theological exposition, and it insists on the united worship of the multicultural church as the ultimate aim of the gospel. That is the heart of Paul's ecclesiology.

And it's a new-temple ecclesiology. You are the temple of the living God; that's in 1 Corinthians 3 and 6 and in Romans 8 too, where the indwelling of the Spirit has the same temple resonance, though it's not usually noticed. Similarly, in Colossians 1:27: in saying "Christ in you, the hope of glory," Paul doesn't just mean my individual hope of glory and your individual hope of glory. The you is plural in any case, but the point goes further than simply stressing that this is more than a sum total of individuals. Look at it like this: God intends to flood the whole cosmos with his glory. There is coming a time when the most Spirit-filled person among us will be just a pale shadow of what God intends to do for the entire world. But that is anticipated when a roomful of people in Colossae, a dozen or two in Ephesus, maybe 50 or so in Rome, are worshiping and praying in the Spirit: this is a sign of the time that is to come when the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. The Messiah is in you, now, as the sign of the hope of glory for all creation. That is the point which flows directly from Romans 1:15–20 and the remarkable verse 23, where every creature under heaven has already heard the word.

We are therefore the people of the renewed covenant, the line that runs from Deuteronomy and Jeremiah to the New Testament. Deuteronomy has a forward look; the covenant is not an abstract, steady state constitution. You are a people whose

story is going somewhere, but where? If you disobey the covenant, you will go into exile; that's the warning of Deuteronomy 28–29. But when you're in exile, if you return to the Lord with all your heart and soul, he will circumcise your heart so that you can love him with all your heart. And then will come to pass the promise that the word will be not far from you, up in heaven or across the sea, but "very near" to you, on your lips and in your heart, so that you can do it. People won't say, "This covenant is so difficult for us to keep; how can we possibly do it?" No: the word will be near you, in you and with you, so that you can do it.

Paul picks up exactly that: not just in Romans 10, where he quotes Deuteronomy 30 explicitly, but by implication in Galatians 3 and in Romans 2, 7 and 8: again and again, his message can be summed up as "You, the people of God in the Messiah, are the people of the renewed covenant." The long story of Israel, of Abraham and his family, has found its goal, its telos, at last. It has had its explosive fulfillment in Jesus as Messiah, the Christos: take away the idea of Jesus as Messiah, as some readers of Paul still try to do, as though "Christ" was simply a proper name, not a title—do that and you will never get the point. The Messiah is the one who sums up Israel in himself, so that what was true of Israel is true of him. Now the new covenant has been inaugurated, and the people who are in Christ discover that when they confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead, they are wearing the badges which say, "We are the people of this renewed covenant." They are in fact "doing the Torah" in the deepest sense that God always intended, that Deuteronomy always held out.

So what is God going to do? Is God going to scrap the whole Israel idea altogether? There's a swath of Western thought which has said that—has said in effect that since the first plan has gone wrong, God has decided to do something quite different, to send his own Son to die for sinners, so we can forget about all that Israel stuff. Not a bit of it. That is to misread Romans and to misunderstand Paul at his very heart. Instead, Paul declares in Romans 3:21 that God's covenant faithfulness has now been revealed through the faithfulness of the Messiah for the benefit of all those who are faithful. He, the Messiah, is "Israel in person." That's why faith is not an arbitrary badge of membership in the Messiah's people. We are to be the people marked out by *pistis*, "faith" or "faithfulness"—or better, both, because he himself is the faithful One, the one who embodied the covenant faithfulness of God by offering to God the covenant faithfulness of Israel. And we, in him, are to be known by our own answering *pistis*, faith, faithfulness.

So we return to Galatians, where all this comes back full circle. In Galatians 2, all who believe in Jesus the Messiah belong at the same table. This, then and now, is the challenge to the powers.

This is the full context of the doctrine of justification. God will put the world right one day. He has promised to do so. He has launched that project in Jesus Christ. How is he going to do it? Through human beings. Creation is longing for the revelation of the sons and daughters of God. Why? Because creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but of the will of him who created it; because creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, to share the liberty of the glory of the children of God. When the children of God are glorified, creation will give a huge sigh of relief and say, "I'm so glad you have all finally got your act together." Creation is longing to be wisely stewarded by the gentle, wise governance of human beings.

And therefore God puts human beings right, against the day when he will put the world right. Justification is designed not to take us out of the world but to qualify us to be God's putting-right people for the world. That's why between present justification and future justification comes the theology of justice. Unless we make those connections, we're not thinking Paul's thoughts after him. But how does that happen? It happens because God sends his Son as the faithful Israelite who takes the weight of the world's sin on himself in order, once it's been defeated and dealt with, to launch his new creation. That is how it works.

So the center of Paul's worldview, in terms of symbolism, is this community. It is about Philemon and Onesimus getting it together. It's about Euodia and Syntyche getting it together in Philippi. It's about Jew and gentile learning to sit at the same table in Antioch or Galatia. That is the center: the united community. But how can that community be generated and sustained? How can such a fellowship keep going, when living in a world from which the normal symbols that define the various constituent communities have been taken away? The only way this community can be sustained is through what we call theology. I believe that when we read Paul we are seeing the birth of a discipline which we now call Christian theology.

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