

The Jesus Movement Part IV: Paul

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”– Philippians 2: 5

In this continuation of his series of papers on ‘the Jesus Movement’, David Timbs recounts the basis of Paul’s conviction that the Jesus Movement would only achieve credibility, attract and hold outsiders if its members validated the Gospel message by the quality and congruence of their community life. For Paul, this meant that Christians needed to establish a revolutionary alternative community in which people would be welcomed, given a place of belonging, treated as human beings and embraced as sisters and brothers.

Humanity’s fall from grace in the Jewish tradition

Following his conversion and the early baptismal instruction he received, Paul of Tarsus did not develop his understanding of Christ in some kind of a vacuum. Paul the Jew thought about Jesus the Jew within the continuum of Israel’s history of Salvation and he began at the beginning.

In the Genesis narrative, the broken relationship between humanity and God is ascribed to the former’s pride which led to disobedience. The original relationship between Creator and humanity was ruptured when, in attempting to grasp equality with or to become greater than God, human beings became less than human.

Out of the ruins of this disaster of a shattered relationship, *loyalty*, one of the most commonly used qualities attributed to God in the Hebrew Scriptures was implied explicitly for the first time. God had now become not just God the Creator but God the restorer and the history of God’s reconciling and healing initiatives are spelt out in the Promise and Covenant narratives.

The Jewish understanding of the Covenant and the Law as divine guiding principles explains their key role in the establishment and maintenance of right-relationship between God and God’s people. The theology of Messianic redemption rooted in what has come to be called the *proto-Gospel* or God’s promise of hope and restoration to the human race. (Gen 3: 15)

Redemption and restoration in Jewish Salvation history were completely contingent upon Israel’s obedience to and observance of the Mosaic Law and its ancillary purity/separation laws. These provided the Jewish people with the necessary moral direction as well as clear symbols of identity. From around 200 BCE to 200 CE, Jewish sages and scribes provided detailed commentary on the Torah and a set of minor principles of compliance with its prescriptions. This is the *Oral Law*, eventually published in written form. It contains the 613 Rabbinic *Mitzvot* (the minor precepts) which make up the *Mishnah*.

Estrangement and restoration in Paul’s thought.

It was only natural that when Paul contemplated the Genesis account of humanity's rift with God he would go to the figure of *Adam* as the starting point for his theology of the rupture, reconciliation and restoration. Just as the first representative human being had brought about the disintegration of the original relationship with the Creator, it would be a second representative human being who would be instrumental in the work of reconciliation and restoration. For Paul, Christ, the second Adam, would accomplish through his humility and obedience the restoration of original harmony lost by the first Adam. Paul's *Adamic* theology is clearly evident in his letters to the Philippians, Corinthians and Romans.

When urging the Philippians to pattern their lives on Christ, Paul wrote:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2: 5-11)

It is obvious that Paul pictures a striking contrast between first Adam and the second: whereas the first human attempted to become greater than God and became less than human, the second freely chose the state of subservience; whereas the first Adam brought death upon humanity, the second Adam, even though not condemned to it, freely chose to identify with and embrace humanity in the worst of its degradation, and death. In that act of supreme selflessness and self-giving, the second re-established the original relationship with God shattered by Adam through disobedience and self-absorption. (1)

Paul's theological vision focuses sharply on the human state as God intended in the beginning and how that changed dramatically when humanity failed God's creative will. In 1 Corinthians Paul wrote:

“Thus it is written, the first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust (fragmented, alienated humanity); the second man is from heaven (humanity restored). As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.” (1 Cor 15: 45-49; 2 Cor 3: 18)

Right relationship broken, relationship restored

Augustine on Sin

With this context in mind, it is important to examine what Paul means by “sin” when he speaks of human fragmentation and estrangement from God. This has clear implications for a critical understanding of the Augustinian theory of Original Sin. After his conversion to Christianity, Augustine came under the influence of *Neo-Platonism* with its affirmation of the superiority of perfect spiritual forms, beauty and truth and its inherent distrust of created

materiality. It was relatively simple for Augustine to explain the “sin” and “fall” of the first humans as effecting an hereditary, congenital tendency towards evil, from the moment of conception. For Augustine, sin implied fundamental *imperfection* which caused alienation from God the *perfect* Being. In contemporary systems terminology, human beings, after ‘the Fall’ became *hard-wired* for sin.

Augustine theology of ‘original sin’ was and remains an hypothesis constructed on a very literal reading of the Genesis text and filtered through a combination of the Neo-Platonist category of ‘perfect forms’ and the freewheeling ‘typological’ method of textual interpretation favoured by the Fathers of the Church. His hypothesis has been elevated to almost benchmark status and enshrined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as the standard doctrinal position of the *Magisterium*. With that kind of official endorsement, many commentators believe, with reason, that it continues to cause enormous damage to the collective Catholic psyche and imagination as well as infantilising and domesticating the Church’s teaching and preaching. It is probably much more convenient for the *Magisterium* to favour the familiar Augustinian hypothesis of ‘the Fall’ because the alternative would most certainly have fundamental and revolutionary implications for almost every other aspect of Catholic doctrine.

Paul’s theology of sin and redemption

Paul, unlike Augustine later, did not think of sin as hereditary at all. He had little interest in discrete personal sin or existential moral failures (Gk: ‘*armartema/’amartemata*). He was much more concerned that, at the heart of the great breakdown of right relationship (*dikaiosyne*) between God and humanity, was structural, systemic evil caused by sin, (Gk: ‘*amatia*):

“Therefore as sin (‘*amartia*) came into the world through one man and death through sin (‘*amartia*), and so death spread to all because all sinned.....” (Rom 5: 12) This is substantially different from Augustine’s account of sin as *genetically passed on* or humanity being born into a state of sinfulness (*original sin*). For Paul, sin, just like virtuous action, is *habitual*. ‘*amatia* does not point to a pre-existing, pre-determined state over which human beings have little or no control. In Paul’s theology, human free will and choice is integral to the very notion of sin because human beings actually choose to sin. (Rom 3: 23) They live in an historical continuum in which free choices can alter events and influence history. Specifically, human beings can choose to drive a wedge between God and themselves. It is not predetermined. (2)

Structural Sin

In recent decades this notion of ‘structural sin’ has become part of mainstream in some areas of theological reflection and pastoral application. For example, the idea of *structural sin* was picked up and embraced by the Bishops of Latin America (CELAM) at their 1968 Conference in Medellin, Colombia:

“The Medellin document expanded the Christian understanding of liberation as freedom not just from sin but also from sinful social structures that kept the majority poor. This was the origin of the term *liberation theology*.” (3) This theological theme and pastoral focus continue to be discussed and developed especially in Latin America. A recent example is the 2007 Aparecida Document. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was a major writer of that particular CELAM blue print for renewal and reform across the Latin American Continent. As Pope Francis, he used this document to great effect. It provided the guidelines for his November 2013 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Right relationship

As he attempted to depth the mind of Christ, Paul struggled to come up with the conceptual framework and language to explain how it was that Christ, through his own humanity, restored the equilibrium in the God – human relationship. The Greek word Paul uses is *dikaiosyne*. US scripture scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer translates it as ‘saving power’ (4) while his Australian colleague, Brendan Byrne prefers “right relationship.” (5) A co-relative term frequently used by Paul is the new existence or new creation made possible “in Christ” (*en Christo*). Paul often uses the Greek expression *kata sarka* (literally, ‘according to the flesh’) to describe both adverbially and adjectivally the opposite of *dikaiosyne*. Paul employed *kata sarka* to mean a ‘state of inauthentic human existence.’ (6)

In 2 Corinthians Paul explains:

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a (an inadequate) human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view (*kata sarka*, Paul’s pre-conversion understanding), we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ (*en Christo*), he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5: 16-21; See also Gal 3: 21-26)

The wisdom of the Cross

One of the major obstacles Paul had to overcome in his apostolic ministry was to persuade his audience that God’s most dramatic display of power, wisdom and reconciling grace in history was accomplished in a failed Jewish preacher who was rejected by his own people and executed by Imperial Rome as a common criminal. Paul’s message rested on the ultimate contradiction of sound logic and genuine wisdom. He had a particularly difficult time persuading both his Jewish listeners and the abstract thinkers in the Corinthian community. Among these were the ‘men of knowledge’ who constantly sought to undermine Paul’s message by proposing the notion of a disembodied Saviour, a Christ without the cross. Paul the rhetorician responded:

“Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, for it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block (Gk: *skandalon*, hence “scandal” in English) to Jews and folly to

Gentiles, but of those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than humans, and the weakness of God is stronger than human beings.” (1 Cor 1: 20-25)

The perversity of God’s wisdom and its overthrow of conventional logic are at the very heart of Paul’s Gospel. It was precisely in the melting-pot urban expanses mentioned above that Paul and his missionary companions found a real audience of people looking for a saviour they could claim as one of them. These people were living at the edges of society; they were disowned, pushed aside and victimised. The downtrodden and the outcasts readily identified with the rejected, persecuted, unjustly treated and savagely punished Jesus of Nazareth.

No blood debt

When Paul speaks of humanity restored, redeemed, he does not in any way imply any notion related to the concept of buying back and paying off a blood debt. What he does mean by redemption (*apolytrōsis*) is the liberation of humanity from its state of dehumanisation cause by the rift in between human beings and God. It meant a complete restoration of humanity Christ. It was not by the physical shedding of his blood that Christ became the ‘expiation’ for sin (*‘ilasterion*). It was in his own personal humanity that reconciliation was achieved and right relationship restored. (7)

The persuasiveness of the Christian Community.

After over a century of civil and expeditionary wars, the Roman world of the first century CE was left deeply scarred. Vast populations had become refugees. They had experienced unimaginable loss, dislocation, disenfranchisement and despair. Almost endless conflict and destruction had stripped them of security and a lasting sense of belonging. Enormous demographic shifts took place as millions of displaced people from ravaged country areas gravitated to the great cosmopolitan urban melting pot cities of the Empire such as Rome, Corinth, Antioch and Alexandria. Perversely, most of these refugees found themselves lost in enormous and anonymous urban expanses, without security, community and without much *hope*. They found themselves trapped in a world more dangerous than the one they had abandoned. (8)

Paul was convinced from the outset of his mission that the cause of the Jesus Movement would only achieve credibility, attract and hold outsiders if its members authenticated their message by the quality and congruence of their community life. For Paul, this meant that Christians needed to create an alternative community environment in which people would be welcomed, included and in which all could realise their longings for a genuine human existence just as God intended.

The Christian Community needed to subvert the very structures which denied people their humanity. Paul understood this very clearly. He was acutely aware that huge divisions and antipathies across ethnicity, social class and gender had become entrenched within his ancestral Religion, Judaism and Greco-Roman society. He had these oppositions in mind

when he formulated his missionary Gospel message and he realised that these walls of exclusivity could only be demolished through a new creation *in Christ*.

Paul worked tirelessly to achieve in practice what he taught: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Cor 5: 17) What was clearly inhibited the new creation and what muted the Christian community’s persuasive appeal both Jew and Gentile were those socio-religious structures which diminished the human condition.

These divisive structures institutionalised categorisation, segregation and elitism within the human society. As a Jew, he understood that ritual purity laws both caused and promoted social elitism and exclusion. Furthermore, enshrined in the Jewish morning prayer, the *Amidah*, were three Blessings (#2-4 which reflected fundamental ethnic, social and gender boundaries and divides:

The benedictions and Paul’s counter affirmation

2. “Blessed are you, Lord God of the Universe, you have not made me a foreigner” (Gentile);

There is neither Jew nor Greek

3) “Blessed are you, Lord God of the Universe, you have not made me a slave”;

Slave nor free

4) “Blessed are you, Lord God of the Universe, you have not made me a woman.”

Male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3: 28)

Paul was also confronted with similar structures in Greco-Roman society which hampered the establishment of Christian communities which challenged the structures of division and injustice based on ethnicity, social status and gender. The Roman Household Code was the most dominant of these institutions of social stratification. This Code reflected and preserved the fundamental values and structures of Roman society: the natural superiority of the paterfamilias, the husband, father and master. The second social level was the superiority of parents over children while the third level enshrined the authority of parents and children over the household slaves. The references to the submission of women in 1 Cor 14: 34-35 should be treated as later interpolation inserted into Paul’s teaching by opponents within the Jesus Movement. Their purpose was to discredit Paul and to undermine his teaching on the radical equality of all and the specifically to restrict the role of women in public worship. Paul condoned neither women’s submission nor their silence. They were among his most valued co-workers in the Gospel. (9)

Looking ahead

For Paul, human existence necessarily implies the existential reflection, embodying and imitation of Christ’s humanity. If his converts were in any way confused about what that

meant, Paul offered himself as an example: ‘Be imitators of me as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor 10: 31 – 11:1).

One of Paul’s early personal conversion experiences was to separate himself from the culture of compulsive obedience and absolute certainty created by unquestioning submission to the Law. The problem that the Law posed for Paul was the inescapable reality of the fear of punishment and the very notion of duress and compulsiveness associated with Law itself. For Paul, threat generates fear and, in turn, it engenders patterns of compliant behaviour. A major casualty of fear is freedom and fear is the least noble of the virtues.

After his conversion, Paul quickly resolved his own inner conflicts and ambiguities in relation to Christ and the Law of Moses. Many of his fellow Christians however, especially those belonging to the Jerusalem community had not, in Paul’s mind, done so adequately. Very soon after his first great missionary journey, Paul found himself labelled as a dangerous, volatile and divisive person who needed to be watched, monitored and contained. Paul found himself being stalked and continuously harassed by fellow Christian missionaries from the Jerusalem community. These opponents were identified by both Paul and Luke as *the circumcision party* or *certain men from James* (the leader of the Church in Jerusalem). They were Judeo-Christian proselytizers who insisted that converts to the Faith submit to the Jewish ritual purity laws in addition to Baptism.

Paul’s opponents disrupted his mission and actively subverted his ‘law-free’ Gospel. While he was more than a match for them himself, what he feared and resented most was the harm done to his own converts by the Torah-Christ people. Paul’s conflict with his legalistic opponents is the subject of the next article, *Paul and the Judaizers*.

Endnotes

- 1) “A Study of Philippians 2: 5-9,” *Carelinks Commentary* (Linked [here](#)); Daniel Bratcher, “The Poured-Out Life. The Kenosis Hymn in Context,” *The Voice. Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*.2013 (Linked [here](#)).
- 2) Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Becoming Human Together. The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul*, Wilmington, DE, Glazier, 1982, 35-36. See Joseph Fitzmyer, “Paul on Conversion” *jesuschristsaviornet* (Linked [here](#)). Cf Rom 1: 16-17. For a more thorough reflection on Paul’s understanding of *hamartia* as the principle or cause of sin one should read Rom 7: 13-25. [See Jerome Murphy-O’Connor OP, *Paul – A Critical Life*, Oxford, OUP, 1986, 335-339] Note Paul’s commentary on the three ages of Salvation: (Adam) Before the Fall, (Adam) Sinful existence, (Adam restored) Salvation. (Rom 3:21-26)
- 3) Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer. Francis and the making of a Radical Pope*, London, Allen and Unwin, 94-95. Ivereigh continues:

“At a 2010 inquiry, Begolio explained (origins and meaning of *liberation theology*):

The option for the poor comes from the first centuries of Christianity. It's the Gospel itself. If you were to read one of the sermons of the first fathers of the Church, from the second to third centuries, about how you should treat the poor, you'd say it was Maoist or Trotskyist. The Church has always had the honor of its preferential option for the poor. It has always considered the poor to be the treasure of the Church. During the [third century] persecution of the deacon Lawrence, who was the administrator of the diocese [of Rome], they told him to bring all the treasures of the Church. A few days later he appeared with a throng of poor people and said, "These are the treasure of the Church." At the Second Vatican Council the Church was redefined as the People of God and this idea really took off at the Second Conference of the Latin-American bishops in Medellin.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the 'father of Liberation Theology' and one of the principal organisers of the CELAM Medellin Conference, went on to create a mind shift in the way people thought of the 'poor.'

"Our [liberation theology's] question is not how to speak of God in an adult world [as Bonhoeffer did]. That is the old question posed by progressivist theology. No, the interlocutor of the theology of liberation is the "nonperson," the human being who is not considered human by the present order – the exploited classes, marginalised ethnic groups, and despised cultures. Our question is how to tell the nonperson, the nonhuman, that God is love, and that this makes us brothers and sisters." *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Readings*, London: SCM, 1983, 193.

- 4) Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33; London: Chapman, 1992, 262.
- 5) Brendan Byrne SJ, "Paul's Adam Myth Revisited," in Duncan Reid and Mark William Worthing, *Sin and Salvation, ATF Task of Theology Today 3*, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2004, 50-54. Byrne proposes two aspects of sin: one the stative, or 'plight' understanding and then the understanding of sin as breaking 'right relationship with God.'
- 6) Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together*, 77-78.
- 7) Eamonn Mulchay, *The Cause of Salvation: Soteriological Causality According to Some Modern British Theologians, 1988-1998*, Roma, Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2007, 431. See also Kevin O'Shea, *Redemption, A study written for the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*. Published in 2005 (Linked [here](#)) In Christ there is longer 'yes' or 'no' but only 'yes' in him. (2 Cor 1: 18-20) "He (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom (*sophia*), our righteousness (*dikaiosyne*), sanctification ('*agiasmos*) and glory (*doxa*) (1 Cor 1: 30)
- 8) Roman historian and philosopher, Epictetus (55-135 CE) wrote about this poignantly in an essay on 'The Forlorn State.' Epictetus reflects on the on the paradoxical situation of human beings enjoying Tiberius' *Pax Romana*, but at the

same time experiencing social alienation, vulnerability and loss. Discourses, Ch XIII, Bk III (Link [here](#) and see Epictetus in the *Loeb Classics* [here](#).)

- 9) See the Household Code reflected in Eph 5: 21-33; Col 3: 18-24; 1 Tim 2: 8-15. Opponents of Paul actually interpolated it in 1 Cor 14: 34-35 in order to undermine and discredit Paul's message of equality in the Christian Community. Rarely explained properly, these texts continue, groundlessly, to turn generation after generation of women hostile to Paul of Tarsus.

Again, what Paul believed, taught and witnessed to is here: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3: 27-29; 1 Cor 12: 13) Gal 3: 23-29 (27-28)

The Household Code: "Translation of the German *Haustafeln*, used by commentators for a literary type developed for ethical instruction in the Hellenistic world, adopted by Jewish Hellenistic synagogues, and thence by the NT (Col. 3: 18-4: 1, but also Eph. 5: 22-6: 9; 1 Tim. 2: 9-15; Titus 2: 2-10; 1 Pet. 2: 13-3: 7). The codes were an attempt by leaders of the Christian community to establish a pattern of family and social life not unlike that of traditional families among Gentile and Jewish contemporaries in the Graeco-Roman world. The patriarchal style represents a reaction against the egalitarian organization of the earliest Church in Jerusalem (Acts 2: 44-7) and is remarkable for the absence of Paul's radical teaching against sexual discrimination (Gal. 3: 28)." Household Codes" in *Oxford Biblical Studies Online* (Linked [here](#)).

For a detailed treatment of Paul's co-workers in the Gospel see: Felix Just SJ, "Paul's Associates and Co-workers," *Electronic New Testament Educational Resources*, (Linked [here](#))

Future Newsletter articles in the Mutations (a changing Church) series:

August: Paul and his opponents inside the Jesus Movement; the Law, Christ and Freedom.

September: The end of the Apostolic era; the transition from the Christian Synagogue to Church during the First Century C.E.

October: The Church, Gnosticism and the politics of the Roman Empire.

Some other things for another time:

- Jesus in his own time, place and space: social, religious, political and economic context. Recommended on an earlier article; Sean Freyne, the late Irish Scripture scholar's final Lectures: "Zwingli Redivivus," Yale University (Link [here](#))
- Bill Timmeus: "A New Understanding of the Apostle Paul", *NCR* May 27, 2015. (Linked [here](#))

- See the Creation and other Mesopotamian myths in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Linked [here](#)) and an explanation of the *Enuma Elish* (Linked [here](#))

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July 2015