

What Regard Should We Have for “PAULINE THEOLOGY”?

A Pharisee of Pharisees, trained at the feet of Gamaliel, a man of profound intellect, called, tried and inspired of God as few men ever were, eventually becoming Apostle to the Gentiles, and writing more New Testament Scripture than any other person, yet Paul's theology was fundamentally misconstrued even in his own day!

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When seeking clear definition of important New Testament questions, we are drawn to the writings of the Apostle Paul. This Apostle, ‘born out of due time,’¹ whose writings were wide ranging in content and possessing an uncommon depth of understanding, soon became the definitive authority in what is known as New Covenant Theology! Paul’s imprint there is inescapable. Being so prolific and having such extraordinary insight, especially with regard to issues having to do with Old Testament Ritual, a distinct school of thought soon emerged which is today identified by the term: “Pauline Theology”.

It is the general perception among modern disciples that after the New Testament Church had become established, and the gospels had been written, that subsequent writings of the Apostle Paul changed many fundamental positions, particularly with regard to that orientation which came to be known as ‘legalism’. Few were in a position to articulate this important and controversial subject as Paul.

It is commonly believed that Paul’s writings were ‘revisionist’, that after most other New Testament writers had completed their writings, Paul’s superceded theirs, re-defining the positions held by the Early New Testament Church. Adding to this misperception are the dates placed in the upper center columns of many Bibles, particularly the gospels, which indicate dates of the events then being written about, without regard to the fact that these narratives were written in retrospect, some three decades after the events they relate. These added dates reinforce the common understanding that Paul wrote later, and thus presented the final say.

Putting Pauline Theology into its proper time setting can modify somewhat that perception that he superceded and redefined earlier Church views.

It was the Apostle Peter, writing towards the end of Paul’s ministry, who injected a precaution that few realize the full extent of, that even in his own day, Paul’s teachings were being drastically mis-represented: “...*even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him has written unto you: As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.*” (2 Pet. 3:15-16) Reading the context of this passage shows that it was important salvational issues that Paul had written about that were being dangerously misconstrued.

The very existence of the term “Pauline Theology” suggests a separate and distinct order of beliefs, set in contrast with the theological position that would otherwise emerge, if one were to limit himself to New Testament writers other than Paul. It is this contrast, or the allegation of a contrast, which gives many basis and comfort when disregarding those doctrinal elements with which they disagree.

There is no doubt that Paul’s writings were more explicit than most others. The essential question is, were his beliefs substantially different than those of his contemporaries? Modern theologians would like us to think so. A second question is, are those elements of belief purported to originate solely with the Apostle Paul an accurate representation of his theological position, or is there some degree of “wresting” involved, as Peter suggests? And third,

¹ 1Cor. 15:8

did Paul's writings supercede those of the other New Testament writers?

Paul took specific issue with many of the common religious views of his day. Those views were heavily influenced by the Jewish religion, itself infected by Hellenistic philosophy, and affected by ever present and easily adaptable Gnostic elements. Modern theologians allege and base their take on Paul's writings under the basic premise that his writings took serious issue with the Old Testament religion rather than his refuting the common views of his day which, though posing as being of Mosaic origin,² bore only certain resemblance to the True Old Testament religion.³

It is this third question that is here considered: Did Paul actually write **after** the other writers? The general presumption is that he did.

Which Commandments?

Just prior to His ascension, Christ gave what we recognize as the Great Commission, in which He instructed His disciples to *"teach all nations...to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."*⁴ One of those teachings was the fact that He was not intending to in any way repudiate Old Testament Law!⁵ Paul, as the others did, correctly understood that the Old Testament Lawgiver, was in fact, the same Jesus Christ of the New Testament!⁶ That being the case, our understanding of what was intended by the final instruction to... *"teach all things... which I have commanded you"*, should not exclude the fundamental Old Testament Law and Prophecy. (You will find this exclusion is the underlying objective of those who tout Pauline Theology as representing their major position.)

We should consider why they didn't ask, "which commandments?" In light of what had transpired just days before, at the Passover, where He said, *"...as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do."*⁷ *"...for all things that I have heard of my*

*Father I have made known unto you."*⁸ Much earlier He said, *"The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise."*⁹ Toward the end of His ministry, He repeated the theme, *"Jesus said unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet have you not known me Philip? He that has seen me has seen the Father;...the words that I speak unto you, I speak not of myself; but the Father that dwells in me, He does the works."*¹⁰

From these we can understand why the Disciples didn't ask, "Which Commandments?" Why would they have thought of asking such a question, one that had such an obvious answer? Theologians who have sought ways to disregard Christ's clear admonition to *"think not that I am come to destroy the Law"...*¹¹ have provided themselves a means to do that very thing by alleging that there exists another Law, that which Jesus gave, as opposed to the Old Testament Law given in the time of Moses. More than one problem arises as a result of that premise. First, that One who thundered from Mount Sinai was the same individual we now know as Jesus Christ, and as a result, by their suggestion, puts Him in a position of contradicting Himself. Secondly, Christ repeatedly assures His Disciples that what He conveyed to them was IDENTICAL to what the Father would have said and done, had He been the One to deliver it!

We can see why they had no question as to which Commandments were being talked about!

But beyond that question, there is another affirmation. And, here is where the relative timing comes into play. The suggestion on the part of many is that Paul wrote later, after the others. The plain fact is that it was the other way around. That it was the others who wrote later! Particularly John! The Apostle Paul died in about 66 AD, thus all of his Epistles were written before that time.

The Book of Mark was written in the early 60's, written to a Roman audience, by someone who was

² Matthew 23:2

³ Matthew 15: 8 & 9

⁴ Matthew 28: 19 & 20

⁵ Matthew 5: 17 & 18

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10: 4

⁷ John 14: 31

⁸ John 15:15

⁹ John 5: 19

¹⁰ John 14: 9-11

¹¹ Matthew 5: 17 & 18

not a personal eyewitness. Mark's source likely was Peter, who served as his translator/interpreter before serving with Paul.

The first Book by Luke was written in the early to mid 60's, also by a non-eyewitness, generally to a Greek audience. Luke was a companion of Paul, (who may have been converted under Paul's ministry), who was also a companion of Peter.

Matthew was written in the late 60's, to a Jewish audience, like the others, some 30 to 35 years AFTER the events they relate took place.

The second book by Luke, called The Acts of the Apostles, was written in the mid to late 60's, to the Church.

But it was John who wrote latest of all! Some suggest that the Gospel of John was written as late as the early 80's, or even later! John's Gospel was written to Christians. John filled-in doctrinal gaps in the earlier narratives, adding direct personal information. We can see from John's timing and reiteration of the Law as being fundamental to our conduct, in imitation of Jesus, an answer to a growing question. The Gospel of John is written around a Holyday setting, giving scenes from one Holyday season, then the next. The Epistles of John were written even later than his gospel, just prior to the Book of Revelation, in the 90's AD.

What we need to consider is whether or not the Gospel writers were familiar with the writings of Paul? The comment by Peter in 2 Peter 3:16 suggests they were. Being that they wrote **later** than Paul did, if they saw any area in which their theology differed from his, wouldn't they have offered some form of explanation, or clarification? The point being, that they did not see themselves differing in any substantial way. The 'difference' is in the eye of the beholder, the revisionist theologian, not the Apostle Paul. **That** was the phenomenon Peter was referring to, underway even in his day!

We need to remember that the Apostle John was the one who had final custody of all pre-canon Scriptures into the mid-90's AD. He could have reviewed and annotated Paul's Epistles at any time if he saw need to! He didn't! The Gospel writers apparently didn't see what modern theologians see.

Modern Theology wants to create confusion where none should be. By creating 'doctrinal division', where there really isn't any, between the Gospel writers and the writings of the Apostle Paul, alleging that he wrote **after** they did, thus explaining away the otherwise obvious question as to why none of them ever took specific issue with Paul on any doctrinal subject.

The easily provable Truth is that Paul actually wrote **first**. The Synoptic Gospels, Acts, Peter, James and John, were written later. There was adequate exposure and ample time to refute or clarify any point of difference. Especially by John who 'infilled' the other Gospel writers with detail their Gospels lacked. That 'Pauline Theology' was in some way 'revisionist' would have been news to Peter, Matthew Mark, Luke, James and John, many of whom knew and worked with Paul.

The Epistles of Paul circulated first. The others later. Premises based on it being the other way around should be heavily suspect.

The 'revisionist' concept resulted more from misapplication of what Paul had to say regarding the changing format of worship, away from a Temple and Ceremonial focus, which served as an aid to those who didn't have God's Spirit (an essential for True Conversion). Who better than Paul to address those issues? (Paul was the trained theologian, many of the others were fishermen!) However, matters of substance were not being changed! Remember, it was Paul himself who admonished the Churches to "*..all speak the same thing..*"¹² It would be an odd thing for him to ask, if he was saying things that were in fact different from what others were saying!

The New Testament must be considered as a homogenous whole, not two sharply divided theological camps, as some allege. This is the fundamental misconception put forth by so many. Paul wrote before the others, not after them. The absence of contradiction on the part of the later writers of anything Paul wrote or said is proof that they didn't see a need to take issue or set the record straight on any doctrinal difference. **Ω**

¹² 1 Corinthians 1:10