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Catholic Theological Association 2009 Conference Papers

The Legacy of Paul

Introduction

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Having been established in 1984, the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain celebrated its 25th annual conference in September 2009 at Ushaw College, Durham. Although it was held a few weeks outside the official Year of Paul, the theme of the conference was The Legacy of Paul. What we have here, then, is not a collection of academic papers about the exegesis of Paul's letters or a discussion of theological themes in Paul that you might get from a conference of NT specialists, but a survey of how Paul has influenced the church, its practice and its theology. The question is: What has Paul left us?

The CTA's anniversary was marked by a sermon from its current President, John McDade. In its context in the magnificent Victorian Puginesqueness of Ushaw's chapel, the homily on what it is to do theology was both funny and moving, and it is a pleasure to make it available here. Unfortunately not everything from the conference is available for publication. The illness of one speaker deprived us of a Jewish perspective on Paul, we do not have our consideration of how Augustine has influenced our understanding of Paul, and we are without Archbishop Patrick Kelly's reflection on Paul's mission to the nations (*ad gentes*) and the mission of the church today. Nor can we print Simon Gathercole's introduction to the conference, which was an account of the so-called New Perspective on Paul that acted as a summary of the current state of play in Pauline studies, which are voluminous.

Gathercole told us that the New Perspective is rooted in a fresh account of second-temple Judaism that does justice to its riches and nuances, which had previously gone unnoticed or had been unknowingly distorted. The Old Perspective, however, only goes back to the early sixteenth-century and is mainly identified with Martin Luther's reading of Paul, though Calvin gave a rather different account of the status of the Law. Under the influence of his own spiritual anxieties, Luther's interpretation of Paul is determined by his reading of just

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two letters, Romans and Galatians, and the doctrine of justification by faith that Luther encountered there when he began to prepare lectures in Wittenberg in 1517. Luther focuses on the lone individual standing before God, troubled by his conscience, aware of his sinfulness, tormented by guilt and unsure of his salvation. His concern is how he can be accepted by God, how he can be justified and declared innocent before the supreme judge. The fate he expects is to receive is God's wrath. The possibility of his being able to ease his position through pious practices as advocated by the late medieval church was diminished by the corruption Luther perceived at their heart. He saw pilgrimages, relics and indulgences as covers for money-making, and Rome was at the centre of this venality. But in Paul, Luther found a message that salvation did not come through any human actions – works of the law – no matter how impressive; all God requires is faith. There can be no human contribution to salvation, which comes entirely from God. Grace is "imputed" (from *logizein*, to reckon, in Romans 4, which has been called a book-keeping metaphor) to the sinner which in turn brings faith. Hence Luther's phrase *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously a sinner and just), something the Bishop of Durham in the context of Reformed doctrine has called a legal fiction, whereby an individual is reckoned to be just but not really morally just, forgiven but still a sinner. Subsequently Luther's distinction between law and gospel was to lead to a marked opposition between Judaism and Christianity in Lutheran theology. This is something found in many of the great NT scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not least Rudolf Bultmann, where Judaism was portrayed as the exemplar of legalistic religion (along with Roman Catholicism) with a works-righteousness at its centre, typified by their understanding of the Pharisees as portrayed in the Gospels.

The first turn against this understanding of justification in Paul came in 1976 with Krister Stendahl in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, who suggested a link between Luther and what Stendahl decried as 'the introspective conscience of the West'. At a similar time Tom Wright came to the extraordinary conclusion for someone in the evangelical tradition, though he did not publish it at the time, that Luther had got Paul wrong. However, the big shift took place in 1977 with E. P. Sanders' account of second-temple Judaism in *Paul and Palestinean Judaism*. Sanders' extensive reading of primary sources convinced him that Judaism had been misjudged and was far from being the proto-Pelagian religion of the Christian imagination in which one earned one's salvation by one's own efforts. Ancient Judaism, we were now told, not only had a deep spirituality but was a graced religion. A Jew was chosen by God and enabled by God to keep the Torah. Sanders did not believe that Paul could have had a problem with being a Jew and his early life as a Pharisee confirms this. He was zealous for the law and comfortable with his religion.

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Paul was not longing for Judaism to be something else. This led to Sanders to argue that Paul's theology does not move from plight to solution (i.e. it is no good being a Jew, we therefore need something else that can save us), but from solution (Christ has come to bring salvation to all) to thinking that there must be a plight (humanity, Jews as well as gentiles, cannot be saved without Christ). So Jewish religion is good and, in Paul's way of thinking, its only deficiency is that it isn't Christianity. According to Sanders, a Jew is not saved by keeping the law; salvation comes from being a member of the people with whom God has established a covenant, and this is a matter of grace. Keeping the law has nothing to do with entering the covenant, it is how you *stay* in the covenant and it is something you *can* succeed in doing. Forgiveness is available for those who fail to keep the law. Sanders has characterised Judaism as 'covenantal nomism' and has certainly shown that Judaism is not the law-bound religion that you find represented in Luther as well as in Lutheran and much other Christian theology. In the New Perspective, Paul's Jewishness is emphasised and, as he never repudiated his Jewishness, we should stop talking about his 'conversion' (at that time there was no independent Christian religion to convert to) but of his 'calling' or 'summons' to take the gospel to the gentiles. Above all there should be no hint of 'supersessionism': the view that Christianity has superseded Judaism and so rendered it ineffective, consigned to the past and implying that it never was much good.

It is characteristic of the New Perspectivists that they displace 'justification by faith' from the centre of Paul's thought, though this was suggested by Albert Schweitzer eighty years ago and before that by Wrede. At the centre is now the idea of faith bringing a life of *participation 'in Christ'*. Justification by faith is now seen as a peripheral part of a drive to bring the gentiles into a covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For Luther, justification is about the nature of the God who freely accepts the sinful individual who is incapable of saving him or herself (it is about theology and salvation); now it is said to be the basis for the unity of Jews and gentiles in the church (ecclesiology). Insofar as Paul criticised the law, it was because aspects of it reinforced Jewish exclusivism. On the one hand, Paul said that 'the law is dead', but on the other hand he defended himself against the charge of antinomianism from those who thought he had thrown out all the Torah's moral demands. There is a real difficulty in Paul's letters here compounded by a lack of consistency between Galatians where the law can lead one away from God (2.19, 5.4), where it is called a 'curse' and a 'yoke of slavery', and Romans where the law is acknowledged to be a gift from God (9.4). This apparent contradiction has led J D G Dunn (the man to whom the expression New Perspective is attributed) and N T Wright to suggest that Paul is not abrogating the whole Torah but only

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those 'boundary markers' such as circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance and purity rituals that serve to separate Jews from non-Jews. (Here they identify themselves with Calvin who gave a positive evaluation of the Law, rather than Luther.) Paul looks for a church of Jews and gentiles united through baptism (Gal 3.27–8) but the moral requirements of the Torah remain. In Paul, gentiles are clearly absolved from being circumcised, observing the food laws and the rest, but an unresolved problem is whether this also goes for Jews. Is this release only for gentiles or for Jews too? Did Paul see himself released from the Law? At a further remove there are some Christians who think Judaism continues to be an entirely valid religion for Jews; Christianity is simply God's arrangement for gentiles, so you would never expect to see any Jewish Christians. Hypothetically you can ask in the light of what you find in Galatians and Romans: if Paul had had a son, would he have had him circumcised?

However, the New Perspective on Paul has not gone unchallenged. The world of Pauline studies is divided between supporters of the new and old perspectives as one can see from Stephen Westerholm's survey, "*Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and His Critics*" (2004). Some, including Simon Gathercole, insist that there is extensive evidence that second-temple Judaism maintained that holding to the Torah was a *sine qua non* for a Jew being saved (gentiles would be judged on whether they had kept the much reduced Noahic covenant). There are many like Francis Watson who maintain that Paul rejects the whole of the law for the purpose of justification. We indeed suffer the plight of being unable to keep the law fully and the only solution comes from another God-given scheme whereby salvation comes from Christ, where faith/faithfulness replaces law/torah as the basis for our status before God. Certainly Paul has a strong sense of human sinfulness which excludes the idea of merit or boasting on one's own behalf. It is clear that one's understanding of the place of the law in Paul's letters is central for deciding where to pitch one's camp. However, now that the New Perspective has been around for a full generation there are signs of Pauline scholarship moving on to some sort of synthesis, fusing the best of old and new.

Geoffrey Turner's paper on Paul's use of the Old Testament considers the legacy that Paul himself inherited and serves to emphasise just how thorough-goingly Jewish was his thought-world. Here there are statistics to punch home how extensive was his use of scripture through direct quotations (some acknowledged, some not) and allusions to specific texts – always taken from the Greek OT. After a general introduction, he takes four examples to indicate how Paul reworked scripture in the light of his understanding of the significance of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. These are Paul's adaptation of the Jewish criticism of pagan idol worship that he found in Wisdom

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13–14; how Paul may have found a doctrine of 'righteousness through faithfulness' in the Psalms which he reformulated as faithfulness to Christ rather than faithfulness to the Torah; how the historical narrative that runs through Romans 9–11 may be underpinned by Psalm 78; and how Paul adapted the Shema of Deuteronomy 6.4 for Christian use in 1 Corinthians 8.6. He ends with some brief reflections on how far we might still be able to use Paul's hermeneutics for making sense of scripture, both Old and New.

Paul Murray sets the Apostle in the context of ecumenism and how he has been received in the Catholic and Lutheran traditions. His focus is the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* which was produced by those two Churches in 1999 and which, without dealing with all theological differences, was able to sweep away centuries of mutual suspicion by offering an agreed statement on essential beliefs. Important differences remain and the situation has become more problematic recently, precisely because the new reading of Paul has called Luther's interpretation into question. But more to the point, Murray thinks that it is only a start to produce official joint statements that have limited practical impact on the lives of most Christians; what is needed is a receptivity to learn from other traditions. One requirement, one might suggest, is that Catholics should read Paul, if only to show Lutherans that they do not own him.

In the past ten or fifteen years a number of decidedly non-religious philosophers have surprised us all by turning to Paul for enlightenment on politics. The first of these may have been Jacob Taubes in 1993 with *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*. In general these books are far from satisfactory because the authors have not even bothered to immerse themselves in Paul's letters as a whole, let alone to look at much (or any) recent Pauline scholarship. John Barclay here sets out to show that such a judgment would not be fair to Alain Badiou (born 1937, having taught at the École Normal Supérieur in Paris). His account of Badiou shows a sympathetic reader of Paul whose philosophical understanding of 'event' – he is a child of *les événements* of 1968 – is consonant with his reading of Galatians, yet it is a reading that strips Paul of essential theological themes, not the least of which is 'the cross'. In asking the question: Is Badiou a good reader of Paul?, Barclay finds both strengths and weaknesses.

At the conference we had an empty slot due to the illness of the speaker who was to give a Jewish response to Paul. However, our President, John McDade, dipped into his briefcase and graciously offered to read a paper that he had prepared earlier for another event and which was then unpublished. This paper on Pascal is not directly related to Paul but is of such interest that we are happy to publish it here. Pascal, like some postmodern writers, we are told here, can

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free us from the Enlightenment agenda, even though he was writing at the birth of modern Rationalism. McDade tells us that his relevance is shown by his acute diagnosis of the methodological problem for theologians, his anticipation of 'some modern treatments of the instability of the self and its language', his recognition 'that dialectic and contradictions are a necessary part of an adequate theological account' and his outline of 'an approach, rooted in the categories of an Augustinian theology, which, in order to be adequate, wove a deliberately rough cloth'.

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