



## Learning from Paul: The Pauline Year 2008/2009

The fact that Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the period from 28 June 2008 to 28 June 2009 the Pauline Year gives Christians throughout the world the opportunity not only to reflect on the writings of this missionary, but also to study in depth his personality and the societal, cultural and religious context of his time. Pope Benedict himself spoke on this in the general audience of 2 July 2008: "In this first meeting let us pause to consider the environment in which St Paul lived and worked. A theme such as this would seem to bring us far from our time, given that we must identify with the world of 2,000 years ago. Yet this is only apparently and, in any case, only partly true for we can see that various aspects of today's social and cultural context are not very different from what they were then." He concludes his remarks with the following statements: "Thus he grows in historical and spiritual stature, revealing both sharing and originality in comparison with the surrounding environment. However, this applies likewise to Christianity in general, of which the Apostle Paul, precisely, is a paradigm of the highest order from whom we all, always, still have much to learn. And this is the goal of the Pauline Year: to learn from St Paul, to learn faith, to learn Christ, and finally to learn the way of upright living."

In this and the next issue of the *Bulletin Dei Verbum* we would like therefore to feature a variety of articles that highlight the life, the work and the significance of Paul for Christianity and for ourselves. In this connection, we would love to receive your own personal ideas as well. So write to us, or send us an email; we are curious to know your personal image of Saint Paul.

THE PAULINE  
YEAR  
2008/2009

## Approaching Paul

### What Constitutes the Significance of Paul for Christianity?

*Claudio Ettl*

#### 1. "Now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel" – legend and reality

*A man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.*<sup>1</sup>



*The Apostle Paul – Cappadocian fresco*

This description of the Apostle Paul is found in an apocryphal writing of the late second century A.D., the so-called "Acts of Thecla". Certainly this literary portrait cannot be taken as authentic, any more than the fresco found in a Cappadocian underground church in modern Turkey that dates to the fourth century A.D. – if only because their composition or origin lie at too great a distance in time from the life-time of Paul.

Nevertheless such a legendary notice is not entirely without value if treated with the necessary historical-critical reserve. Because what is said here of Paul is based in part on statements that he himself made in his letters regarding his person. Moreover it reflects the image people had of the Apostle to the Gentiles and of his outward appearance through much of the history of early Christianity.

As for the great friendliness of Paul mentioned in this text, there would certainly be good reason to doubt this in part – for the authentic Pauline letters offer us too much data on the not always easy character of the Apostle. So for example Paul defends himself in 2 Corinthians against the reproaches of his opponents, and does not hesitate to utter some threats:

*I, the man who is so humble when he is facing you, but bullies you when he is at a distance. I only ask that I do not have to bully you when I come, with all the confident assurance I mean to show when I come face to face with people I could name who think we go by ordinary human motives.*  
(2 Cor 10:1f.)

And shortly after this we read:

*"He writes powerful and strongly-worded letters but when he is with you you see only half a man and no preacher at all". The man who said that*



*can remember this: whatever we are like in the words of our letters when we are absent, that is what we shall be like in our actions when we are present. (2 Cor 10:10f.)*

A man “full of friendliness” with the “face of an angel”? Indeed, and also a man with rough edges, who could be downright unpleasant when it was his own thing that was at stake. A man of character, as we would say today.

Let us return once more to the above-quoted citation of the Acts of Thecla: so if the friendliness and angelic disposition of Paul seem to derive rather from his later appreciation and from the significance of his person for the early Church, the data concerning his external appearance (his bald head, crooked legs, distinguished nose) are more in line with his own statements. For it would appear that during his lifetime Paul was afflicted by a chronic illness, as we learn from another statement he makes in 2 Corinthians:

*(...) I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me and stop me from getting too proud! (2 Cor 12:7)*

This thorn in the flesh is most often understood to have been a physical infirmity that Paul had to cope with on a recurrent basis. And the exhausting experiences that were a routine part of his missionary activity cannot but have left their traces. Once again we can allow the Apostle to speak for himself:

*(...) I have worked harder, I have been sent to prison more often, and whipped so many times more, often almost to death. Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned, three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day. Constantly travelling, I have been in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans; in danger in the towns, in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from so-called brothers. I have worked and laboured, often without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and starving; I have been in the cold without clothes. (2 Cor 11:23-27)*

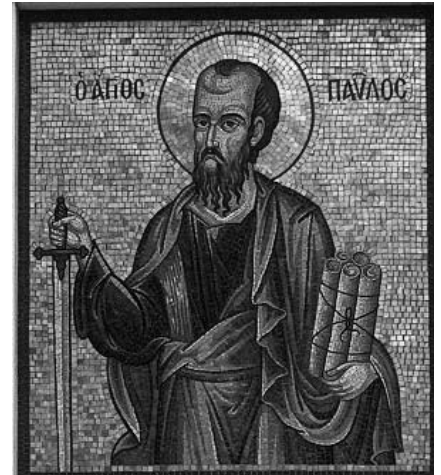
An exciting person, an exciting life.

## **2. Missionary, theologian, writer: the significance of Paul**

What is it, then, that makes Paul and his significance for Christianity special? There are a number of reasons that make a study of the so-called Apostle of the Gentiles worthwhile.

### **2.1 Literary Reasons**

If we leaf through the New Testament, we encounter other names of authors for individual writings besides that of Paul: the Gospels are associated with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; we find letters that are ascribed to James, Peter or Jude. The majority of the writings of the New Testament however name Paul as author – 13 letters all together. In recent times, following a long period of scholarly research and discussion, it is generally agreed that seven of these letters are genuinely “authentic,” that is to say can be thought of as letters that were dictated by Paul himself (Rom, 1 Cor, 2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess, Phlm). We can confidently ascribe these seven authentic letters to a concrete individual whom we know



*Mosaic of the Apostle Paul*

by name and about whom we have historical information. Though the other writings of the New Testament are also in part ascribed to specific authors, as for example the Gospels or the Catholic Epistles, these authorial data do not always represent reliable historical information. The writings in question were often belatedly ascribed to well-known individuals so as to enhance their authority and importance. (Catchword: pseudepigraphy).

It follows that Paul is the only author of New Testament writings who is known to us by his real name. While the profile of those theologians that stand behind other New Testament writings can be drawn for the most part only indirectly from the collected, elaborated and transmitted traditions they hand on, and while these authors also often hide behind their writing or behind a pseudonym, Paul puts himself forward in his letters as a really existing personality who even till today speaks to us directly out of his writings.

Another peculiarity lies in the fact that with the authentic letters of Paul we possess the presumably oldest writings of Christianity altogether, older than the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles in the opinion of the majority of the exegetes. Paul as the author of these texts does not of course belong to the first Christian generation, to the generation of Jesus and the eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, as do for example the Twelve and the disciples. But Paul is the only author of the New Testament who stems from the second generation.



## 2.2 Biographical Reasons

In the person of Paul three cultural realms of the ancient world coalesce – all of which were formative for the history of early Christianity and for the development of the early Church: Judaism, Hellenism and Roman culture. This is why it is indispensable for the question of the development of the Christian Faith to get to know better this multicultural man. To be at home, or at least to live among a variety of cultures is indeed a central characteristic of our globalized world today.

The work and the theology of Paul cannot be understood without a look at his biography, at his way of life. Life and theology mutually condition each other; the one is always to be treated in connection with the other. Central for Paul is the event of his call experience, which led to a totally new orientation. In modern terms, it amounted to a paradigm change in his life and his theology.

The personality of Paul is also of decisive significance for the history of early Christianity. Paul was active, so to speak, at a cross-point and intersection of the early history of Christianity. His work played itself out at the heart of a development in which the central question for primitive Christianity was whether the Christian faith would continue to be understood as a part of Judaism or whether an opening to non-Jews ought to be pursued. Paul is to a large extent responsible for the fact that this existential question for early Christian adherents was decided in the second sense. We owe it to him that the faith of Jewish-Palestinian character in the Messiah Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee did not remain confined to Judaism. Rather, it was translated into the culture of Hellenism that was the hallmark of the time both politically and culturally. The enormous achievement of inculturation that this transition implies is inconceivable without Paul.

## 2.3 Theological reasons

The theology of Paul is no clearly defined theory, no theological opus conceived and written down at one stroke which can be neatly arranged or systematized. Rather it amounts to “theology in process” (so Joachim Gnllka).

In his letters addressed to very concrete audiences – mostly communities or groups of communities – Paul develops the theological concepts that appear most central to him. In the process he can give free rein to his excitement and his enthusiasm as well as to his protests or even anger. This is what makes his letters still relevant and vibrant today. When we read the letters of Paul we are able even today to reconstruct how the theological positions of Paul were developed, from what concrete circumstances they arose and how he was able to further develop or even modify them in the course of his life. Paul is a theologian who till today allows us to share in his reflections and in his emotions.

We do not possess the theology of Paul, however, in the form of a comprehensive writing that spells out everything in advance. We must rather ferret it out from different letters, which were moreover written at different times, for different reasons and to different audiences. The Pauline letters are therefore occasional writings. With the exception of the Letter to the Romans perhaps, Paul has to take a stand in his letters on very concrete theological questions, which were often addressed to him by the community itself, for example on the question of divorce or the Lord’s Supper in Corinth. So initially what we have is responses to concrete questions, and often, too, attempts to resolve special problems. Nevertheless this always takes place in a way that – in spite of its close ties to these peculiar circumstances – always remains focused on the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ as having universal validity. For this reason it would be false to think that Paul did not possess any overall theological understanding.

## 3. Learning from Paul: Paul today

It is perhaps better for this reason to speak of “Paul, the theologian” rather than of the “theology of Paul.” This makes better allowance for the circumstance outlined above: since we know of Paul only from occasional writings, composed in response to concrete circumstances, his theological ideas always remain tied to the associated configurations and situations. Theological thought and Pauline personality, theology and biography are thus always interconnected. Even Pauline theology is subject to development. This is precisely what makes this quest exciting, that the Apostle to the Gentiles allows us to see him not only as a successful missionary and clever theologian, but as a man totally convinced of his mission – as a man who bears the stamp of his own diverse religious and cultural roots, whose life is decisively shaped by his call experience and who in a creative and original way interprets and hands on to others his faith in Jesus Christ.

It is precisely in this way that the man Paul can be a model for every one of us. And this must be precisely what Pope Benedict is suggesting when, as noted above, he gives a central place to the leitmotiv of “learning from Paul.”

(Translation: L. Maluf) ■

<sup>1</sup> Translation of Wilhelm Schneemelcher in Edgar Hennecke’s *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, cited in *The Writings of Saint Paul*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, New York/London 1972, p. 199.