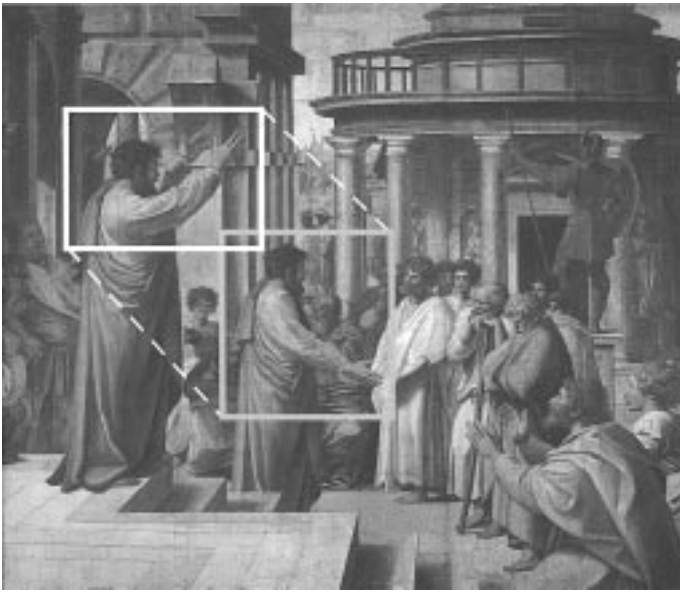

Be Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION 58



Reframing PAUL

Adapted from the book by Mark Strom

“What’s gone wrong? How can the church be an attractive, relevant community of transforming grace and conversation.”

The Graeco-Roman world was shaped by ideals and abstract ideas. These abstract concepts, such as beauty, goodness and moderation, translated into ideals of true behaviour and noble character. These ideals, in turn, maintained a social system in which one was constantly reminded of one’s place on the social ladder. The elite must always remain elite; the less so must always defer.

The Apostle Paul left these abstract ideals behind and fought against their influence upon his *ekklesiai*. This contradicts the common impression of Paul as an abstract theologian, someone who wrestled with deep theological doctrine while hovering six feet above everyday reality. But in fact, it was the philosophers of Paul’s day—and even some of Paul’s Christian opponents—who traded heavily in abstractions, one-way rhetoric and top-down hierarchies while depreciating the currency of everyday reality. By contrast, Paul the tentmaker was a conversationalist of God’s good news, a storyteller of Jesus Christ, an apostle who walked the avenues and back alleys of everyday reality. His passion was for communities of grace and conversation where the new reality of Christ was explored and embodied within the daily messiness of life.

Similar conventions of abstraction, idealism and elitism have

continued to shape Christian thought and practice almost without exception and across all traditions to the present day. Evangelicalism is no exception. In many ways evangelical thought resembles the categories and methods of classical and Graeco-Roman philosophy and theology. Our interpretive procedures too often abstract the text from its historical and modern settings in order to establish what we regard as undiluted, absolute and objective truth. Ignoring the differences between Paul’s words to Corinth, Rome and Ephesus, we reduce the data to supposed common denominators in order to formulate the abstract theological concepts of “Paul’s doctrine of church,” “Paul’s doctrine of leadership” or “the centre of Paul’s theology.” The truth is seen to lie above any cultural and historical setting. This is Plato, not Paul. Paul’s letters are reduced from rich and provocative narratives and improvisations to a database for systems of theology.

Abstraction, idealism and elitism lay at the heart of the agendas of pride that Paul tried to tear apart. He did not urge opposing parties toward a single correct position. Rather, he called for the death of intellectual and social self-interest: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). Then he modelled this new disposition of heart and mind in his own refusal of the rights

and status of being an apostle: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (1 Cor 9:19).

At the heart of Paul’s reframing of this dispute was his preoccupation with Christ, who brought coherence to Paul’s conversations. Every one of Paul’s letters shows him working from the story of Christ as his starting point. In Paul’s thought, neither Christ, nor his dying and rising, nor even his gospel was an idea or category of ideas or ideals removed from relationship. Paul knew and wanted to know the person of Christ, not theological ideas or processes abstracted from him. Paul was at pains to lift his friends’ expectations away from moral codes and to ensure that they did not turn their new freedom into a further set of rules.

Around the world, more and more evangelicals are giving up on church. They no longer relate to the sermons and services, systems and cultures that shape church life. Two desires stem from this disillusionment. The first is for grace to subvert the expectations and games of church life. The second is for meaningful and grace-full conversation to replace the irrelevance and harm of much theology, preaching and church life. Many wonder if they are alone in their suspicion that something is very wrong. Some sense dissonance between the New Testament gatherings and our own conventions of leadership and church. Some ask whether we have misrepresented Paul and his writings. Looking afresh at his anguished relationship with the Corinthians, we may well ask if we have sided with Paul—or with those sophists he derided as “super-apostles.”

Evangelicals have benefited enormously from the faithful and creative labours of many theologians. But there are other less-acknowledged sides to the story of theology: its inability to connect with everyday concerns; its use to patronise and disdain others; its role in propping up an elitist system of leadership; its deadening effects on young theological students; its promotion of pedantry and destructive debate; its second-hand character that minimises genuine creativity and new perspective; the way it imposes law in the name of protecting grace; the way it preempts and gags conversations that might otherwise break new ground in integrating life and faith. There is great value in laying a foundation of beliefs. But the methods and disposition of theology have failed to deliver its promise of a richer personal knowledge of God. Theology and church have by and large abducted the

conversations that rightfully stand at the heart of the Christian gathering.

Paul’s conversations were rich in stories. These stories characterised the gathering. The believers came together around Christ and his story. They also came with their own stories. They came to (re)connect their stories to his and to each others’ stories. That was the gathering. They taught, prophesied, shared, ate, sang and prayed their stories—their lives—together around Christ. The Spirit made the conversation possible. All the people shared the Spirit through whom they met God and one another face to face. They urged one another in conversation to grow into the full measure of their freedom and dignity.

Recent emphases on community are welcome and helpful. But they may simply lead to more *talk* about change rather than *actual* change. We must grapple with how our cultures and conventions systematically and pervasively, even deliberately, gag the most important conversations. The sermon and the service have hijacked conversation. There are conventions for talking and listening, but none for true dialogue. Preaching does not allow it. Worship services do not allow it. Each has its semblance of conversation. But the rules of each game militate against an open-ended meeting of hearts and minds, free from the controlling agendas of keeping the systems in place.

New conversation requires bringing things to the light. It requires discussing the undiscussable. Conventions of status and control inevitably arise wherever a human system incorporates norms and expectations of authority, order and rectitude. Likewise, pride, insecurity and fear are always close at hand. Paul was well aware of the games played by his contemporaries. On at least one memorable occasion, he set aside theological accuracy in preference for mutual love and respect grounded in wonder at the impartiality of God’s grace. Those of us who long to converse meaningfully with Paul and with each other must wrestle with the wisdom of his choice.

What new kinds of conversation do I envisage? First of all, I visualise not the neutral posturing of traditional exegesis and theology, nor the pseudo-interaction of preaching and church service, but people engaging with one another around concern and desire grounded in their everyday experiences. At heart is a rhythm between ancient narrative and modern story, between insight and healing. The agenda is as broad as life. The mood may be analytical and incisive, light and irreverent, deep and

therapeutic. Maybe all, some, or none of the above. At its heart are people wrestling with the Spirit and with one another to know the truth, grace and freedom of Christ in all the particulars of who they are and what fills their lives. I think of them as “grace-full” conversations. Conversations marked by grace. Conversations full of grace. Conversations that bring grace.

Grace is subversive. It undermines the ideals and standards of those of us who cannot tolerate weakness in others (or in ourselves). It undermines the pride of those of us who search out every vestige of unbiblical belief and practice. It undermines the presumption of those of us who preach the pure gospel to cure all ills. It undermines the safety of those of us who throw off the shackles of abusive and codependent relationships only to refuse grace to those who have hurt us. It undermines our need to find the ideal, the answer, the method, the cure. We are left with the weakness of grace-full conversation.

Grace leaves us with Jesus. Jesus leaves us with his Spirit. His Spirit draws us into conversation. The conversation opens us to the wonder and fragility of life. The Father who gave us life bids us live and converse in grace.

Reframing History

Paul told and retold the same story wherever he went. The story was Christ’s story. It focussed on him, and Paul claimed to have received it directly from him. But the story was also Paul’s in that he identified himself with Christ and with his commission to make him known. He was also deeply aware of how it could become “another gospel” or “no gospel at all” (Gal 1:6-9). He laboured to tell the story without deceit, pride or empty eloquence. He suffered for it and believed his trials would advance its cause.

In the Fullness of Time

Paul’s use of the term *euangelion*, “good news” or “gospel,” fits well with the use of the verb form in the Septuagint. His use also drew from the traditions of Jesus’ teaching. At the same time, the word was also intelligible to those without a Jewish heritage. The *euangelion* word group was

associated with royalty and victories and with the benefactions, festivals and sacrifices offered on such occasions.

The marriage of Old Testament hopes with the known use of the word in imperial contexts suited Paul's purposes. His good news proclaimed the long-awaited coming of the royal son of David, now crowned as the Son of God. This coronation marked the "fullness of time." Indeed, Paul understood that the final event of the story, the return of Christ, carried the hopes of the Jewish prophets' great day when the Lord would triumph and be crowned.

Closely related to Paul's use of *euangelion* was his use of another word, *mysterion*, "mystery," which enabled Paul to convey the sense of making known something that had been hidden for long ages. This mystery had many sides to it. Its origins lay before creation. The work of Christ had lifted the veil of mystery from the grave. It had baffled the best minds and thwarted the strongest tyrants of human history and could only be known by the Spirit. It was the revelation of God's scheme for human history. It was the inclusion of the Gentiles within the people of God. The mystery of God was "Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

Like *euangelion*, Paul's use of *mysterion* was similarly suited to both Jewish and Graeco-Roman audiences. In LXX Daniel 2:18-47, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, dreams of the events that are soon to determine the course of human history and the fortunes of the exiled people of Judea. But the dream remains a mystery to the king and to Daniel until God reveals its meaning to the seer. The connections to Paul's use are clear. A similar use of the term emerged in the Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period and gained some currency beyond Jewish audiences. At the same time, Paul's use of the word may have suggested comparisons to the Graeco-Roman mystery cults. Like his use of *euangelion*, Paul almost invariably used the singular *mysterion*, whereas when referring to the Graeco-Roman cults the word is always plural. This might seem to distance Paul's use from the cults. But it may be that Paul had again innovated slightly in order to turn the word for his own use. Perhaps he used the term to help his audiences compare his message to that of the cults and so to preempt their claims. If Paul deliberately used this "preeminently cultic word" in a noncultic manner, he implied that the open story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ had eclipsed the esoteric mysteries of Graeco-Roman religion.

Paul placed the identity and events of Jesus Christ at the centre of human history; they gave meaning to all that had gone before

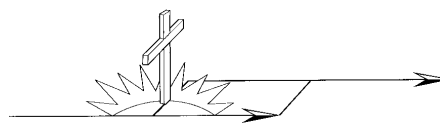
and shape to all that was to come. Time and time again, he framed his immediate concerns within a vision of history as a whole. On its grandest scale, this vision stretched from creation to new creation, even as it narrowed to two men.

Adam, Christ and the Shape of History

The Jewish prophets consistently expected a decisive event to renew the fortunes of their people. Generally these prophecies interwove themes of judgment and promise. Some had spoken of a great day, the day of the Lord, when he would deliver Israel from its enemies and a new era would dawn. So, for example, Isaiah developed this theme when he drew together under the banner of the day of the Lord the ancient holy war traditions and the theme of the nations' arrogance. This was later extended to cosmic proportions. In "that day" the Lord would come as the ancient warrior to destroy the earth and his enemies and to restore his people. By Paul's time, "the day of the Lord" was a known symbol for that time when God would conquer all his enemies and renew the creation. It would be the end of one era and the beginning of another.



Paul was no stranger to this expectation. His portrait of Christ's victorious ascension in Ephesians 4:7-9 drew on Psalm 68, a hymn of praise to the Lord, the warrior king. There are numerous other echoes in Paul of the themes of divine coronation, holy war and re-creation. Christ's return would be the day of the Lord. All of this enriches what we have noted repeatedly: that Paul placed the story of Christ at the centre of God's plan for history. In an important sense, then, the future had begun already. The single decisive day of the prophets had become two days, creating an overlap in the ages.



The prophets had anticipated a day of judgment and salvation; Paul believed that both had been revealed in Jesus Christ (Rom 1:17-18; 3:21). In this revelation, Christ had sealed the future of the world and of his people. The future had begun

because Christ had entered into the experience of the new creation in his own resurrection—he was the new man (1 Cor 15:45).

This summing up of history within a single person had profound social implications. Christ is "the one new man" in whom Jew and Gentile find a new common identity. Christ draws believers of all sexual, social and cultural distinctions into the one new identity. Through his willing obedience and humiliation, Christ had reversed the arrogance and presumption of the first man and so received the glory and honour due to the image of God (Phil 2:5-11). In so doing, he had become the model for all who would live as the Creator intended.

The same theme occurs on a grander scale in Romans. Anticipating the social tensions likely to exist or develop in and around the believers in Rome, Paul moved quickly in chapter 1 from his summary of Christ's fulfillment of Israel's history to identify Christ as the new and entirely sufficient revelation of God's plans. What follows is a lengthy clarification of the respective lot of Jew and Gentile, beginning and ending with Adam. We must recall here Paul's agenda to preempt the claims of Jerusalem and of social rank and to show how they had been made redundant in the events of his gospel. This clarifies why Paul stresses the common accountability of all people before God at the start of the letter. His portrait of the pitiful state of mankind rang true to the social realities of his time and set them in a far larger sweep of history from creation to the final revelation. The first man plunged humanity into its present state; the second man guaranteed the future.

By regarding Adam as the prototype of Christ, Paul characterised the two periods of history by the two men: Adam and Christ. The actions of the two men established the identity and experience of those whom they represented: disobedience, sin, condemnation and death; or obedience, righteousness, justification and life. So the two men characterise two eras of history and two corresponding mindsets and patterns of experience that Paul dubbed "the flesh" and "the spirit" (Rom 6:1-8:17). Those who are in Christ are led by the Spirit and see life from the vantage point of their new identity. They now wait for the final revelation of the new creation where they will regain (surpass?) the original honours of Adam—"the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-39).

This same pattern had shaped Paul's earlier portrait of the future of humanity (1 Cor 15:12-57). Jesus was "raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v. 20). The metaphor of "firstfruits" belongs to Israel's ancient tradition of

presenting the first portions of the harvest to God as a guarantee of the whole. The harvest Paul envisaged was the resurrection of all the people of God at the great day of Christ. Christ himself had been raised as the firstfruits—the guarantee—of all those who would rise from the dead because of him. Jesus was now the second man, the new image of God, characterised by heaven and by the Spirit. There is now a new humanity, patterned after the order of the new man: “And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (1 Cor 15:49).

Paul was not playing intellectual games with his friends at Corinth or Rome. He used this Adam-Christ pattern to undercut traditional social expectations and conventions. It undermined the logic of comparison, pride and self-sufficiency so critical to the social pyramid. This is clear in the objections that Paul anticipated at Rome: “So, shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? . . . Is the law itself sin? . . . Or perhaps that which is good became death for me?” (Rom 6:1, 15; 7:7, 13). The move from one challenge to the next shows Paul trying to cut off every escape route to the law. Paul had put himself out on a limb away from the security of both Jewish and Graeco-Roman conventions and ideals of morality and religious piety. If Christ determined the status of a believer, then what would hold the believer’s behaviour in check? His detractors argued that he had opened the gate to immorality and impiety. Traditional moral safeguards centre on nature, law and reason, piety and self-control. Instead, he turned his known and would-be slanderers back to the story of Christ. The only strategy congruent with the new relationship was to reaffirm one’s new identity, destiny and master. In Paul’s terms, believers must continually “reckon” themselves as in Christ and live by the promises of God alone. Paul maintained that if a profound regard for Christ’s

mercies did not bring transformation, neither would anything else. The old maxim was now radically reworked: “Know yourself” (ie., your place and rank) had become “know yourself in the rank and benefits of Christ.”

In Christ

Paul believed that the old era would remain until the triumphant return of the heavenly man and the ensuing judgment. Yet Christ’s resurrection had already inaugurated the new order of creation. All of this carried great significance for Paul’s understanding of present experience:

So then we no longer think according to the flesh. Certainly we had regarded Christ according to the flesh, but we no longer know him this way. So then, anyone in Christ is a new creation. The old has gone—the new has come!

*Those who are in Christ
are led by the Spirit
and see life from the
vantage point of their
new identity.*

Central to this affirmation is the phrase “in Christ” (or “with Christ”), which functioned for Paul somewhat like “gospel” and “mystery”—as a shorthand term that could carry one or more of the patterns of Paul’s thought. It enabled him to draw into one place Christ’s representative role and the contrast of the two ages. It also gave a deeply personal colour to these historical pictures. As their representative, Christ had guaranteed the blessings of the new creation for his people even as they lived in a world enslaved to the old order. The tensions between the two ages made every accomplishment of Christ a “now” and “not

yet” experience for Paul. The resolution lay in Christ’s own experience—what was “not yet” for Paul was already “now” for Christ. As the new man, the heavenly man, the man in full possession of the Spirit, Christ fully experiences the arrangements of the new creation. Paul locates all of the benefits of the new order with Christ, whom Paul believes is holding them secure on Paul’s behalf until they meet face to face. So the phrase was not about a mystical union, nor about an ideal of a higher spiritual or moral state to attain. There is no shift from history to some more primary reality. It was profoundly personal. As the psalmists saw themselves sheltered from the storms of life by the closeness of the Lord, Paul exulted in Christ as the one who would hold him secure until the final day. This was not a sleight of hand, as though Paul were saying, “I’ll act as though you are with me even though I know you are not!” Paul believed that the Spirit interacted with his own spirit to keep his heart and mind in the identity and blessings of the new order even while he lived in a world that was passing away. Paul’s perspectives meshed together: the historical spills over into the social and personal.

The reshaping of history and humanity in Christ radically reframed Paul’s life and thought. Paul called for a personal transformation displacing social convention and status. He urged Christians to base their lives on a God whom the best of theology would discredit. They should resist the unquestionable ideals of personal self-sufficiency and serenity. Putting their normal means of recourse to justice to one side, they were to show mercy in their leadership and benefactions to the less fortunate. Moreover, they were not to act from the normal presumption of superiority. They were to start from the radical self-awareness that, though undeserving, they had received their place in the new social structure of the body of Christ by the mercies of God.

Behold, I make all things new.

“O Father, Thou art unchanging, Thou never hast grown old; Thru countless ages, ever fresh, Thy newness doth unfold.”

The Greek word translated *new* in Rev 21:5 describes *freshness*, not age. It’s the same word used in Rev 21:1 referring to a new heaven and a new earth. For the New Jerusalem to be designated “new” is very meaningful. In the Bible we can see two creations—the old creation and the new creation. And they overlap! The difference between these two creations is not so much in the recentness of one’s existence over the other, but in their content. When we read Revelation 21:5 the emphasis should be on the Person and His being as the factor of newness, of *freshness*.

Why is it called a New Covenant? Because it replaces the old. But also, as Jesus said, “This is the New Covenant in MY blood.” It is new, and truly brings new life, simply because God is in it. Because God is IN it! Now put the emphasis on the “I”. “Behold, **I** make all things new.” — E.W.