

# PROBLEMS ARISING FROM THE ATTEMPT TO FIND THEOLOGICAL COHERENCE BETWEEN PAUL'S LETTERS\*

## ПРОБЛЕМЫ, ВОЗНИКАЮЩИЕ ПРИ ПОПЫТКЕ ОПРЕДЕЛИТЬ БОГОСЛОВСКИЙ ЦЕНТР В ПОСЛАНИЯХ ПАВЛА

**Eduard Borysov**, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament at Kiev Theological Seminary, On-site Director of Talbot School of Theology – Kiev Extension.

**Эдуард Борисов**, доктор философии в области богословия, университет Абердина, профессор Нового Завета в Киевской богословской семинарии, региональный директор киевского филиала Талботской школы богословия.

ORCID: 0000-0003-0618-4624

E-mail: boredik@gmail.com

---

"Богословские размышления" № 22, 2019: 11-26

DOI: 10.29357/2521-179X.2019.22.1

**Abstract:** The history of interpretation of Paul's letters includes discussions about the center in the apostle's theology. A number of attempts to define this pivotal theme have exemplified the difficulty in precision and broadness of the exercise. The proposals to limit the "kernel" idea to a single doctrine or theological concept have been shown to be inadequate. J. C. Becker's coherence-contingency scheme has received positive evaluation among scholars and suggests a helpful direction.

**Аннотация:** История толкования посланий Павла включает в себя дискуссию о центре богословия апостола. Разнообразие попыток определить ключевую тему демонстрирует сложность задачи – с одной стороны, ее точность, а с другой – ее широта. Предложения ограничить такую «сердцевину» одной доктриной или богословской концепцией на проверку оказались неадекватными. Схема Д. К. Бекера «когерентность-ситуативность» получила положительную оценку среди ученых и предлагает продуктивное направление.

---

\* The article received on 23.03.2018; approved for publication 25.03.2019.

J. Plevnik's Trinitarian approach in handling the center is sufficiently broad to cover Paul's theology and its foundation. The student of Paul should be aware of the problems and misconstructions involved in finding the driving principle behind the Pauline letters. Among them are: bringing a foreign idea into the text, losing track of a specific letter's context, ignoring changes in expression of the apostle's ideas, neglecting particular topics and the suppressing alternative perspectives.

**Keywords:** center, Paul, theology, coherence, particularity.

Тринитарный подход Д. Плевника в определении центра является достаточно широким для охвата всего богословия Павла и его основы. Исследователь Павла должен быть осведомлен о проблемах и ошибочных построениях, возникающих при определении движущего принципа в Павловых письмах. Среди них такие, как привнесение чуждой идеи в текст, недостаток внимания к конкретной ситуативности письма, игнорирование изменений в выражении идей апостола со временем, пренебрежение отдельными темами и подавление альтернативных взглядов.

**Ключевые слова:** богословский центр, Павел, согласованность, ситуативность.

## Introduction

Scholars interested in a systematic approach to biblical data focus on key concepts as overarching themes in a biblical book or author. Did Paul ever have a central doctrine in mind when composed his letters? Alternatively, can one talk about a unifying theme in Paul's corpus or merely *ad hoc* answers to specific circumstances of a particular church? In other words, are we justified in constructing a systematic theology of Paul? Are we bringing our own interests and agendas to the apostle's historically contingent correspondence?

In recent decades, several influential theories for the center in Paul's theology have been presented. The goal of this paper is not to add a competing view, but to discuss some of the problems arising from the attempt to find theological coherence among the apostle's letters. A short overview of the existing proposals on the topic will be followed by a number of risks that one needs to avoid in conducting a coherent reading. Among them (1) imposing extraneous ideas onto the text, (2) disregarding the particular context of each of the addressed churches, (3) neglecting the development and elaboration of Paul's teaching, (4) underestimating other themes, and (5) imposing a particular theory's domination over other perspectives. It is the goal of this article to demonstrate that current theological, philosophical and political concerns are not (necessarily) Paul's and the student of Paul should not emphasize one doctrine at the expense of other important ones (although they may not be as prominent in the apostle's letters).

### I. An Overview of the Main Attempts to Locate the Center in Paul's Theology

The existence of a theological center or "mind of Paul" in the Pauline writings is, as commonly acknowledged by Paul's students, based on such texts as Gal. 1:6–9; Phil. 3:4–14; 1 Cor. 2:2; 3:10–11; 15:14, 17; 2 Cor. 11:4.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a theological core in Pauline writings not only has theoretical significance for scholars but also reveals

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Plevnik, "The Understanding of God at the Basis of Pauline Theology." A short overview of possible theological centers in Pauline thought is presented by Reumann, "Righteousness."

“the existential significance of his message.”<sup>2</sup> It is argued, that the unifying principle of the apostle's theology was the basis for his life, mission, and teaching.

In his short overview of the historical quest for the theological center in Paul, Joseph Plevnik starts with a critique of the centrality of justification coming from the Tübingen School. He continues, reviewing Albert Schweitzer, Catholic theologians and current proponents and opponents of a center.<sup>3</sup> Here one can also mention O. Cullman (“salvation history”), O. Loretz and F. Fensham (“covenant”), H. Seebass, G. Klein, G. Fohrer (“rulership or kingdom of God”), W. Kaiser (“promise”), W. Künneth (“the resurrection of Jesus Christ”), B. Reicke (“the Christ-event”) and others.<sup>4</sup>

Richard B. Hays and John Reumann find “justification by faith” as well-suited to be the center of Paul's theology, although by using different rationales. For Hays, the justification of the believer is derived from participation in Christ, who is justified due to his faithfulness. The justification of Christ is the basis for the justification of a Christian. According to Reumann, justification is the center, because of its uniqueness and non-derivative nature in Pauline writings. No one before Paul presented and explored this doctrine in such a fundamental way. Reumann, unfortunately, ignores the fact that the apostle preached the same gospel that was common to all in the early Church (1 Cor. 15:3–5) and was not unique exclusively to Paul.<sup>5</sup> This point demonstrates that even those who uphold the traditional Reformed center, i.e., “justification by faith,” arrive to this conclusion differently or disagree whether it is primary or derivative center.

A counter reaction to the legal concept as the center in Paul became a participatory account of salvation through transformation. Originating in Germany with W. Wrede, G. Adolf Deissmann, and Albert Schweitzer, it was branded as “mysticism” and moved on to Great Britain with James Stewart, C. F. D. Moule, Morna Hooker, and North America with E. P. Sanders. According to Scott J. Hafemann, none of the German scholars, whether Wrede and Deissmann, who proposed an alternative view to the traditional one (i.e., justification by faith), or Schweitzer, with his organizing principle as the eschatological mysticism of “participation in Christ” were successful in formulating Paul's core doctrine. Similarly, W. D. Davies,<sup>6</sup> with his rejection of the “Law/gospel contrast” and proposing the inauguration of the new age of the Spirit as the main idea, could not redirect the current in Pauline scholarship. Rather, this was achieved by Krister Stendahl and E. P. Sanders.<sup>7</sup>

Sanders, following Schweitzer's theory, concluded that the justification controversy in the first century was situational and cannot be the center because it does not lead to Christian ethics and sacraments.<sup>8</sup> Since, according to the New Perspective on Paul, a

<sup>2</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology.”

<sup>4</sup> For an extended list of proposed centers see Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology*, 197–98.

<sup>5</sup> Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*; Reumann, Fitzmyer, and Quinn, “Righteousness” in the New Testament, 105–23. Cited by Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” 474–75.

<sup>6</sup> Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*.

<sup>7</sup> Hafemann, “Paul and His Interpreters.”

<sup>8</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 434; Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 220. Plevnik summarized their criterion as “anything that is derived from something else in Pauline theology is not the center.” Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” 466.

Jew is no longer considered as legalistically observing the Law for the goal of obtaining righteousness by works, justification as the center should be given up for another fundamental notion, that is “participationist eschatology.”<sup>9</sup> Here is Sanders’s summary of Schweitzer’s warning,

As long as one studies Paul under the *loci* of systematic theology, relegating eschatology to the last place in one’s discussion, understanding of Paul is hindered if not completely obscured. Further, as long as one takes the central theme in Paul’s gospel to be ‘righteousness by faith alone’, one misses the significance of the realism with which Paul thought of incorporation in the body of Christ, and consequently the heart of his theology.<sup>10</sup>

Sanders and those who propose the idea of “being in Christ” as the center, however, also miss a significant soteriological aspect, namely, the objective side of God’s salvific work through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ<sup>11</sup> that is applied by the Holy Spirit to each believer and church as a whole. Thus, I suggest, the soteriological center lies behind both the objective and subjective salvation of a person, which is accomplished by the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit.

Douglas A. Campbell follows the critics of the “Justification theory” (as he calls it), being the most influential recent proponent of an “apocalyptic” Paul. He considers the system whereby justification is the initial step of salvation that consequently is followed by sanctification as an error that does not resolve the problem of two contradictory systems. He provides following five reasons to believe so: 1) Paul never stated salvation in these two distinct phases. 2) For Paul justification and sanctification go together in parallel to each other. 3) Conceptually these are two different models. Thus, shifting from one to the other implies not a progress but abrogation of the previous. 4) In reality justification simply subordinates sanctification, not sequencing it. 5) When unconditional justification is combined with conditional sanctification there is but conditional salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Campbell believes that Käsemann, J. C. Beker, Leander E. Keck, M. C. de Boer, and J. Louis (Lou) Martyn work in a similar apocalyptic framework that supports his alternative model in Romans 5–8, “Martyn, and the tradition within which he stands, shares the alternative theory’s emphases on unconditionality and grace, on revelation, and on a fundamentally liberative soteriology, and this in terms of an inaugurated eschatological existence in relation to the entire cosmos.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, Campbell concludes, “The “participatory” and the “apocalyptic” Paul are both posited in large measure in opposition to the same underlying problem: the construal of Paul’s gospel in terms of Justification.”<sup>14</sup> He believes that in Paul’s forensic, relational, and ethical dimensions operate simultaneously, because being/state of the righteous God/person is at the

<sup>9</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 552.

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, 434.

<sup>11</sup> Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” 469–70, 472.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, 190. Wright is correct when he judges Campbell’s proposal to read Romans 5–8 as Paul’s objection to his opponent’s presentation of justification in Romans 1–4 as not adequately justifiable in *The Deliverance of God*. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 192.

same time his or her act/action.<sup>15</sup> The author of the new reframing of Pauline theology proposes a relational transformative participation in the trinitarian salvific act, “Paul’s account of sanctification *is* the gospel. His description of deliverance and cleansing “in Christ,” through the works of the Spirit, at the behest of the Father, the entire process being symbolized by baptism, *is* the good news.”<sup>16</sup> This trinitarian dimension to Paul’s thought, to my mind, should be welcomed as a promising way forward in understanding the apostle’s overarching thinking.

One should also note N. T. Wright’s influential contribution to the discussion of Paul’s theological motif. The essence of Paul’s preaching, according to Wright is the climax of God’s covenant with Abraham: “Paul invokes the great stories of God, Israel and the world because his view of salvation itself, and with it justification and all the rest, is not an ahistorical scheme about how individuals come into a right relationship with God, but rather tells how the God of Abraham has fulfilled his promises at last through the apocalyptic death and resurrection of his own beloved Son.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike James D. G. Dunn<sup>18</sup> – another famous representative of the New Perspective on Paul – Wright finds a covenantal theology in Paul that was based on the grand God’s story of creation and restoration through Abraham. Wright understands “God’s righteousness” as his faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham (Gen 15), while for John Piper it is “God’s concern for God’s own glory.”<sup>19</sup> “Justification” of God is not a transfer of a “righteous character” of God as a judge to a person (imputation, Piper), but a “declaration of a status” that a person is in the right, not necessarily totally virtuous (speech-act, Wright).<sup>20</sup> For Wright, the story of God’s people, Israel, and her exile reshaped around the story of the Messiah is the center of Paul’s worldview and theology.<sup>21</sup> Thus, creation and covenant broken by humanity and restored through the faithfulness of Israel’s representative Jesus the Messiah, King and Lord (who died and is risen from the dead as an apocalyptic intervention of God into the world) are the main concepts, through which Wright reads Paul.<sup>22</sup>

According to Don N. Howell Jr., “the justification-participation debate, then, provides an arena in which to evaluate the feasibility of a soteriological center for Pauline

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, 680.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, 934 (emphasis original). Chris Tilling supports Campbell’s alternative construal of Romans against his critics. Tilling’s relational interpretation of Paul’s trinitarian God-talk is timely and promising. See his discussions in Tilling, *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*, chaps. 4, 14; Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *Paul*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> For Dunn’s view on the doctrine of justification in Paul see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 334–89.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, *Justification*, 64, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, 69. The former bishop of Durham argues that the concept of justification is just one of the ways to talk about salvation in Scriptures. The doctrine of justification acquired features that go beyond what Paul actually said. It results in reading into Scriptures our definition of justification, missing the point of Scripture in those places where the term occurs, funding support where it is not.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 22. See Wright’s discussion of juridical, participationist, apocalyptic, salvation-history and covenantal approaches to the theological center on pp. 38–40.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Paul*, 52. Wright claims that three main doctrines of Judaism, i.e., monotheism, election of Israel and eschatology, were reshaped by Paul around God’s revelation in Jesus the Messiah and the gift of the Spirit. Wright, chaps. 5–7.

theology.”<sup>23</sup> At the end of his discussion, he concludes that neither justification nor participation can be an overarching theme of the Pauline corpus. Even when they are counted as parallel ideas that complement each other, both are part of soteriological and Christological realms. The search for the theological center needs to go beyond these doctrines into the realm of God the Father’s salvific act.<sup>24</sup> This is a welcomed conclusion, which, in my view, would benefit from a more elaborated trinitarian framework. Paul often presents the Father’s work in the context of the Son’s sacrificial obedience on behalf of sinners and the internal work of the Spirit inside believers (e.g., Rom. 5:1-5; 8:14-17; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 4:4-6; 2 Thess. 2:13-14).

J. Christiaan Beker, in his attempt to avoid Sanders’ pitfall, helpfully, in my opinion, divides Paul’s theology into two levels: the “deep” level of the Christ event with its apocalyptic interpretation, and the “surface” level of contingent expressions, such as righteousness, adoption, freedom, and the like. Moving in that direction, Beker avoids the criticism of having a derived center by trying to reach the bedrock of the whole superstructure of Paul’s theology. The sufficiency of the apocalyptic understanding of Jesus Christ, however, is an overstatement, because it does not explain the entire person of Christ, e.g., his pre-existence nor gives an adequate place for the Father and the Spirit.<sup>25</sup> The aforementioned shortcoming notwithstanding, this article will utilize Beker’s approach to assess existing theological centers proposed by Pauline scholars.

Plevnik concludes that the center of Paul’s theology is a broad notion that includes “his [i.e., Paul’s] understanding of Christ and of God, his understanding of God’s salvific action through Christ, involving the Easter event and its implications, the present lordship, the future coming of Christ, and the appropriation of salvation.”<sup>26</sup> He acknowledges that this may not be fully expressed in each epistle, but can at least be generally assumed in Paul’s dealings with specific issues. In a footnote, Plevnik mentions the significant role of the Holy Spirit in affirming, revealing, guiding, and supporting the appropriation of the Christ event and salvation by early Christians.<sup>27</sup> If this is true, then we should modify

<sup>23</sup> Howell, “The Center of Pauline Theology.”

<sup>24</sup> Howell, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 16–19. Throughout this article I will use Beker’s analysis primarily as an illustration of particular points, not as the ground of my personal approach. See the fair critique by Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” 473–74. Other critiques of Beker’s “coherence-contingency scheme” are presented by Achtemeier, “Finding the Way to Paul’s Theology”; Boers, “The Foundations of Paul’s Thought.” Cited by Plevnik, “The Understanding of God at the Basis of Pauline Theology,” 555. I concur with Wright, who considers Campbell’s use of “apocalyptic” to describe his rereading of Paul misleading Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 189.

<sup>26</sup> Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” 477–78. Toews summarizes the center of Romans in similar vein that “[t]he theological center of Romans is the gospel of God’s salvation for all people.” Toews, *Romans*, 365.

<sup>27</sup> Plevnik, “The Center of Pauline Theology,” 478. In his later article, Plevnik expanded this idea. See Plevnik, “The Understanding of God at the Basis of Pauline Theology,” 562–63. Plevnik believes that the central theological idea can be found primarily in Romans and is connected with Jesus Christ as the Son of God in communion with the Father and the Spirit. He writes, “[T]he center or the basis of Pauline theology is not in the effects of Christ’s salvific action but on a deeper level, in the underlying relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to one another and in their joint contribution to our salvation.” Plevnik, 567.

the center by adding a fully trinitarian dimension to it (Gal 3:2–3; 5:16–26; Rom 5:5; 8:11–16; 1 Cor. 2:6–16; 2 Cor. 5:5).

In the quest for a center in Paul, some factors are crucial to limiting the scope of the considered data. Among such factors are (1) the number of Paul's letters (recognized by scholarship or the disputed ones), (2) a possible development or refining of his theology during his missionary activities (his "early" and "later" theology), and (3) the contextual particularities of the letters. Plevnik, among others, insists on considering only the undisputed letters. Arguably, however, if one limits the range of data to only the accepted Pauline letters, one can be charged, using Plevnik's words, with "truncating and warping the apostle's thought or imposing a mode of thinking on him that is not his own."<sup>28</sup> If, in reality, the disputed letters are authentic, then we risk losing significant aspects of the apostle's theology, for example, the cosmic dimension of Christology and soteriology, as well as some aspects of eschatology and ecclesiology (Col. 1:15–20; 2:15; Eph. 1:10, 22–23; 2:6; 3:10; 4:8–10; 2 Thess. 2:1–12). Moreover, not all of Paul's letters have been preserved, which can mean that his theology is much broader than we can distill from the letters we possess. The preserved letters themselves are limited in revealing Paul's mind because, for the most part, they are contingent and polemic in nature. As Dunn insightfully concludes, "[epistles] would give us the theology of Paul's controversies rather than the theology of Paul."<sup>29</sup> The question, perhaps, should be, is a center of Pauline theology attainable for us in the clear-cut definition? What fallacies of generalization do we need to consider in our pursuit of the center in Paul?

## II. Problems Arising from the Attempt to Find Theological Coherence Among Paul's Letters

### 1. Imposed Ideas

Harmonization and generalization tend to draw universal principles from the letters, which may not be the real intentions of Paul in a specific ecclesial context. By doing this, one risks bringing extraneous ideas into other letters. This is the case when Paul's readers approach the author with personal questions and find parallels with their situation. For instance, the New Perspective on Paul has proven, for the majority of Paul's students, that the traditional Lutheran reading of the epistles in juridical terms can be misleading. Martin Luther, driven by the slogan "justification by faith alone," interpreted Paul's situation and soteriological conflict with Jews and/or Jewish followers of Christ as an issue of legal status before God akin to his dealing with Roman Catholic opponents. We can refer to this motif as the theological and existential grid that he applied to his reading of Paul.<sup>30</sup>

Two contemporary examples of such a grid can be found in Ernst Käsemann and Beker. In his *Commentary on Romans*, Käsemann attempted to summarize "Paul's theological

---

<sup>28</sup> Plevnik, "The Center of Pauline Theology," 469. Childs' legitimate call for a canonical reading is appropriate in this regard. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*.

<sup>29</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 14, 17.

<sup>30</sup> About the introspective reading of Paul by Luther see Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays*, 12–13.

treatise” by the notion of justification by faith.<sup>31</sup> In response, Herman Ridderbos discussed the danger of shackling the message of the apostle with the idea of justification by faith because such an approach could rob the message of its “redemptive historical dynamic” and make it into a timeless consideration of individualistic justification.<sup>32</sup> According to Beker, Käsemann, along with other Pauline students who use precise theological concepts for a center, confused the contingent notion of justification with a fluid but coherent center in Paul. For Beker, this center is constituted by the subtextual “apocalyptic interpretation of the Christ-event.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, he concludes, “[t]he validity of locating Paul’s coherent center on a subtextual level depends on its proximity or distance to the text of the letters, that is, on the transparency of the coherent center in the text.”<sup>34</sup> The problem with both examples is that not every text from the Pauline corpus reveals Käsemann’s or Beker’s center. What if the reason for that is not a lack of or limited transparency of the text, but rather because the center itself is different? Therefore, we are trying to impose our understanding of the pivotal idea on the subtextual level. How can one be sure that he has attained the subtextual organizing principle of Paul?

Taking into account the historical conditions of Luther’s debate that influenced his understanding of the nature of Paul’s debate, and the creation of an interpretative pattern used by contemporary readers, we need to conclude that personal biases, struggles, and intellectual environment impact one’s approach to hermeneutics. The theme of justification can be prominent in the dialogs of Galatians and Romans (and to some extent, Philippians), but not of Thessalonians, Corinthians, Philemon and other epistles. Reconciliation might be considered as a theme in Romans and 2 Corinthians, but not in Philippians. In light of the difficulties in establishing the theological center in Paul, several solutions were proposed, which vary from an explicit denial of an ideological axis in Paul to an attempt to delineate a theological theme limited in scope. Beker summarizes these proposed solutions in the following way, “(1) Paul is on the whole coherent, but he is not systematic [Sanders]. (2) Paul is incoherent, there is no coherent center in Paul [Räisänen]. (3) Paul’s developmental theological journey explains his contradictory thoughts (Hübner, among others). (4) Paul’s coherent center must be located in his psyche (Gerd Theissen).”<sup>35</sup> We may add to the list: (5) concrete attempts to delineate the pivotal theme of Pauline theology as “justification by faith” (Käsemann), or “reconciliation” (Ralph Martin), as well as (6) broad generalizations, such as, “the gospel” (I. Howard Marshall),<sup>36</sup> “the redemptive work of Christ” (George E. Ladd), and “the eschatological presence of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ” (Udo Schnelle).<sup>37</sup> This diversity

<sup>31</sup> Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*. See also Reumann, who takes Käsemann’s approach, Reumann, Fitzmyer, and Quinn, “*Righteousness*” in *the New Testament*, 105–23.

<sup>32</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus*, 63. A view similar to that of Ridderbos is presented by Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 412. Ladd suggests that the unifying center of Paul’s theology is “the redemptive work of Christ as the center of redemptive history.”

<sup>33</sup> Beker, “Paul the Theologian.”

<sup>34</sup> Beker, 365.

<sup>35</sup> Beker, 354; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*; Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*; Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*; Räisänen, *The Torah and Christ*; Hübner, “Methodologie und Theologie.”

<sup>36</sup> Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*; Martin, *Reconciliation*; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 423.

<sup>37</sup> Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 389.



of proposals is the evidence of the multifaceted nature of the epistles, which can hardly be forced to fit one theme.

## 2. The Loss of Particularity

An attempt to locate the coherence of the letters in a theological center can violate the particularity of the letters. It ignores the context of the addressees and the specific reasons behind each letter. The recent studies of the social settings of the early Christian communities have shown how crucial it is to read Paul as a Jewish follower of Jesus in the Greco-Roman world. His teaching did not exist within the boundaries of an isolated sect, but, to an extent, was a competing religious philosophy with certain political claims. The followers of Christ in Paul's communities lived within the hierarchical social structure of polytheistic and multi-philosophical societies that endorsed certain class, race, and family codes.<sup>38</sup> The problems addressed in Paul's letters could arise only within groups closely interacting with their society on the matters of role and relationships between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, parents and children, masters and slaves, the state and its citizens. To have a balanced approach to Paul's thought, one will need to recognize this aspect of social conditionality.

An attempt to generalize the Pauline corpus into a systematic doctrine risks losing a contextualized reading and interpretation. In Beker's estimate, Käsemann in his commentary on Romans overstressed a unifying theological idea over the contextual particularities of the letter's intended audience. Thus Beker says, "Käsemann should have paid far more attention to the framework of Romans (1:1–15; 15:14–33), to the question of its intended audience, to the situation in which it was written, to the particular function it was intended to perform, and to the intended result of the letter."<sup>39</sup> Another example how a lack of attentiveness to a letter's particularity can lead to its misreading is provided by Williams S. Campbell. In his excellent book *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* he points how the traditional understanding of the addressee in Romans 2 as a Jewish Jesus-believer ignores textual and rhetorical features of the chapter. Consequently, such reading presents a skewed interpretation of Judaism in this chapter and Romans in general, which is, arguably, a misinterpretation of Paul's view of Judaism.<sup>40</sup> I agree with Nils Alstrup Dahl that canonicity and catholicity of the epistles should not be stressed at the expense of their particularity. The significance of the fact that Paul wrote letters to individual churches points to "historicalness of all theology, even that of the apostle."<sup>41</sup> The context of a particular church does not make Paul's theological statements less universal.

---

<sup>38</sup> For an example of such studies see Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World*; Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*.

<sup>39</sup> Beker, "Review of Commentary on Romans, by Ernst Käsemann." According to Plevnik, among those scholars who question the centrality of justification by faith in Paul's thought are Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*; Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays*, 78–96; Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 70–94; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*; Beker, *Paul the Apostle*; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, lvi–vii; Martin, *Reconciliation*, 149–54. See in Plevnik, "The Center of Pauline Theology," 462.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*, chap. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Dahl, "The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church," 271.

David K. Lowery agrees that “the letters individually and collectively do not present a comprehensive or systematic theology.”<sup>42</sup> Even when acknowledging that Romans is the closest to being a “systematic theological presentation,” he concludes that this letter has a strategic value for Paul as a missionary and not merely as a theologian. Paul was driven by universal principles while giving responses to particular church issues. Therefore, there is no need in making an epistle universal to find the universal principle in a particular letter. It is true that specific applications of theology to particular circumstances cannot be the center, but they may direct us to the center. By ignoring particularity, we create the Platonic center of Pauline theology, which does not exist in reality, but only in the mind of Paul, or perhaps, in the minds of his interpreters.

### 3. Static Theology

Universalization may disregard theological development in Paul’s thought, assuming that the formulation of certain aspects of the apostle’s teaching (e.g., *parousia*) has never changed over time. The question of development in Paul’s theology is, undoubtedly, debatable. However, we must at least agree that some aspects of the apostle’s teaching have received new expression or elaboration with time. The authors of the book *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* do not believe there is thought development in Paul’s presentation of the imminent coming of Jesus Christ, “In the case of 1 Thes 4 and 2 Cor 1, interpreters have probably misunderstood Paul’s earlier comments. The “we” of 1 Thes 4:15 does not necessarily include Paul. Grammatically, the phrase “we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord” may simply mean, “whichever Christians are still alive.””<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, they recognize the possibility of “progress” between 1 and 2 Thessalonians, due to the misunderstandings of the addressees. It is clear that in Paul motivation for readiness and serving with enthusiasm in view of the imminent return of the Lord (1 Thess. 3:13; 4:15–17; 5:6, 23) was overshadowed by a serene acceptance of the prospect of death (2 Thess. 2:1–2; Phil. 1:20–26; 2:17, cf. 2 Tim. 4:6–8). Another instance of such developments is, arguably, transition from charismatic church leadership based on spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12) to hierarchical or structural leadership (1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1).

Dunn proffers explicitly further instances of elaboration by Paul himself in his theology, acknowledging that “evolution” is an inappropriate term for it.<sup>44</sup> He says that some of the new emphases in Paul’s theology are his “apostleship” and “justification by faith” in Gal. 2–3, which emerged due to the threat to the “truth of the gospel.” In the same way, the theology of suffering received its full expression in 2 Corinthians. These facts point not to the lack of these themes in the apostle’s earlier teaching, but rather to the intention to define and clarify his beliefs.

We should also assume that Paul did not need to repeat the core of his theology to those whom he already preached during his missionary travels, with the exception of Romans (1 Thess. 1:9–10; 1 Cor. 3:10–11; 15:1–5; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal 1:6–9). Using the

<sup>42</sup> Lowery, “A Theology of Paul’s Missionary Epistles,” 245.

<sup>43</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 440.

<sup>44</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 730–31.

written correspondence with local churches, the apostle seeks to apply his once-preached gospel to their specific situations. We are faced more with contingent manifestations of his theology than with hardcore systematic presentation. As Plevnik comments, Paul “builds on the established foundation and appeals to it.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, we may, at least, presume that new situations and tensions in Paul’s ministry caused him to develop applications of his theology.

#### 4. Overgeneralization

To select a theological center of Paul’s letters may lead to undermining other theological and practical themes present in them. It is difficult—if at all possible—to summarize epistles written in response to specific church problems with one overarching topic. Here the question is how broad the idea needs to be to encompass the teaching of the famous, early Christian theologian and missionary. The fact that scholars differ in discerning the core of Paul’s theology attests to the subjective nature of the criteria implemented in their search. The debate over what is primary and what is derived for the apostle is again centered on the question of which theme is foundational. The proponents of the kernel idea find inadequacies in the suggestions of others, saying, “the flag does not cover the cargo,” e.g., justification by faith is not broad enough to include the subjective appropriation of salvation in Christ and its practical consequences.

Dunn is correct in his contention that theology which concentrates solely on doctrine is “lopsided and incomplete”<sup>46</sup> because Paul’s gospel was “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (1 Thess. 1:5, ESV). The core idea of the apostle was never purely intellectual. For Paul, a Jew who was rooted in the teaching and instructions of the Torah for life, it was unthinkable to divide belief from praxis. His key convictions motivated him to live them out accordingly and to set an example of what they mean for others. Real conviction does not exist exclusively on the theoretical level but always finds expression on the existential level. Thus, we bring in an unnecessary dichotomy when we limit our study of the theological center by studying only Rom. 1–11 and Gal. 1–4 and ignore the “applicational” parts of the letters.

An example of having too narrow a center, whereby one theme undermines other theological themes, is reconciliation. Ralph Martin, in his article, *Center of Paul’s Theology*, discusses several criteria for defining “the underlying principle of coherence in Paul’s theology.”<sup>47</sup> These criteria, as he realizes, might become a part of a vicious hermeneutical circle: we find the criteria from Paul’s letters that prove our assumed theological center. Martin’s choice of patterns in Paul’s theology may be regarded arbitrary because they do not encompass all of the significant data in the apostle’s writings. Such important topics as the place and role of the Holy Spirit, Israel, sacraments, Church, and eschatology, are absent from his list. Additionally, reconciliation as the unifying theme oversimplifies

---

<sup>45</sup> Plevnik, “The Understanding of God at the Basis of Pauline Theology,” 563–64.

<sup>46</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Martin, “Center of Paul’s Theology,” 92.

the issue, based on the fact of infrequent usage by Paul.<sup>48</sup> Davis, commenting on Martin's *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, says, "[t]here is a danger here, of course—the danger of constructing a forced and artificial unity from our modern canonical perspective rather than discerning a unity recognized and utilized within the NT itself. But it is a danger of which Martin seems aware."<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Beker concludes that no single concept can articulate Paul's thinking. On the contrary, these are mere "fragments" of the apostle's thought. He says, "[t]he time is past when a preferred key-term of Paul is played off against others or when the preferred term is simply imposed on "the whole Paul" (i.e., on the totality of Paul's letters)."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, he suggests maintaining fluidity regarding a coherent center that allows for multiple contingent expressions.<sup>51</sup> To avoid an inflexible center that cannot encompass a broad range of topics in Paul's letters, J. Paul Sampley utilizes a broader concept, i.e., Paul's "world of thought," which again, the interpreter can hardly identify.<sup>52</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier presupposes that the theological center may consist of several essential elements, e.g., one gospel, Christ crucified and risen, and various other concepts.<sup>53</sup> Even if one accepts a multifaceted center with several components, this does not resolve the debate over which, and how many, components there should be.

## 5. "Normal" Reading

In a desire to harmonize Paul's letters an interpreter may impose one way of reading at the expense of other perspectives. In her search for the center, the student of Paul should cope with, in words of Paula Gooder, "an ever expanding range of ways of interpreting the biblical text," which "seek to disturb the dominant, traditional readings of texts... [However,] they should not be viewed as 'abnormal' but as establishing a wider range of 'normal.'"<sup>54</sup> A number of alternative readings have criticized the traditional approaches, and have presented their corrective insights. For instance, Kathy Ehrensperger, in her analysis of mainstream commentators and some feminist interpreters, concludes that their dominant approach was in limiting Paul's thought exclusively to Hellenistic ideas. "They thus depict him as a man driven by the desire to overcome any kind of particularities, especially ethnic particularities, in anticipation of his vision of the world to come, where God's reign will eradicate all differences and distinctions between peoples and nations."<sup>55</sup> This Hellenistic idea of sameness and oneness, in their view, predominates Paul's theology. The eradication of ethnic, cultural,

<sup>48</sup> Dockery, "Review of *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, by Ralph P. Martin."

<sup>49</sup> Davis, "Review of *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, by Ralph P. Martin."

<sup>50</sup> Beker, "Paul the Theologian," 355.

<sup>51</sup> Beker, "Recasting Pauline Theology," 16–17.

<sup>52</sup> Sampley, "From Text to Thought World," 5.

<sup>53</sup> Achtemeier, "Finding the Way to Paul's Theology," 30–34. In relation to the Pastoral Epistles Mark L. Bailey presents a contextualized but limited center, "[a]t the theological center of the Pastorals is the need to defend the faith against encroaching errorists." Bailey, "A Theology of Paul's Pastoral Epistles," 334.

<sup>54</sup> Gooder, *Searching for Meaning*, xv, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Ehrensperger, *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged*, 179.

and religious identities is evaluated as the ideal of the one people "in Christ." Any differences brought in by the evangelized nations threaten the unity of the Body of Christ and thus are subject to elimination.

A perspective informed by one's personal experience and preference can be deficient in terms of an extreme overreaction to the dominant view. The scope of this paper does not allow delving into an in-depth survey of different non-traditional approaches. The subjective nature of these approaches, which aim at presenting the minority interpretative voices, is something they all have in common. For most of them, the context of the reader is more important than the context of Paul and his audience. The plurality of interpretational grids and, therefore, the plurality of central ideas, should be welcomed and celebrated. These alternative perspectives with their cultural and social experiences, open new insights for Pauline scholarship. An interpretation which is faithful to the text will listen to different voices from divergent experiences but will evaluate them by their proximity to the particular expression of Paul's thought in his epistles.

### III. Conclusion

This study has attempted to show some of the difficulties related to the search for coherence and a theological center in Paul's letters. As has been demonstrated above, attempts to define the unifying principle as a particular doctrine (justification by faith), notion ("in Christ," reconciliation, gospel) or phrase (God's salvific act in Christ) have their shortcomings and cannot represent the *totus Paulus*. It is legitimate, in my view, to agree with Beker that the coherent core of the apostle's theology is presented via contingent expressions of the letters that apply Paul's gospel to particular circumstances among Christian communities. The danger of universalizing ideas in the epistles consists of bringing to the text one's own presuppositions and context, violating the particularity of a letter, disregarding theological progress, undermining other theological and practical themes, and imposing a particular way of reading Paul.

The complex nature of Paul's theology contained in the available corpus of writings should remind interpreters of the complex nature of theological center. Moreover, the extant letters preserve not the systematic account of the apostle's theologizing but a contingent demonstration of his theology in practice. Such realization allows one to locate a theological center of a letter or letters at best, not the whole of Paul's world-thought. A theological axis limited to the Christ event downplays crucial roles of the Father and the Spirit. Hence, the fruitful quest for the coherent center should continue in the direction of a Trinitarian reading, with openness to insights from alternative perspectives.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> For recent examples of such trinitarian interpretations of Paul see Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*; Hill, *Paul and the Trinity*; Borysov, *Triadosis* (forthcoming).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achtemeier, Paul J. "Finding the Way to Paul's Theology: A Response to J. Christiaan Beker and J. Paul Sampley." In *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, edited by Jouette M. Bassler, 1:25–36. Pauline Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.
- Bailey, Mark L. "A Theology of Paul's Pastoral Epistles." In *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, edited by Roy B. Zuck and Darrell L. Bock, 333–68. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.
- Balla, Peter. *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise*. WUNT 95. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997.
- Beker, J. Christiaan. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Paul the Theologian: Major Motifs in Pauline Theology." *Interpretation* 43, no. 4 (1989): 352–65.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Recasting Pauline Theology: The Coherence-Contingency Scheme as Interpretive Model." In *Pauline Theology*, edited by Jouette M. Bassler, Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Review of Commentary on Romans, by Ernst Käsemann." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 7, no. 3 (1981): 8–9.
- Boers, Hendrikus W. "The Foundations of Paul's Thought: A Methodological Investigation – the Problem of the Coherent Center of Paul's Thought." *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 42, no. 1 (1988): 55–68.
- Borysov, Eduard. *Triadosis: Union with the Triune God: Interpretations of the Participationist Dimensions of Paul's Soteriology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019.
- Campbell, Douglas A. *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Campbell, William S. *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*. London: T & T Clark, 2008.
- Childs, Brevard S. *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994.
- Dahl, Nils Alstrup. *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church." In *Neotestamentica et Patristica: Eine Freundesgabe Herrn Professor Dr. Oscar Cullmann Zu Seinem 60. Geburtstag Überreicht*, edited by W. C. van Unnik, 6:261–71. NovTSup. Leiden: Brill, 1962.
- Davies, W. D. *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*. Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1998.
- Davis, James A. "Review of Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology, by Ralph P.

- Martin." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 2 (1983): 227–28.
- Dockery, D. S. "Review of Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology, by Ralph P. Martin." *Grace Theological Journal*, no. 5 (1984): 300–301.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Ehrensperger, Kathy. *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies*. New York: T & T Clark, 2004.
- Gooder, Paula. *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.
- Hafemann, Scott J. "Paul and His Interpreters." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, 666–79. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Hays, Richard B. *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Hill, Wesley. *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.
- Howell, Don N. "The Center of Pauline Theology." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 601 (1994): 50–70.
- Hubbard, Moyer V. *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World: A Narrative Introduction*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010.
- Hübner, Hans. "Methodologie und Theologie: zu neuen methodischen Ansätzen in der Paulusforschung." *Kerygma und Dogma* 33, no. 4 (1987): 150–75.
- Käsemann, Ernst. *Commentary on Romans*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Dallas: Word, 1993.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Lowery, David K. "A Theology of Paul's Missionary Epistles." In *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, edited by Roy B. Zuck and Darrell L. Bock, 243–97. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Martin, Ralph P. *2 Corinthians*. WBC 40. Waco, TX: Word, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Center of Paul's Theology." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, 92–94. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981.

- Plevnik, Joseph. "The Center of Pauline Theology." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1989): 461–78.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Understanding of God at the Basis of Pauline Theology." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2003): 554–67.
- Räisänen, Heikki. *Paul and the Law*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Torah and Christ*. Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society, 1986.
- Reumann, John. "Righteousness: New Testament." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 5:724–73. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
- Reumann, John, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Jerome D. Quinn. "Righteousness" in the New Testament: "Justification" in the United States: *Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.
- Ridderbos, Herman. *Paul and Jesus: Origin and General Character of Paul's Preaching of Christ*. Translated by David H. Freeman. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958.
- Sampley, J. Paul. "From Text to Thought World: The Route to Paul's Ways." In *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, edited by Jouette M. Bassler, 1:3–14. Pauline Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.
- Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.
- Schnelle, Udo. *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*. Translated by M. Eugene Boring. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. Translated by William Montgomery. London: Black, 1931.
- Stendahl, Krister. *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976.
- Theissen, Gerd. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.
- Tilling, Chris, ed. *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul's Divine Christology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.
- Toews, John E. *Romans*. Believers Church Bible Commentary 20. Scottdale: Herald, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.