
The Apostle Paul: An Intellectual?

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Most Christians, whatever their particular doctrinal preferences, have claimed the apostle Paul as one of their own. He represents what most followers of Christ would recognize as essentially Christian. There are exceptions, of course. Some feminists consider Paul a male chauvinist with few redeeming qualities.¹ Other people have seen in Paul a messianist with masochistic tendencies,² or an incorrigible authoritarian with delusions of grandeur,³ who had no tolerance for the views of anyone else.⁴ Even those who paint him in negative colors, however, find it difficult to simply dismiss him.

In the 20th century, under the influence of Albert Schweitzer and Adolf Deissmann, it became popular to understand Paul as a great mystic.⁵ According to Deissmann, there are two kinds of mysticism. Some mystics see as life's goal the achieving of the total dissolution of the self in absolute passivity. Others want to be possessed by God in order to be active as agents of the divine. In this pattern Paul, obviously, would appear as a mystic of the second kind. If he was indeed a mystic, however, it would be difficult to think of him as an intellectual. Mystics are too involved with themselves and the salvation of souls to be much concerned with ideas. The presentation of Paul as a mystic at the turn of the century was, in part, an effort to combat the prevailing picture of him as the great doctrinal architect who had built a marvelous intellectual edifice on the Protestant foundation of righteousness by faith.

No one doubts that Paul affirmed the significance of God's grace and humanity's need to believe in Christ as God's agent of salvation. Many today, however, doubt that the notion of righteousness by faith is at the

center of Paul's thought. As a matter of fact, establishing what is central to Paul's thought is being recognized as nearly impossible precisely because he did not build a systematic doctrinal edifice.⁶

Toward a Definition

I would like to explore the notion that Paul was an intellectual without getting bogged down in the debate I have briefly summarized. I imagine that some may find the whole exercise ill-conceived. Why would anyone want to be known as an intellectual? We are all familiar with the caricature of intellectuals as individuals so concerned with understanding the options on every issue that they become incapable of ever doing anything. Intellectuals are eggheads who live in the clouds, totally ignorant of the pains and passions that drive the lives of common mortals, or so we are told.

To guide my discussion of Paul, therefore, I would like to offer a simple definition. An intellectual is a person who values human reason, both its powers and its ways. A Christian intellectual, who recognizes the importance of revelation and the ever-active influence of the Holy Spirit, also values human reason. After all, revelation is not unequivocal, and the Holy Spirit does not always get people's attention by tapping them on the shoulder.

God usually communicates with us by appealing to our reason. By reason we mean both that which gives the mind the structures within which any thought is possible and also those steps taken by the mind according to certain agreed-upon rules. Following these rules one may argue for the superiority of one proposition over

another. Conclusions arrived at without following these rules are judged unreasonable or illogical.

A person who lacks the built-in structures of reason is said to have lost his or her mind. Christian believers are not expected to lose their minds, or to argue in illogical ways. Faith never overrules reason, even if, as Tillich so beautifully explained, faith transcends reason. As he put it, faith is reason in ecstasis.⁷ Still, what an individual believer believes cannot be capricious or purely personal. It must be able to withstand the judgment of others: in other words, it must fit rationality. This means that the Christian believer who is an intellectual places an even higher value in the judgment of reason.

A Reasonable Worship

I believe that this was the case with Paul. Pauline exegetes agree that the first 11 chapters of the letter to the Romans contain Paul's theological argument, and that at the beginning of chapter 12 the "therefore" introduces Paul's conclusion to the argument in terms of its significance for everyday life:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, as your reasonable^a worship, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Do not allow this age to mold you according to its structures.

Rather be metamorphosed with a new mind from above so that you may evaluate what is the will of God, that is, the good and acceptable and perfect.^a

In this verse Paul states two rather remarkable ideas having to do with worship. The first is one insisted upon

by the classical prophets of Israel, namely, that living contrary to the will of God in one's daily affairs at home and in the marketplace annuls whatever one may do at the temple. The second proposes that Christians must offer their own bodies in a "living sacrifice," rather than dead heifers. Wishing to characterize this type of sacrifice he names it a "reasonable worship."

Why is this kind of life, this living sacrifice, worship in accordance with reason? Because, Paul explains, acting out a living sacrifice entails refusing to allow "this age" (this world) to mold Christians according to its own schemes. In the Christian way of life the Holy Spirit, rather than this age, is what transforms and shapes conduct by the renewal of the mind. If this is the case, Paul continues, Christians will be able to discern what is good, acceptable, and perfect, in other words, the will of God.

This text reveals a Paul who places an enormous amount of trust in the power of the mind renewed by the Holy Spirit. Here Christians are presented as the sole arbiters of the will of God. The Spirit has empowered them to make judgments about options that present themselves as expressions of God's will. The gospel Paul preaches is not one that establishes him as the only one capable of discerning the will of God. When he explains how the gospel he presented in the first 11 chapters of Romans informs directly the practical life of Christians, he writes of a mind renewed from above as the guide for a life that, because it accomplishes God's will, actualizes in itself through worship. What Christians do when they come together to sing, pray, listen to the Word, and share their testimonies is beneficial only to the extent it contributes to the offering of a living sacrifice to God in their everyday life.

Christian Discernment

Paul valued the ability of others to use their minds. This is demonstrated by the way he

openly appealed to his readers to evaluate the reasonableness of his arguments by exercising their powers of discernment. He writes: "I speak as to reasonable people. Judge for yourselves what I say" (1 Corinthians 10:15). Paul loses his patience with the Galatians who ignore the evidence of their own experience, against which there can be no argument, and, rather harshly, calls them "morons" (Galatians 3:1). To the Corinthians, who consider themselves mature people of the Spirit and therefore affirm "all things are lawful," Paul writes: "Brethren, don't become children in your thinking; even if in evil you make yourselves babies, in thinking become mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20). In this way Paul appeals to what was designated above to be reason as the structure, or the power, of the mind.

To give his understanding of God's salvation Paul usually depends on passages from the Old Testament.¹⁰ A few times he also appeals to a command from the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:14), to an early Christian confession of faith (1 Corinthians 15:3-5), or to an early baptismal formula (Galatians 3:27-28). These clearly function as authorities to which reason may appeal. Although we would not think much of an argument carried out by means of allegory today, Paul, like his Jewish contemporary Philo of Alexandria, used it as

a valid way of arguing (Galatians 4:21-31). As a good Jew trained under a Pharisaic master, Paul also knew how to do *midrash*, arguing by elaborating imaginatively on a biblical passage (2 Corinthians 3:4-18). On other occasions Paul uses the more rabbinic way of limiting the meaning of a particular word, or bringing together two Old Testament passages in which the same word is used in order to define one by means of the other.¹¹

Paul also built arguments that depended strictly on the logic of the case rather than on appeals to authority. In Galatians he made an *argumentum ad hominem*. It rests on what humans would commonly agree to. No one expects another person to add clauses to a contract after it has been signed; therefore, we should not think God did it (Galatians 3:15). In Romans he built a more complicated argument *a minori ad maiorem*. It rests on the fact that if the reader is willing to grant "this" (a common notion) to be the case, how much more should he also grant "that" (which common sense agrees operates at a higher order). If the sin of Adam is credited with having caused the entrance of sin and death in the world, how much more is the death and resurrection of Christ to be credited as having accomplished the entrance of righteousness and life in the world (Romans 5: 10, 15, 17)! While the argument affirms the effectiveness of Christ's work, contra-

dicted by the fact that sin and death still are in evidence in the world, it presupposes that Christ's mission is the work of God, which is of a higher order and is more effective than the work of a man. In these passages Paul shows himself using methods designated above as reason.

Another way in which Paul exhibits his high estimation of the powers of the mind is seen in his reluctance to become the judge of what others do while carrying out God's will. Christians are servants of God, and therefore only their Master has the authority to judge them (Romans 14:4). Paul insists, how-



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ever, that when Christians act, they should act on the basis of full conviction. He advised: "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind But he who has doubts is condemned . . . because he does not act with confidence [out of faith]" (Romans 14:5, 23). For Paul, faith is acting in full obedience to the judgment arrived by a Spirit-renewed reason. Here again Paul demonstrates how high a value he placed on the reasoning abilities of believers. For Paul to say "my conscience bears me witness" (Romans 9:1) is the same as to say "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus" (Romans 14:14). Christians must act in faith, out of minds that are fully persuaded.

The Renewed Mind

Paul does not conceive the renewed mind in individualistic terms. His sense of identity is not private, but social. For him, Christians are not autonomous bodies, but members in the body of Christ. The good, the acceptable, and the perfect cannot be "what's good for me." Thus Paul, who argues strenuously throughout Galatians that "for freedom Christ has made us free" (Galatians 5:1), also insists to the Corinthians that as individual members we ought not to live for ourselves, but for the building of the community of faith (1 Corinthians 14:26). He tells them explicitly, "Nobody should seek his own thing" (1 Corinthians 10:24).

What fills Paul's cup with joy is to know that a church thinks with one mind.¹² To his favorite church, the one at Philippi, he counsels: "Let those of us who are mature be thus minded, and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you" (Philippians 3:15). For him, revelation is the dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit bringing about a common conviction into the minds of those daily offering themselves as members of the body of Christ in a reasonable worship.

Paul did not presume that his was the only mind capable of being renewed by the Holy Spirit. He trusted in God and in his fellow Christians. He knew that the workings of the Holy Spirit could bring about conviction both to them and to him, and that either he or them could eventually change their mind. Quite often he found himself arguing with them as to the truth of the gospel and its implications. In his dialogues and disputes with fellow believers he understood that convictions about the gospel can only be had in a mind whose integrity may be used by the Holy Spirit.

Paul's appeals to the renewed Christian mind, his willingness to allow those for whose sake he had gone through labor pains (Galatians 4:19), whom he had nursed as babes (1 Thessalonians 2:7), and had exhorted as a father (1 Thessalonians 2:11), to think for themselves, his respect for their convictions, makes him both a true follower of Jesus and a true intellectual.

NOTES

1. George Bernard Shaw popularized the picture of Paul as a chauvinist. "The Monstrous Imposition Upon Jesus," in Wayne A. Meeks (ed.), *The Writings of St. Paul* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 299. See also Robin Scroggs, "Paul: Chauvinist or Liberationist?" *The Christian Century* 89 (1972): pp. 307-309, and Elaine Pagels, "Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974): pp. 538-549.

2. See Richard Rubenstein, *My Brother Paul* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 34-53.

3. See James Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Graeco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 21-38.

4. Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul. In Other Words* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 153-156.

5. A. Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1912). A. Schweitzer, *The*

Mysticism of Paul (New York: Seabury, 1931).

6. See J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 11-19.

7. P. Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 77.

8. Where most English versions say "spiritual," the original reads *logike* = logical, reasonable.

9. All the Bible citations in this article are in the author's translation.

10. Paul's foundational texts seem to be Genesis 12:1-3; 15:6; Deuteronomy 10:16-17; Jeremiah 18:6; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; Habakkuk 2:4; and many Psalms.

11. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:27 Paul quotes Psalm 8:6, but finds it necessary to make clear that when it says "all things" God is to be understood as an exception. In Galatians 3:16 Paul quotes Genesis 12:7 and builds his case on the fact that the noun "offspring" or "seed" appears in the singular rather than the plural. On the other hand, in Romans 9:33 he juxtaposes Isaiah 28:16 to Isaiah 8:14-15 in order to define the stone God placed in Zion.

12. See Philippians 2:2; Romans 12:6; 15:5; and 2 Corinthians 13:11.

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