"PAUL PREACHING AT ATHENS." RAPHAEL. PHOTO: VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON/ART RESOURCE

Pastoral theology and practice in Paul's letters

Model of Persuasion

BY JOHN R. DONAHUE

"PICK IT UP; READ IT"—twice a young Roman rhetorician on the fast track to success heard these words, uttered in a sing-song voice: "*Tolle, lege; tolle, lege.*" Augustine then picked up and read Paul's Letter to the Romans, and his life was turned around along with theology in the West. Centuries later a troubled Augustinian monk in Germany read the same letter and wrote: "I raged furiously and with a confused conscience. Then, thanks to God's mercy and

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meditating on it day and night, I paid attention to the context.... I began to understand God's righteousness as something by which the righteous lives as by God's gift, that is, by faith" (Martin Luther on Romans).

St. Teresa of Ávila was consoled by Paul when reflecting on her spiritual trials: "But while I was in an oratory, in great affliction, and not knowing what was to become of me, I read in a book, which it seemed as if the Lord had put into my hands, those words of St. Paul, that God is very faithful and never allows people who love Him to be deluded by the devil." And Jerome Nadal (1507-80), commenting on the newly issued Jesuit *Constitutions*, wrote, "For us Paul provides the pattern of our lives."

On May 24, 1738, a young John Wesley went to a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, where Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans was being read, and remembered that "about a quarter before nine, while he [Paul] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone...."

Yet Friedrich Nietzsche called Paul the "dysangelist" (herald of bad news), and George Bernard Shaw described him as the "monstrous imposition upon Jesus." Paul has been pilloried as the first Christian misogynist, an advocate of slavery and an apostate anti-Semite. Will the real Paul please stand up? While Paul has truly been many things to many people (apostle, missionary, theologian and martyr), I will focus on elements of Paul's pastoral practice as he grapples with problems in his complex urban churches. And I hope this Paul will speak to those engaged in pastoral service to the pilgrim church today.

> Today, when a wide spectrum of men and women are committing themselves to ministry, Paul is a paradigm of fruitful, mutual and affectionate cooperation.

It is very significant that Paul wrote letters to the different communities he founded or intended to visit. In the ancient world letters, in contrast to ancient stylized epistolary literature, were a substitute for personal presence. Though we have a trove of letters from this period dealing with such matters as divorce, property disputes and errant sons asking for money from parents, none match the personal engagement and religious depth of Paul. From his letters we can derive elements of Paul's pastoral theology and practice. His pastoral theology is an interaction of at least five overlapping elements, which should be seen as a prism (rather than as discrete elements) that refracts aspects of Paul's initial "enlightenment" (Acts 9:3).

Foundations of a Pastoral Theology

A prophetic call to be an apostle to the nations. Though often termed a "conversion," this is an inaccurate description of Paul's life-changing experience. Rather, he understands himself in the heritage of the great prophets of Israel. While confronting those in Galatia who preached "another gospel," Paul retorts "the Gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:11-12). He later thanks God "who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, and was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles," a clear echo of Jer 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." Ultimately it is rooted in a deep experience of grace and love: "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Gal 2:20). Paul rejoices in his new identity, "I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8).

Jewish identity and heritage. A major objection to using the word "conversion" in Paul's case is that it suggests a move from one religion to another. Paul never thought of himself as anything but a Jew who had accepted the crucified and risen Jesus as the hoped-for messiah of his people, whom he so loved that he would consider himself "accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh [for] they are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen" (Rom 9:3-5). Contrary to earlier interpretations that the burden of the law brought Paul to throw himself completely on God's mercy, Paul claims that he is "in observance of the law, a Pharisee," and "in righteousness based on the law, blameless" (Phil 3:5-6). Though clearly educated in Hellenistic rhetoric, Paul never quotes Greek writers; instead the Jewish scriptures provide the foundation of his most enduring insights.

His lived experience of the Christ event. Paul's revelation was the "Christ event," the saving significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit

along with the living presence and power of Christ in the community (Phil 3:7-16; 2 Cor 1:1-11; and 2 Cor 10-12, esp. 12:1-10). Paul reproduced in his own life the pattern of this event. After citing an early Christian hymn in Phil 2:5-11, that Jesus "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped...but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, even to death on the cross, but was exalted by God and given a new identity" (a name above every name), Paul goes on to describe a personal emptying of his own—of his status and privileges in Judaism—that he considered no loss compared with the knowledge of Christ and the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:4-11).

Writing to a fractious group of Corinthians, Paul narrates a "death" experience when he "despaired of life itself," only to realize "that we might trust not in ourselves but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:8-9).

A prayer-filled life. Paul begins every letter with that most Jewish of prayers, thanksgiving, and most often ends with a blessing. Philemon, the shortest letter, is typical: "I give thanks to my God always, remembering you in my prayers, as I hear of the love and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones." Virtually all forms of prayer echo through his letters: thanksgiving to God, petitions for the community, blessings and glorifying God. Prayer binds him to the communities when he constantly speaks of his prayers for them and asks them to pray for him. When challenged by super-apostles he reluctantly speaks of his mystical experience of being caught up into paradise (2 Cor 12:3-4), and proclaims "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings" (Rom 8:26). No better insight into prayer as an abiding presence of God in all things can be found than Paul's deep faith; "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Traditions handed on in his communities. However dynamic he was, and however willing to stand up to church leaders, like Cephas, when he felt the Gospel was in peril, Paul drew on the traditions of the community that were handed down to him. When beginning his long reflection on the meaning of the Resurrection, he says he "handed on what I also received," the confession of the death, burial, resurrection and appearances of Jesus (1 Cor 15:3-7). He counters what he sees as a parody of the Lord's Supper when some in the community start eating their choice food before the poorer members arrive and thus humiliating the "have nots." He then invokes the eucharistic words of Jesus uttered "on the night before he was betrayed," bringing home that the deepest meaning of the supper is one of self-giving for others. The hymn in Philippians (2:6-11) may have been used at baptism. Though admitting that he did not know Jesus in the flesh, Paul invokes Jesus' prohibition of divorce (1

Cor 7:10) and paraphrases Jesus' teaching on reconciliation (Rom 12:14-17).

Paul's most enduring fidelity to tradition embraces not only teaching and liturgical fragments, but practice, mainly a concern for the poor embodied in the Jerusalem agreement with the "pillars": "only we were to be mindful of the poor, which is the very thing I was eager to do" (Gal 2:10). During his missionary journeys he continually raises funds for the Jerusalem church (the poor), and his arrest and journey to Rome in chains is the result of his efforts to deliver the collection to Jerusalem.

Pastoral Theology in Practice

While clearly there is no gap in Paul between belief and practice, even a cursory sketch of his interaction with various communities can challenge contemporary pastoral ministry. Paul gives *primacy to the proclamation of the Gospel.* He is "set apart for the Gospel" (Rom 1:1) and called "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel" (Rom 15:16); he has been sent not to baptize but to proclaim the Gospel as the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:17-20), and he will put up with anything rather than hinder the Gospel of Christ (1 Cor 9:12). Paul's whole self is caught up in this proclamation. "With such affection for you," he tells the disciples at Thessalonica, "we were determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us." Paul illustrates this by the image of a nursing mother and a gentle and challenging father (1 Thes 2:7-8; 11).

Today, when a wide spectrum of men and women are committing themselves to ministry, Paul is a paradigm of fruitful, *mutual and affectionate cooperation.* Timothy is a co-sender of significant letters and a frequent emissary (as is Titus); Paul refers to Timothy as a brother and describes Timothy's devotion to him as that of a son to his father (Phil 2:22). The married couple Aquila and Priscilla (named Prisca in 1 Cor 16:19 and Rom 16:3) welcomes Paul to Corinth, works with him in Ephesus and is in Rome when he writes to the church there. Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, near Corinth, carries Paul's letter to Rome. Paul not only is dependent on co-workers; he is delighted at the work of others, like Cephas or Apollos, who might appear to be in competition with him: "For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor 3:9).

Paul's faith rests on the bedrock of the Gospel, which breaks down the barriers between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28). To proclaim the Gospel he travels through many lands and many cultures, while constantly *adapting his proclamation* to changing circumstances and people, so that he becomes "all things to all...for the sake of the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:22-23). He affirms his freedom to eat meat offered to idols, since even though there are "so-called gods in heaven and on earth," the idols are empty representations, because "for us there is one God" (1 Cor 8:5-6). But if this causes a brother or sister to sin, he will never eat meat again (1 Cor 8:13). Paul's missionary practice is a beacon for us in the rapidly changing cultural landscape of the modern church.

Paul never set out to produce commentaries on the Torah, or even sustained reflection on the Christ event. His "theology" is *responding theology,* which emerges in dialogue with the questions and difficult situations that existed in his sometimes fractious communities. Chloe's people (1 Cor 1:11) alert him to problems in Corinth. Other letters follow with a laundry list of problems: divisions in the community, justification of strange sexual practices, disedifying legal disputes and marriage issues, a dispute between the weak and strong over ritual laws, liturgical problems and difficulties understanding the Resurrection. He writes to the community in Philippi because of a dispute between two leading women, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2). Even in Romans, the most theological of his letters, the final chapters confront serious divisions in the community. Were it not for these disputes, we might never have had the eucharistic tradition of 1 Cor 11:23-26 nor the Philippians hymn (2:5-11). Even bitter attacks from his opponents allow Paul to reflect most deeply on the meaning of Christ in his life: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness," and "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10). Paul plumbs the depth of his own experience, his heritage and the traditions of the church, but assimilates the experience of his communities in evolving a pastoral theology.

Paramount to Paul's engagement with community issues is *leadership through persuasion.* A legacy of Paul's training in Tarsus, a center of ancient rhetoric, is his use of various styles of argument to enter the world of his hearers. His letters reflect the ancient tradition of *psychagogia,* "spiritual direction." Rarely does he simply invoke authority. Rather, he spells out the implications of the views of others to allow them to see the contrast between their views or practices and their shared experience of the Christ event through baptism and life in community. Paul's patient pedagogy is a model to our contemporary church where issues of authority—invoked or rejected—are so prevalent.

Thus does Paul offer guidelines for pastoral theology during and beyond this Year of Paul. His body of writing has transformed lives for centuries. *Tolle, lege; tolle, lege.* Take and read. A

Gilbert Martinez, C.S.P., reflects on the Pauline Year, at americamagazine.org/podcast.