

Wrestling with Paul

II Peter 3:14-18

Introduction

Christians believe that God has revealed Himself to us in the writings of the Bible. Numerous passages in the text of the Scriptures indicate that what was written was what God had said or describe what God has done. In Peter's second epistle we have a distinct reference to the means used to bring to us God's message in chapter one, verses 19 through 21.

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in verse 3 was a challenge that in these "prophecies" we have all we need for life and godliness.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,

To understand God and his "will" then, we must learn, and for our context, read the Bible's message. We are challenged to know Him and grow in our application of these words to every aspect of our lives.

All reading is complicated by presuppositions that impact what we understand. Nothing that we read or hear happens in a vacuum, but occurs in a context of previous conversation, experiences, beliefs and goals that impact how we hear and what we believe is truly being communicated in this particular instance. Even as I am writing this I have just experienced this within a household conflict first hand.

Even from the beginning of Christianity, the apostle Paul was understood to be both important and difficult for his hearers and readers. And even now it is in controversies over how to read and understand what Paul said where we find many significant controversies among Christians and so-called Christians.

Wrestling with Paul has major impact on our understanding of the Bible and of the very essence of Christianity. In this presentation we will look at some of the problems with reading Paul, where differing opinions lie and the direction these can lead in our understanding of the Christian faith.

The Competition: The Biblical Assessment of Paul

So as we begin to “wrestle with Paul” this evening, it might be helpful to size up our competition.

Paul as Wisdom (II Peter 3:14-16a)

As Peter’s second epistle comes to a close, he issues a challenge to his hearers that we find in these verses. In the face of their current challenges they are instructed to be diligent so to be without blemish and to be at peace. To face conflict and controversy and to not get caught up in the problem and create further problems by reacting in non-Biblical ways *and* to be at peace in these situations in faith without wavering in our confidence of God’s wisdom and abilities indeed involves high aspirations.

Peter has recommendations to assist them in this pursuit. A trust in God’s agenda for the ages in which we are in the flow of God’s demonstration of His own glory in His Son will be a major part of this diligence. He then reminds his hearers that they have heard and read a great interpreter of God’s plan in the writings of the apostle Paul. For Peter, Paul should have great impact in these matters because he represents the best of God’s wisdom in his teaching.

Paul as Scripture (II Peter 3:16c)

But Peter sees Paul as more than a mere assist in the understanding of God and His word. He acknowledges and equates Paul with the concept of Scripture. The use of the word “Scripture” throughout the Bible carries with it the weight of the authority of God. Peter uses this idea when he says that some twist Paul’s writings as “they do with the *other* Scriptures.” This puts Paul on the same level as say, Moses or Isaiah in Peter’s mind.

This in fact is the source of his confidence in Paul. The message of II Peter is wrapped around confidence in Scripture as we can see in a cursory survey of the letter. In 1:3, we have “all we need” and in 1:12 we read that he is “remind[ing them]...in the truth that you have.” When we get to verse 19 we find our surety is in “the prophetic word” that comes from men as they “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Peter warns of false teachers and false prophets in chapter 2 and then in 3:1,2 he reminds them of the predictions of “the holy prophets, and commandment of the Lord and Savior *through* your apostles.” His answer to their need is in the Word and only in the Word.

Paul as Encouragement (II Peter 3:17-18)

Peter needs to caution his readers to “take care” not to be misled in their faith and to misplace their confidence and stability. This is especially important since they know that falsehood will not only come as a direct assault on the Christian worldview but will come from within by those misinterpreting and applying their own Scripture.

This leads to Peter calling them for growth in both the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. God will accomplish his task (grace) in their pursuit of him (knowledge) as they understand the Scriptures.

Paul as Challenge (II Peter 3:16b)

Which leads us to look at the small phrase, almost used in passing that indicates Peter’s own struggle. He says that “there are some things in them that are hard to understand.” These are words from an apostle himself. Sure, he is an apostle that has struggled to “get it right” at times but still he is an apostle who was taught from Jesus Himself. Peter didn’t say that he and Paul had had conflict, and indeed we know they had. He says that Paul writes things that are hard to understand, in particular about living as a Christian in this period of redemptive history.

But in his warning he tells us something else. Yes, there will be those who twist his words for their destruction, but some do so in ignorance. We must then be on guard to work hard to understand Paul and ‘get it right’ to ensure that “to Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.”

Understanding Paul is central to understanding how God is working in the world and our response to it. To correctly place ourselves in this truth *all* must work to understand Paul correctly.

The Strategy: An Introduction to Pauline Hermeneutics

The implication from II Peter 3 is that there are both correct and incorrect ways of reading and understanding Paul. Therefore an important part of correctly reading Paul is to have a plan or strategy in approaching the Pauline literature. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive approach nor is it even a primer for correct interpretation. But it is important to walk through these concepts to then demonstrate why certain false or inadequate ideas about Paul can arise.

Grammar

Because we see the Bible as God's word we often misread the Bible by reading it in magical way. We have been trained to see the Bible as a collection of stories, words and phrases without correctly working on seeing their connections and contexts.

By thinking intentionally about the grammar and syntax of the Bible, we will be on our way to avoiding a jumbled, haphazard understanding of God and his character. We should read the Bible in its own structure with sentences composed of subject and predicate, nouns and verbs and various modifiers. A sentence makes an assertion or predicates something about a "thing", the subject. We should attempt to focus on this in our reading with the other material as important but as it is; the modifiers of the subject or the assertion.

And then we will see that there is often a paragraph arrangement of the material with a main point and elaboration. This is not obvious in the original, but many contemporary translations, including the ESV, incorporate this in the presentation. Tracing main ideas and how they relate to the next main idea is most valuable in keeping on track in our reading and understanding.

Backgrounds

Because the literature of the Bible was written many years ago, there is historical and cultural distance between us and its message. This does not mean it is inaccessible as some would suggest, but it does alert us to the potential to distort what has been said by only thinking of our own contexts. This comes to play often when there are specific allusions to people or practices that are foreign to our culture. It also impacts the application of some texts by reminding ourselves of ancient expectations.

Genre

We also must read the Bible in view of its various literary types or genres. In particular for Paul we are reading first century letters. Understanding the makeup of letters of the day and how Paul assimilates and adjusts the standard conventions will assist us in understanding his main points and ideas. Even within the genre of letter will be "subgenres" of lists, stories and prayers. The better we know this the better our work will be.

Intention

We must also see the purposefulness of the documents in the Bible. Especially for Paul, to read him in the context of ancient rhetoric, the art of persuasion and discussion is extremely useful. This study reminds us to the intentionality of what Paul intends to accomplish and often explains his varied style that is seen throughout his letters.

Redemptive history

If you have heard anything from the pulpit at Clearcreek Chapel, I am sure Pastor Russ hopes that you have heard that to correctly understand any particular passage in the Bible you must know where you are in the flow of “redemptive history.” This means that the Bible is properly interpreted in the light of the importance of Christ and the cross.

Canonical connections

Reading the Bible also requires understanding that the flow of revelation builds upon and uses and explains prior revelation. Paul’s use of the Old Testament both in direct quotations and allusions requires us to frequently reflect back and understand what has been said to know what he is saying now.

Problem Tactics: Unorthodox Strategies in Pauline Reading

Since understanding Paul is a key to unlocking the Bible and its message, improper us or strategies to reading Paul will lead to problems. These problem tactics will inevitably lead to poor, maybe even pernicious (deadly) outcomes. As we examine two of these concerns, we need to affirm the importance of Paul as a focal point in understanding the Bible.

Paul as Focus

One of the reasons we can be assured that the apostle Paul plays an important role in Biblical interpretation is his position in redemptive history. Paul stands with us in this already/not yet time known Biblical as “the end.” His writings are such as they interpret how the Gospel is manifested in this era. Paul is responsible for 13 of the 27

New Testament documents, more than any other single author, and is the key character in Luke's account of the expansion of the Gospel and the work of Word and Spirit we know as the Book of Acts. Many of Paul's writings are in the genre of "occasional letter", implying that they have specific purpose and content, explicative of the Gospel in specific situations and concerns. Yet several of his documents are more elaborate and formal, resembling treatises that are much more defining of Christianity and its thought.

Paul as Christian

Interpreters of the Bible have long noticed the conflict between Peter and Paul seen in Galatians and the apparent conflict between the church at Antioch and the church at Jerusalem reaching a climax in Acts 15. Many have exaggerated these events to perceive a radical diversity in the New Testament pitting Paul against the twelve apostles and ultimately between Paul and Jesus. Marcion was a second century author who radically separated the Bible into acceptable parts limiting his Bible to a small portion of Jesus' sayings. In the 19th century an influential scholar F.C. Baur and his students began the modern stress on NT diversity. In fact, many authors have taken up this thought and position Paul as the founder of modern Christianity, because his views eventually won the day and we now see Jesus only through his biases. Karen Armstrong has written in her book *The First Christian*, "When I turn back to study the life and teachings of Jesus it seems that Paul has not only been an important influence on Christianity, but that in a very real sense he was its founder. He could be called the first Christian." Another author, Hyam Maccoby in his book *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*, calls Paul "the greatest fantasist of all" who invented the myths of Jesus divinity and sacrifice and "founded Christianity." This problem has been competently refuted in many books; one of the best is David Wenham's *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*

Paul as Jew

Another problem in reading Paul is identifying him as Jew. Not there is any debate as to his cultural and ethnic origins, but exactly what was a Jew of his day and why did he get involved in this seemingly new movement now called Christianity. Foundational to this debate is the work of a classical and New Testament scholar by the name of E.P. Sanders. Professor Sanders' landmark book is entitled *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. In it he claims that the Judaism of the Second Temple period, the time of Judaism following the exile until the fall of Jerusalem, has been misrepresented

by most Pauline interpreters. He claims from the rabbinic texts of the day, that the Judaism held and then refuted by Paul never claimed to achieve righteousness through keeping the law. The Jews of the first century didn't believe that they were working their way to salvation and they didn't claim that their good works made them right with God. Instead, they believed God placed them in "the covenant" and they demonstrated their alignment with the covenant by keeping the law. This view he calls "covenantal nomism." An extended quote from one who agrees with this assessment, Professor James Dunn in his introduction from his commentary on the book of Romans will elaborate more fully. "...the hermeneutical mistake was made...of assuming that the Judaism of Paul's day was coldly legalistic, teaching a system of earning salvation by the merit of good works, with little or no room for the free forgiveness and grace of God. It was this depiction of first century Judaism which Sanders showed up for what it was – a gross caricature, which regrettably, has played its part in feeding an evil strain of Christian anti-Semitism. On the contrary, however, as Sanders demonstrated clearly enough, Judaism's whole religious self-understanding was based on the premise of grace – that God had freely chosen Israel and made his covenant with Israel, to be their God and they his people. This covenant was regulated by the law, not as a way of entering the covenant, or of gaining merit, but as the way of living within the covenant that included the provision of sacrifice and atonement for those who confessed their sins and thus repented."

This view of Paul, and therefore of Moses, motivated by a need to apply points 2, 4 and 5 from our list of interpretive principles has led to a significant aberration of Paul's teaching. The most comprehensive refutation of Sander's research can be found in the technical monographs contained in the volumes edited by D.A. Carson, P.T. O'Brien, and M. Seifrid entitled *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, especially volume 1.

Perilous Conclusions: Extensions of this New Perspective

We will look very briefly at three of the conclusions driven by this "new perspective" on Paul.

The New Perspective and the Law

One area that the New Perspective on Paul has affected is the approach to understanding Paul and his view of the Mosaic Law. Much of this has created more confusion, but yet has helped to distinguish a more comprehensive understanding of the Mosaic covenant than found in previous discussions. However it has led to serious distortions of understanding Paul and his teaching. Heikki Raisanen, a New Testament scholar from Finland, has taken Sander's conclusions to the next level and argues that

Paul is actually filled with inconsistencies and contradictions. He argues on several fronts that Paul uses his terms in inconsistent ways and contradicts himself which occurs out of Paul's laudable motivation to find room for the Gentiles to be included in the people of God without requiring them to obey the Old Testament Law.

The New Perspective and Justification

The most problematic area the New Perspective has created conflict in is the current debate over the meaning of the New Testament idea of justification. The most accessible of those proposing a radical "rewrite" of this theological concept is an Anglican, N.T Wright. In his book, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, he says, "If it is true that Paul meant by 'justification' something which is significantly different from what subsequent debate has meant, then this appeal to him is consistently flawed, maybe even invalidated altogether." And later in the same chapter, "Justification is not how someone becomes a Christian. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian." It is not the scope of this presentation to elaborate much further than this at this time, but rather to point out how this "exegetical tool" can be misused to challenge doctrinal thinking.

The New Perspective and Catholicism

Lastly, another area that New Perspective thinking leads to is the distinction between theological Catholicism and Protestant Orthodoxy. I used the modifiers intentionally. The average man-on-the-street Catholic and liberal, mainstream Protestantism will not be affected by this issue. But, at the scholarly level this is one area that has provided continued ammunition in the fight to demonstrate that the Reformation was misinformed in its theological statements and Biblically there is very little difference in Orthodox Catholicism and Protestantism. If this can be exegetically shown to be true, then the continued separation is something to work to eliminate. Documents like *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* are in a small part the result of such thinking. Kim Riddlebarger in his essay in *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*, says this about the thinking of Scott Hahn, a noteworthy Presbyterian who recently converted to Catholicism and teaches theology at a Roman Catholic University, Hahn's logic is that..."If the doctrine of the covenant cannot be understood in legal terms, justification cannot be based on the imputation of the guilt of sinner's sin to Christ and Christ's righteousness to the believer. This mean the justification cannot be based upon faith alone. Instead, justification must be based on faith and works, the historic position of Tridentine (Trent) Catholicism. Hahn was working through these related issues in seminary when he encountered the

work of Norman Shepherd, who had just been removed from Westminster Theological Seminary for teaching what Hahn describes as the same view of justification as I was expounding.” So we see that the New Perspective on Paul at least adds material to this type of thinking as well.

Conclusions

Some brief assertions in conclusion:

1. The New Perspective on Paul is more a new perspective on the Judaism surrounding the Pauline documents. This has had a good effect because it causes us to look more carefully at the context of the New Testament and to test our presuppositions in its reading.
2. The New Perspective on Paul is at some levels motivated by a desire to understand the backgrounds and context of Paul’s writings to be more accurate in interpreting his letters.
3. The New Perspective on Paul has caused many to be unduly speculative as to Pauline contexts and have come to several serious, if not heretical positions.
4. The New Perspective on Paul should cause us to be diligent in our “hard work” of understanding and applying Paul and not be complacent in what we “think we know.”