



The Life and Writings of St. Paul

Lesson 8

Lesson 8 Commentary Paul's Theology of the Church and Wrap-up

Introduction

Here we are at final session. In the last two sessions, we covered how Paul recast the Jewish thoughts around monotheism and redefined the family of God. Now we will talk about Paul's Theology of the Church. Back in session 1 I talked about Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. When Jesus revealed Himself to Saul of Tarsus, he said "Why are you persecuting ME?" To our knowledge, Saul of Tarsus never persecuted Jesus. He certainly persecuted the followers of Jesus, dragging whole families to prison.¹ Jesus's identification with his followers in this statement may have been the key to Paul's Theology of the Church.

Catholic Beliefs Regarding the Church

Besides being the local community of believers, the Church is the communion with all the baptized. Notice that I did not say the communion of all "baptized that are living." The Church is divided into three groups – Church Militant, Church Expectant, and Church Triumphant. The Church Militant is those struggling, warring, but believing and faithful. It is those baptized that are living in the world today. The Church Expectant are those living in 'an atmosphere of serene hope and all anxiety banished from their lives. It is those baptized believers who have died and are in purgatory. The Church Triumphant are those living in absolute love before the beatific vision in the coming kingdom of God. These are the baptized in Heaven.² The fact that all these groups together make up the Church implies that we can ask those in the Church Expectant and the Church Triumphant for their intercessions. Death does not separate the baptized from the

¹ Acts 8:3. All Biblical citations are from the NABRE.

² Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 823.

Church. “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”³ Therefore, the Church is both visible and spiritual.⁴

The Church has four marks:

- The Church is **one**. In Jesus’s last prayer before entering his passion, he prayed for unity.⁵ Yet, we know there are divisions. We believe that the original divisions were the result of sin.⁶ However, remember in our discussions related to the Trinity, we accept the baptism of all those that truly baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (one God, three Persons) and they are incorporated into Christ and “have a right to be called Christians.”⁷
- As the Bride of Christ, the Church is **holy**. That does not mean that its members are impeccable. We have had some bad popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons and lay people. “All members of the Church, including her ministers must acknowledge that they are sinners.”⁸ Regardless of the sinful leaders and members, the Church has never erred with respect to faith and morals.
- The Church is **catholic** (note the lower-case c), which simply means universal. She is universal in that Christ is her head and has a universal mission. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”⁹
- The Church is **apostolic**. The Church was founded by the Apostles and all the bishops of the Church are direct successors of those Apostles. There is an unbroken line of 266 Popes going back to St. Peter.

Each week when we recite the Nicene Creed, we reaffirm our belief in these four marks.

Lastly, we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ. Jesus, Himself, alluded to this when he said, “Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can

³ Matt 22:32.

⁴ CCC 771.

⁵ John 17:20-21.

⁶ CCC 817.

⁷ CCC 818.

⁸ CCC 826

⁹ Matt 28:19–20.

do nothing.”¹⁰ All members of the Church are in union with all other members and Jesus is the head.

What Did Paul Say?

As I said earlier, I believe Jesus’s word to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is the key to Paul’s theology of the Church. “His is not an individualistic vision of each believer being in a private relationship with Christ, but a collective vision of all Christians bound together in union with the Lord.”¹¹

Paul sees the Church as the Body of Christ: “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it. Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues.”¹² He also believes that Christ is the head of the Body: “Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love.”¹³

Paul views the Church as the Bride of Christ: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”¹⁴

Paul sees the Church as the dwelling place of God, much like the Temple in Jerusalem: “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”¹⁵

Lastly, Paul sees the Church as the ultimate interpreter of proper behavior: “But if I should be delayed, you should know how to behave in the household of God, which is **the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth**.”¹⁶ This verse from 1 Timothy mirrors what Jesus says in Matthew. “If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take

¹⁰ John 15:4–5.

¹¹ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 687.

¹² 1 Cor 12:27–28.

¹³ Eph 4:15–16.

¹⁴ Eph 5:25–27.

¹⁵ Eph 2:19–22.

¹⁶ 1 Tim 3:15, emphasis added.

one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, **tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.**¹⁷ Note that neither Paul, nor Jesus says interpret it on your own. The Church has the final say.

Wrap-up

Well, there we have it. First, we covered Paul as a child through the point of his experience on the road to Damascus and his time in Arabia, maybe to Mount Sinai as an imitation of Elijah. Upon his return, he seemed to settle in Antioch, where he set out on his three journeys to Asia, Macedonia, and Greece, among other places. If one believes that Paul was involved with, wrote, or dictated all thirteen books of the Pauline corpus (as tradition holds and I have argued), then ten of the thirteen books were written during his second and third journeys.

Some argue that the styles of writing between some of the books are so different, they must have been written by others under Paul’s name. I am not convinced that there is enough evidence to dismiss Paul’s involvement in any of the books of the corpus. If not written by Paul, at the very least they have enough in common with Paul’s theology in the “undisputed books” to see clearly that it was written by a disciple of Paul and in the spirit of Paul. Pseudographical writing in the name of a person by that person’s disciples was an acceptable practice in Paul’s time.

Paul spent several stints in prison, a situation that was much different than what we think of prison. In Paul’s day, the prisoner relied upon friends and families for support and food. It was a miserable existence. You can feel that in some of his writings.

We saw in the journey from Caesarea to Rome that he experienced a shipwreck, snakebite and another stint in prison. Acts ends with Paul being under house arrest waiting for trial before Nero. We do not know exactly what happened after that. This is the most significant reason that I believe the Synoptic Gospels and Acts were written before 64 AD. Paul’s death (and Peter’s death, for that matter) would have been two of the most important events of the nascent Church. In addition, the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD would have probably been THE most important event. Yet, none of these events are mentioned in the cited books. A later dating simply does not hold up to scrutiny.

When Paul went before Nero, was he found guilty and executed? Maybe. Did Paul win his freedom, head to Spain, return to Rome and die a martyr’s death in the Christian persecution after the fire in Rome when Nero fiddled? Maybe. We just do not know. We have the testimony of some later writers who were closer to the time than we are. It will be fun to ask Paul when we get to Heaven. We do know from his writings that he was looking forward to being with Christ in Heaven.

¹⁷ Matt 18:15–17, emphasis added.

We then turned to the theology present in his canonical writings, beginning with the Trinity. While he remained a monotheist, he needed to recast it in a light that included Christ. He did this by including Jesus as LORD in an adapted Shema. He clearly had the impression that there was a Father, a Son and a Spirit. Did he believe in one God, three Persons? Maybe.

We then turned to Paul's theology of salvation. I argued Paul saw justification as a redefinition of the family of God. This had to happen, as being the "elect" no longer meant being circumcised or being a Jew or following the Torah. It meant believing in Jesus Christ. He saw the entry point into the new family as baptism, not circumcision. Finally, Paul clearly saw that we would be judged based on our good works during our lifetime since now our works were meritorious because of the free grace of God.

Lastly, Paul saw the Church as the Body of Christ with Christ as its head. The Church was the Bride of Christ and the dwelling place of God.

Prayer to Saint Paul the Apostle:

O Glorious Saint Paul, after persecuting the Church you became by God's grace its most zealous Apostle. To carry the knowledge of Jesus, our Divine Savior, to the uttermost parts of the earth, you joyfully endured prison, scourging, stoning, and shipwreck, as well as all manner of persecutions culminating in the shedding of the last drop of your blood for our Lord Jesus Christ. Obtain for us the grace to labor strenuously to bring the faith to others and to accept any trials and tribulations that may come our way. Help us to be inspired by your Epistles and to partake of your indomitable love for Jesus, so that after we have finished our course, we may join you in praising Him in Heaven for all eternity. Amen.