



# St Paul

by Laurence Freeman

St Paul is often credited with founding Christianity. Certainly it would not have developed as it did without him. Nor would he have developed it as he did, if he had not been thrown from his horse on the road to Damascus and in a blinding light had seen Jesus and had his life utterly changed. To say he shaped the future form of Christianity does not mean he deposed Jesus, but that, like us, he did not know him 'after the manner of the flesh'. Though Paul insists on the humanity of Christ he is not much interested in the historical Jesus. Nor does it mean that Paul was preoccupied with structures and rules. In fact religiously he was radical, a pioneer not an administrator, a mystic rather than a lawyer. St Peter called Paul his friend and 'dear brother' and recommended his letters, though cautioning that there were passages that were hard to understand and that could be misinterpreted (2 Pet 3:15). Peter had tussled with him at the Council of Jerusalem over admitting gentiles into the Christian fellowship. In Rome they were both revered equally as they awaited their fate. But tradition traces the see and succession of the Prince of the Apostles to Peter not Paul. Paul was perhaps not the kind of person you would choose as a safe pair of hands in a diocese.

He was probably born into a prosperous Jewish family in a pluralist Greco-Roman city. Some think that in his twenties he came to Jerusalem to study the Law and by his own admission became a fundamentalist zealot hounding Jesus' followers. Before his conversion experience and by his self-description he ranks with the worst of ayatollahs or Grand Inquisitors. Not only was he right but others should be punished for being wrong. Afterwards, he reversed his deepest religious ideas concerning grace, sin and salvation. This religious revolution however was not primarily intellectual but spiritual. For several centuries beginning with Paul and the apostolic church, theology developed under the influence of mystical experience born in deep contemplation. Over time the tables turned, especially in the western church, and theology as the 'queen of sciences' separated from the supposed 'subjectivity' of prayer and began to monitor the experiential and to scrutinise the 'personal' verification of faith. The roots of this perennial, natural tension between the spiritual and religious, so commonly invoked today, can be seen in the letters of Paul, though he could not have guessed where it would lead.

His first Letter to the Thessalonians is the first piece of Christian writing and in its third verse expresses the triad of faith, hope and charity that, like so many of his formulas, shaped the church's theological vocabulary. His use of these and other terms influenced all later mystical writers – gnosis (knowing through personal experience), pistis (faith as personal relationship), agape (divine love). Through his letters, written to small house churches, in whose lives he had a passionate, even possessive parental interest, we can guess at his complex religious personality. Like Moses he seems not to have been a charismatic speaker. He was fiery in loving and in anger. He could be tender, harsh, forgiving and impatient. His 'thorn in the flesh', whatever it was, kept him humble in his drivenness and his total immersion in the experience of Christ. 'In Christ' appears 164 times in Pauline writings, referring always to this life whereas the phrase 'with Christ' refers to the next one.

Like other founders, the line between the man and the myth is tenuous. Only about half the Pauline letters are now thought to have been written by him. Yet Paul is greater than his personality and historical identity. His conversion experience, however, is utterly personal and is described more than once in his letters and in Acts. It floored him for three years before he could resume life. Mystical experience, he shows us, is transcendent but cannot be separated from the individual psyche in which it occurs and which it can overload. Paul's experience was a 'light mysticism' but the writings it inspired contain material which was subsequently mined for all kinds of Christian mystical literature including the dark night.

Paul's theology contains in a non-systematic way both the kataphatic (what we can say about God) and the apophatic (saying what we can't say). He tells us that 'in Christ the Godhead in all its fullness dwells embodied' (Col 2:2), an important element in the developing dogma of the Incarnation. He also prays that through faith Christ may dwell in our hearts in love and that we may 'know' its totality 'though it is beyond knowledge' (Eph 3:17).

His conversion was only the beginning and perhaps as much of an implosion of his dark side as a full mystical moment. In 2 Cor 12 Paul refers to an experience of being 'caught up into paradise' ('whether in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows') in which he heard 'words so secret that human lips may not repeat them'. It has similarities in expression to Jewish apocalyptic mysticism but is unique too, especially in being so explicitly autobiographical. The significance of telling this however is not to 'boast' but to insist that people form an estimate of him on the basis of what they see. And what is he like? Just like us. He was given a 'thorn in the flesh' to keep him humble and despite his prayers God did not remove it. Thus he was kept weak. And it is weakness not mystical experiences he is proud of because the power of Christ rests on the weak and divine power is seen fully only in human weakness. 'For when I am weak then I am strong'. Here we see the essential renunciation of power that is at the heart of the mystery of Christ and the Christian life. Christian mysticism focuses not on the subjective experience which easily puffs the ego but on the work of God in the greater context of the world and the service of others.

This description of ecstasy, fuelled many subsequent mystical writers like Origen and Ambrose. It helped them to Christianise Platonic 'theoria' (vision) that became a key Christian word for contemplation. In allowing connections with earlier figures like Plotinus it shows how inter-faith dialogue flourishes in the mystical, a point not to be forgotten today as Islam and the Christian West line up politically. Reading Paul's description of spiritual transformation Gregory of Nyssa expanded on the concept of epiktasis, the never-endingness of the experience of God. Paul taught that 'we are being transformed into (Christ's) likeness with ever-increasing glory' (2 Cor 3:18). By contemplating the Risen Christ the human being, as an image of God, is both healed and completed. Christian mystics emphasise the priority of experience but warn of eye-catching 'experiences'. Freezing attention on individual experiences is spiritual consumerism. The extension of experience over time is faith.

Two more aspects of Paul's mystical experience that shaped the Church should be highlighted. First, its impact on moral thought. Paul's conversion and ongoing enlightenment in Christ led him to jettison religious law as the way to rectify the human condition. He discovered the fatal attraction of seeing sin as the breaking of a rule that the law could in turn put right. In Romans he sees the Law as a band-aid solution. It cannot do the radical surgery needed to heal that self-alienation in the human soul which is the root of sin. What achieves it is grace and, wonderful news, where sin is grace abounds all the more. From grace it is but a step to seeing love as the primal energy of prayer and deepening union with Christ and others. For Paul the cosmic Christ is the inner Christ. Knowing this is the sober intoxication of love that dispels 'fantasy. And as Bernard Lonergan, the 20th century Jesuit theologian came to believe, 'The love of God that floods the inmost heart through the Holy Spirit He has given us' (Rom 5:5) is the Christian experience.

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