

<sup>12</sup> Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Regency Library, Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 254.

<sup>13</sup> Prideaux as cited in Albert Barnes, *Daniel in Notes on the Old Testament*, ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 2.175.

<sup>14</sup> Kliefoth as cited in Keil, *Daniel*, 9.3.352; cf. Young, *Daniel*, P. 203.

<sup>15</sup> Walvoord, *Daniel*, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup> John C. Whitcomb, Ezra, "Wycliffe Biblical Commentary, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), pp. 426-28; John A. Martin, "Ezra, *Bible Knowledge Commentary on the Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, Scripture Press, 1985) pp. 660-61.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *Daniel*, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, *The Coming Prince*; McClain, *Daniel's Prophecy*.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, *Daniel*, p. 254

<sup>20</sup> Please consult the following works on the chronology of the life of Christ: A. T. Olmstead, *Jesus in the Light of History* (New York, 1942), pp. 279-81; Josef Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus*, trans. Isabel and Florence McHugh (2nd ed.; Westminster, Maryland, 1959), pp. 72-80; Leslie P. Madison, *Problems of Chronology in the Life of Christ*, unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963; Eugene Ruckstuhl, *Chronology of the Last Days of Jesus*, trans. Victor J. Drapela (New York, 1965), pp. 1-12; Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perin (3rd ed.; London, 1966), pp. 36-41.

## THE CENTER OF PAUL'S THEOLOGY

by

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As we all learned very early in our education, the difficult task of interpretation begins by asking a simple question: "What is the main idea?" Whether we are reading a book, watching a theatrical performance, or listening to a lecture, this is the big question we ask as we seek to understand the meaning of what the author or lecturer is trying to say. This question is really no different when we come to the study of the Scriptures.

When we look particularly at the thirteen letters of Paul in the New Testament, we are struck with this same question. Our problem, however, is that scholars have suggested many different answers. If we fail to come to a consensus regarding the main idea, center, or goal of Paul's letters, we will not be agreed regarding the theological meaning God intended as He inspired His Word through human vehicle, Paul. Thus, this question is of great importance.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that God the Father is the center or goal of Paul's theology. In order to accomplish this purpose we will first provide some criteria for determining the center of Paul's theology. Second, we will give a summary of other proposals in this discussion. Third, we will delineate some lines of proof for our thesis. Finally, we will offer our conclusion along with some theological and practical applications.

### Criteria for Determining the Center

Before providing two necessary criteria for the determination of the center of Paul's theology we would like to offer an important statement regarding the subject of this article. By speaking of the center or goal of Paul's theology we are not suggesting that everything else in Paul's letters is less important or significant. On the contrary, this discussion is intended to be an *interpretive* guide to the understanding of Paul's letters, not an evaluation of the value of some of Paul's statements versus others.

The first criterion for determining the center is that any element that is of contingent significance to Paul's overall theological argument cannot be the center. So such things as Paul's teaching on tongues, the rapture, and eating of idol meat should not be considered as the center.

Second, any element that is derived from something else in Pauline theology, i.e., subpoints of his major theological arguments, should not be seen as the center. Here, we are suggesting that such items as Paul's ethics, his view of the Mosaic law, certain eschatological issues such as the intermediate state or the judgment seat of Christ, do not constitute the main points of Paul's theological outline. They are theological subpoints to the major doctrinal issues he deals with, and therefore they will not be viewed as essential for the issue at hand.

### Summary of Other Proposals

Now that we have limited our search, we can proceed to offer some of the suggestions that various scholars have offered in this search for the center of Paul's theology. The scholars who have proposed these ideas come from a broad range of theological backgrounds, and some have been accepted more readily than others.

Rudolf Bultmann's existential theology led him to propose that **anthropology** is the center of Paul's theology (*New Testament Theology* 1, 191). Beginning with Martin Luther and continuing today in most Lutheran writings is the suggestion that **justification by faith** is at the center (Ernst Käsemann). J. Christiaan Beker sees the **apocalyptic triumph of God** as central (*Paul the Apostle*, 15-19). Others like Herman Ridderbos (39-43) or C. Marvin Pate (44) consider **salvation history**, i.e., the already-not yet structure of Pauline thought, as the main goal for Paul. Catholic scholars such as Joseph Fitzmyer and Joseph Plevnik view **Christology** as the center. Ralph Martin opts for **reconciliation**, and E.P. Sanders suggests **participation in Christ**.

Although most of these categories possess an essential element in Pauline theology (or they would never have gained a hearing in the first place), we believe that they are all too limited. It would seem that reconciliation, participation in Christ, salvation history and justification by faith all relate to soteriology and are actually subpoints of that doctrine. It would also appear that the *goal* of Christ's work is more essential or basic to Paul's theology than what Christ did (which is the emphasis of

the Catholic theologians). Beker appears to be headed in the right direction when he speaks of God's triumph in the world, although the apocalyptic element of his argument is not as essential to Paul's writings as he suggests.

It has not been our purpose to systematically refute each of the proposals listed above. However, we think that each of them falls short of the stated goal of determining the center of Paul's theology. We believe that a systematic presentation of arguments in support of another proposal will help to shed light on this discussion. In our next section we will seek to present arguments in support of our thesis that God the Father is the goal and center of Paul's thought.

### Lines of Proof for the Centrality of God the Father

We begin by noting *the central aspect of the Gospel* in Paul's letters. It is significant that the Gospel is the central theme of Romans (1:16-17) which is considered by most scholars as Paul's most doctrinally organized book. By doctrinally organized we are suggesting that Paul is not concerned so much with correcting problems in the Roman church (as he clearly is in churches like Corinth or the Galatian churches) as with presenting an organized theological argument about the Gospel God has called him to preach. But the book of Romans is not the only place that the Gospel is emphasized. We find significant Pauline statements about the Gospel in every one of his letters, e.g., 1 Cor 1:17; 15:3-11; 2 Cor 10:16; Gal 1:8-9; Eph 3:7; Phil 1:16; Col 1:23-29; 1 Thess 2:4; 2 Thess 2:13-15; 1 Tim 1:11; 2 Tim 1:10-11; 4:5; Titus 1:3; Philemon 13. So if the Gospel is such an important theme in Paul's letters, what are the elements of that Gospel?

In two helpful articles Eugene Lemcio has identified six key elements of the preaching (kerygma) or Gospel found in the New Testament books. In Paul's writings he mentions the following references where these elements are found: Rom 10:8-9; 2 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 5:19-20; Gal 4:4-7; Eph 2:4-10; Phil 2:5-11; Col 2:12-13; 1 Thess 1:8-10; 1 Tim 3:16; 4:10; 2 Tim 2:8-15; and Titus 3:4-8. The six elements are as follows:

- 1) God who
- 2) sent or raised
- 3) Jesus.
- 4) A response

- 5) towards God
- 6) brings benefits

Lemcio concludes his study with the observation that Christology is certainly an essential element in the gospel message but "the accent falls heavily upon God and the 'theo-logic' that gives this proto-narrative coherence: he is the beginning and the end of the story."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, when we look at the Gospel which is certainly a central theme in Paul's letters, we can see that the work of God the Father is emphasized. He is the One who sends and raises Jesus, and He is the One to Whom people must respond.

A second line of proof comes from several Pauline statements regarding various *elements of doctrine*. When Paul gives directives regarding proper ethical behaviour, he encourages believers to do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31; 6:20). Likewise, he challenges Christians to grow in their faith "for the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11). Also, when believers minister to others with material gifts, Paul states that the result of such giving is that God is honored and glorified (2 Cor 9:13; Phil 4:20).

Texts which deal particularly with the church also demonstrate this emphasis. In Romans 15:7 Paul states that the unity of believers as seen in their acceptance of one another is to be done in order to bring glory to God. We are also told that the purpose for the establishment of the church was that God would be glorified (Eph 3:21).

In evangelistic endeavours the glory goes to the Father rather than to those who proclaim the message (2 Cor 4:15). In Romans 1:5 and 16:27 Paul states that the ultimate purpose in the spread of the Gospel among the nation was "for His name's sake" (in 1:5) and for the glory of "the only wise God" (in 16:27).

Thus, in regard to various elements of doctrine including the behaviour of believers, the function and purpose of the church, and the evangelism of the lost, Paul indicates that the glorification of God the Father is the foundation of all these doctrinal elements.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eugene E. Lemcio, "The Unifying Kerygma of the New Testament," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (1990): 3.

A final line of proof comes from texts which reveal the ultimate goal of three *significant theological categories*: Christology, eschatology, and soteriology.

In Ephesians 1:3-14 Paul clearly states that goal of God's salvation of mankind based upon the finished work of Christ is the praise of the glory of God (vv.6,12,14). We also witness this emphasis in texts such as 1 Timothy 1:17 where Paul breaks into praise as he meditates upon the wonder of God's salvation of his soul (also see Rom 15:9).

We learn of the final and ultimate goal of eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 where Paul reveals that Jesus will present the Kingdom to the Father after He has put everything under his feet "so that God may be all in all."

The purpose and goal for Christology is seen initially in the incarnation as Colossians 1:19 demonstrates. Here we learn that Christ's possession of the fullness of deity pleases the Father. This goal is ultimately realized at the exaltation of Christ spoken of in Philipians 2:9-11 where worship of Christ is performed "to the glory of God the Father."

## Conclusion

We have sought to provide several lines of biblical proof to demonstrate that God the Father is the foundational and controlling principle of Paul's theology. First, He is at the center of the Gospel message Paul and the apostles are preaching. Second, He is seen as the foundation upon which several elements of doctrinal instruction are established. Third, He is cited as the goal of soteriology, eschatology, and Christology. The biblical witness clearly supports our thesis that God the Father is at the center of Paul's theology.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the material for this second line of proof comes from Thomas Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 28-35.