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Victor Paul Furnish

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## THE THEOLOGY OF THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

This study shows that the common view of 1 Corinthians as mainly about “ethics” and therefore of little importance for “theology” needs correcting. Furnish argues that 1 Corinthians is an even better place to take the apostle’s theological pulse than the allegedly “more theological” letters to the Galatians and Romans, because here it is especially evident how this thinking about the gospel took place within the crucible of his missionary and pastoral labors. Paul’s complex theological legacy is not a systematic theology or even the basis for constructing a theological system. However, we come close to the heart of Paul’s legacy in his clear-sighted identification of the gospel with the saving power of God’s love as disclosed in Christ, and his insistence that those who are called to belong to Christ are thereby summoned to be agents of God’s love wherever in the world they have received that call.

Victor Paul Furnish is University Distinguished Professor of New Testament in Southern Methodist University’s Perkins School of Theology. He has written several books, including *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (second edition, 1985), *II Corinthians* (Anchor Bible 32A, 1984), and *Jesus According to Paul* (1993). In addition, Furnish has contributed to a number of other volumes, including *Pauline Theology*, vol. II (edited by D. M. Hay, 1993) and vol. IV (edited by D. M. Hay and E. E. Johnson, 1997), *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping the Church Debate Homosexuality* (edited by S. Geis and D. Messer, 1994), and *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (edited by J. S. Siker, 1994).

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# THE THEOLOGY OF THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

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*To*  
*Schubert M. Ogden*  
*valued colleague, cherished friend*

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Although the New Testament is usually taught within Departments or Schools or Faculties of Theology/Divinity/Religion, theological study of the individual New Testament writings is often minimal or at best patchy. The reasons for this are not hard to discern.

For one thing, the traditional style of studying a New Testament document is by means of straight exegesis, often verse by verse. Theological concerns jostle with interesting historical, textual, grammatical and literary issues, often at the cost of the theological. Such exegesis is usually very time-consuming, so that only one or two key writings can be treated in any depth within a crowded three-year syllabus.

For another, there is a marked lack of suitable textbooks round which courses could be developed. Commentaries are likely to lose theological comment within a mass of other detail in the same way as exegetical lectures. The section on the theology of a document in the Introduction to a commentary is often very brief and may do little more than pick out elements within the writing under a sequence of headings drawn from systematic theology. Excursuses usually deal with only one or two selected topics. Likewise larger works on New Testament Theology usually treat Paul's letters as a whole and, having devoted the great bulk of the space to Jesus, Paul and John, can spare only a few pages for others.

In consequence, there is little incentive on the part of teacher or student to engage with a particular New Testament document, and students have to be content with a general overview, at best complemented by in-depth study of (parts of) two or three New Testament writings. A serious corollary to this is the degree to



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which students are thereby incapacitated in the task of integrating their New Testament study with the rest of their Theology or Religion courses, since often they are capable only of drawing on the general overview or on a sequence of particular verses treated atomistically. The growing importance of a literary-critical approach to individual documents simply highlights the present deficiencies even more. Having been given little experience in handling individual New Testament writings as such at a theological level, most students are very ill-prepared to develop a properly integrated literary and theological response to particular texts. Ordinands too need more help than they currently receive from textbooks, so that their preaching from particular passages may be better informed theologically.

There is need therefore for a series to bridge the gap between too brief an introduction and too full a commentary where theological discussion is lost among too many other concerns. It is our aim to provide such a series. That is, a series where New Testament specialists are able to write at a greater length on the theology of individual writings than is usually possible in the introductions to commentaries or as part of New Testament Theologies, and to explore the theological themes and issues of these writings without being tied to a commentary format or to a thematic structure provided from elsewhere. The volumes seek both to describe each document's theology, and to engage theologically with it, noting also its canonical context and any specific influence it may have had on the history of Christian faith and life. They are directed at those who already have one or two years of full-time New Testament and theological study behind them.

*University of Durham*

JAMES D. G. DUNN

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Paul consistently refers to himself as an “apostle,” as one who has been specifically commissioned to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles, to establish churches, and to nurture believers in their faith. He nowhere refers to himself as a “theologian.” Moreover, although the word “theology” is often employed in other ancient Greek religious texts, it does not once appear in his letters (or anywhere else in the New Testament or in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible). Thus Paul’s writings must be approached first of all as *apostolic letters*, not as theological documents. They are all more or less situation-specific, having been prompted by and addressed to issues that were current in particular congregations, or for Paul himself. For this reason, any examination of “the theology of 1 Corinthians” must begin with some consideration of whether it is appropriate to speak of “Pauline theology” at all, and if so, in what sense.<sup>1</sup>

The Greek word *theologia* (literally, “discourse about [a] god”) seems to have been introduced into Christian circles only in the second century. At first it was used in rather general ways, with reference to “teaching about divine things” or, yet more generally, with reference to “religious speech.” The earliest surviving reference to Paul as a “theologian” may be in the works of Athanasius, sometime bishop of Alexandria (d. 373). Introducing a quotation from the letter to the Romans, Athanasius commented that he had learned much “from the theologians, of whom one is Paul” (*Against the Pagans* 35.18–20). Here “the theologians” in view are the authors

<sup>1</sup> See also my essay, “Paul the Theologian,” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul & John. In Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (ed. by Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa; Nashville, 1990), 19–34.

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of Scripture, whom Athanasius described as such because he believed them to be divinely inspired, not because he regarded them as concerned with doctrines or systems of doctrine (*On the Incarnation* 56.6–10; cf. *Against the Pagans* 1.9–10).

The word “theology” was not used with reference to comprehensive, systematic presentations of Christian doctrine until the twelfth century, in works by scholastic thinkers like Abelard and Peter Lombard. The influence of this medieval usage is apparent whenever Paul’s theology is identified with what he says about the traditional topics of systematic theology – God, creation, sin, salvation, Christ, the Spirit, the church, eschatology, and the like. Yet the fact remains that Paul himself did not construct a “theology” in the scholastic sense. All attempts to mine his letters for the components of a theological system run the double risk of imposing on his thought what is not there and of missing what is there.

Since Paul himself did not develop a theological system, and because the traditional categories of systematic theology more often obscure his thought than clarify it, why not abandon the attempt to discern anything like a Pauline “theology”? Why not attend simply to the apostle’s “practical” teachings, and to what can be inferred from his letters about the appeals that characterized his missionary preaching? For instance, one recent interpreter has argued that “it is a fundamental mistake” to regard Paul “as the ‘prince of thinkers’ and the Christian ‘theologian par excellence,’” since he was “first and foremost a missionary, a man of practical religion,” whose thought defies logical analysis.<sup>2</sup> One should of course take care not simply to presume that Paul was always consistent, either in his thinking or in his articulation of his views. Yet his letters leave no doubt that certain firmly held religious convictions shaped and informed his preaching and teaching. Moreover, the apostle himself often identified, explicated, and even conceptualized those convictions in order to support and commend his understanding of the gospel and of Christian faith.

There is in fact a growing consensus that one need not, indeed must not, choose between Paul the “thinker” and Paul the “practical man.” To understand Paul the apostle one must understand

<sup>2</sup> Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia, 1986), 266–67; see also 1–15.

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the way he himself reflected on his gospel, since this is what gave his ministry its special direction and shape. Precisely because he was an *apostle*, he was devoted to thinking through, and to helping others think through, the truth and significance of that gospel. Recognizing this, interpreters are increasingly concerned to find ways of approaching his thought that will do justice both to its own structure and to the situational contexts of his letters within which it finds expression. These letters certainly do not yield “a theology,” if by that one means an orderly, consistent construct of beliefs about God and human existence. What they do yield is a portrait of Paul as “theologian,” in that they disclose him engaged in serious reflection on Christian understandings of God and of human existence, and concerned to communicate those understandings to others intelligibly, and in a way that will make a difference in their lives.

It is therefore with Paul’s *theological reflection* in 1 Corinthians that the present study is concerned. This is most evident where he is engaged in the exposition, sometimes rather extended, of particular assertions or claims. But it also comes into view when he offers interpretive comments on Scripture or statements drawn from the church’s tradition, when he states his own strongly held beliefs concerning the truth and significance of the gospel, and not least, when he mounts arguments against understandings of the gospel that differ from his own.

When interpreting these passages and statements one must take care not to import ideas and themes that surface in other Pauline letters, as if the apostle’s thinking always started at the same place, followed the same course, and arrived at the same conclusions. An assessment of his theological reflection in 1 Corinthians has to proceed with constant reference to the specific aims and character of this particular letter. Moreover, one must not forget what prompts Paul’s theological reflection and drives his concern to elucidate the gospel. It is not an interest in establishing a specific set of beliefs to which he can then demand that the Corinthians give their assent. Rather, it is the conviction that he is obligated to deepen his hearers’<sup>3</sup> understanding of the gospel in order that their

<sup>3</sup> “Hearers” rather than “readers,” because upon receipt the apostle’s letter would have been read aloud to the congregation.

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lives may be more fully conformed to it, both as a community of faith and as people called to live out their faith in the everyday world.

My understanding of the theological orientation of 1 Corinthians has been significantly enriched and informed through participation in the Pauline Theology Group, which met annually from 1986 through 1995 under the auspices of the Society of Biblical Literature. For the privilege of membership in that group and the opportunities it afforded for collegial dialogue, I am deeply grateful.<sup>4</sup> My gratitude extends as well to James D. G. Dunn, also a member of that group, for inviting me to contribute to his New Testament Theology series, and then for waiting so patiently while I completed my assignment; to the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, for grants of a faculty research leave and a Scholarly Outreach Award which gave me extra time to work on this volume; to Mr. Katsuya Kawano, for preparing the indexes; and by no means least to the longtime friend and colleague to whom this book is dedicated, from whom I continue to learn so much.

Unless otherwise noted, the translations of biblical materials are my own.

<sup>4</sup> For the results of the Group's work, see *Pauline Theology*, I–III (edited respectively by Jouette M. Bassler; David M. Hay; and David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson; Minneapolis, 1991–95), and IV (ed. by E. Elizabeth Johnson and David M. Hay; Atlanta, 1997).

## *Abbreviations*

AB	The Anchor Bible
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BARev</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovanensium
BEvT	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie
BGBE	Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GNS	Good News Studies
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Interp</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>

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*List of abbreviations*

<i>JNTS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament – Supplement Series</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>KD</i>	<i>Kerygma und Dogma</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
MNTC	Moffatt New Testament Commentary
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	<i>Novum Testamentum – Supplement series</i>
NTAbh	Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLBS	Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SNTU</i>	<i>Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt</i>
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
VCS	Variorum Collected Studies

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WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WD</i>	<i>Wort und Dienst</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>