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978-0-521-35953-5 - The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians

James D. G. Dunn

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Professor Dunn writes: 'Paul's letter to the Galatians is one of the fiercest and most polemical writings in the Bible. That is what makes it such an exciting document to deal with. For it comes from the early morning of a vigorous new movement (Christianity), when basic principles were first being formulated, and when the whole character of the movement was at stake. In the pages of Galatians we can actually witness fundamental features of Christian theology taking shape. It is a cry from the heart of one at the very front of the line of Christian advance dealing with questions which determined the identity and whole life-style of those to whom he wrote. Here readers can little doubt that they are encountering the living heart of Paul's gospel. There is an elemental quality about it, to which those tired of compromising half truths are drawn when they feel the instinctive impulse to return to first principles. This study, which reflects the new perspective on Paul, helps to explain more clearly than hitherto both the issues which confronted Paul and the powerful theological arguments he brought to bear in response, and so brings fresh illumination to a document still capable of shaping both lives and theology today.'

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NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

General Editor: James D. G. Dunn,
Lightfoot Professor of Divinity, University of Durham

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This series provides a programmatic survey of the individual writings of the New Testament. It aims to remedy the deficiency of available published material, which has tended to concentrate on historical, textual, grammatical, and literary issues at the expense of the theology, or to lose distinctive emphases of individual writings in systematised studies of 'The Theology of Paul' and the like. New Testament specialists here write at greater length than is usually possible in the introductions to commentaries or as part of other New Testament theologies, and explore the theological themes and issues of their chosen books without being tied to a commentary format, or to a thematic structure drawn from elsewhere. When complete, the series will cover all the New Testament writings, and will thus provide an attractive, and timely, range of texts around which courses can be developed.

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To
PETER STUHLMACHER
fellow student
at the feet of
Paul the theologian

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Editor's preface

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 their 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)

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two or three New Testament writings. A serious corollary to this is the degree to 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.

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Preface

Anyone who is interested in the doing and making of theology could hardly find a better starting place than the letter of Paul to the Galatians. For here is Christianity's first great theologian – arguably its greatest theologian – in full flood. Here we can never lose the sense that issues of profound significance are in the balance, to be argued for and defended as though life itself was at stake – as, for Paul, it was. Here we see Christian theology in the making, 'the truth of the gospel' being formulated in its innermost heart and immediate corollaries – at least as Paul saw it. Even if the task of the twentieth-century commentator were to be confined to merely offering a historical description of the theology which Paul here unfolds, it would be hard to avoid being caught up in the issues of first principles, essentials and priorities, hard to remain untouched by the intensity with which Paul engages in the argument. And for those who wish to engage in the theological debate with Paul for themselves, to treat Galatians as a dialogue partner, the power and the passion of the letter can at times be almost overwhelming.

The writing of the following pages has therefore been a labour of love. The sense of engaging with a profound, if somewhat irascible theologian has never left me. As my appreciation for the thrust of the argument, for the allusions, nuances and overtones grew, so my admiration for the man and his theology has steadily deepened. If then the present volume contributes even a little to a fresh and fuller understanding of Paul's theology and Paul's gospel the labour will have been repaid in sufficient measure.

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PREFACE

Although I was concerned primarily with the theology of Galatians it was clear to me from the start that the theological argumentation had to be set in its historical context. In a day when many question the need or value of doing so in handling a text like Galatians, my own conviction has been repeatedly reinforced that this letter cannot be adequately understood except in relation to the situation to which it was addressed. For this is no ivory tower theology, no theology in the abstract, but theology in vigorous and outspoken dialogue with all too real and specific situations. It is true that we cannot hear the other side of the dialogue in its own terms, but the alternatives and threats as seen by Paul are clear enough. For those who wish then either to appreciate Paul's grasp of the gospel or to engage with him in assessing and expressing claims to theological truth, it simply will not do to abstract the words of Galatians from their context in the letter or from the letter's context in history. For it is the contingency, the context-relatedness of Paul's statements which both gave and still give them their point; a restatement of the same truth in a different or later context requires a different formulation. The Paul of 1 Cor. 9.19–23 would have been the first to see that. Any use of Galatians in doing theology which ignores the historical contextuality of Paul's statements in Galatians, therefore, is almost bound to misperceive particular points in the argument and to lose the balance of the whole. To hear Paul in his historical context is to recognize more clearly not only *why* he says what he says, but also *what* it is he actually is saying in the letter.

This study comes at the end of a sustained interaction with Galatians stretching over twelve or so years. During the first part of that period my main concern was with Paul's letter to the Romans; from the first it was clear to me that the latter could not be adequately understood without constant recourse to the former – another indication of Galatians' importance. But since 1988 Galatians itself has been my principal concern, particularly in writing a commentary on the letter for the Black's New Testament Commentary series. Having worked through the text of the letter in close detail it was a particular pleasure to be able to take a step backwards and to write a

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theological overview of the whole document. Since space did not permit a section on the theology of the letter in the introduction to the commentary, the two volumes overlap to a surprisingly small extent and can be regarded as companion volumes.

My thanks are due to Alex Wright, Cambridge University Press's editor for the series, whose support for the series and encouragement in the writing of this volume has made the venture still the more pleasurable. Regular participation in the Pauline Theology Group which has met annually for the past few years at the Society of Biblical Literature conferences has been a constant stimulus and delight, as also the more continuous dialogue with my colleagues and postgraduates at Durham. The volume is dedicated to Peter Stuhlmacher in celebration of our continuing Durham–Tübingen theological dialogue, not least on what the theology of Paul is for today. As for Meta, whose praise is far beyond rubies, she still can't quite believe that this volume was completed so quickly!

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ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BAGD	W. Bauer, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , ed. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich; 2nd edition revised F. W. Gingrich & F. W. Danker
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
ER	<i>Epworth Review</i>
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , ed. G. A. Buttrick
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTS	JSNT Supplement series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LSJ	H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , revised H. S. Jones
LXX	Septuagint = Greek version of Old Testament
NEB	New English Bible
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible

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Abbreviations

<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
par(s).	parallel(s)
REB	Revised English Bible
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SEA</i>	<i>Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNT	Supplement to <i>NovT</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittell & G. Friedrich
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament