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PAUL, THE REFORMATION AND MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

What is the nature of Paul's attack on Judaism and Judaizing Christianity? It is increasingly being recognized by New Testament scholars that the answer to this question can no longer be taken for granted.

According to the traditional approach stemming from the Reformation, Paul is attacking the idea that salvation can be earned by acts of obedience to the law, as held by his Jewish or Jewish Christian opponents. He himself preaches the gospel of salvation solely by the grace of God, and the idea that salvation is to be earned by man's achievement is therefore anathema to him. Judaism is thus presented as a religion of 'works righteousness', a form of Pelagianism according to which God has given us the law so that we might earn salvation by fulfilling it. Paul's gospel opposes such arrogance with its insistence on grace and faith alone. On this view, what is at issue between Paul and his opponents is a matter of pure theology and pure theory: they debate the merits of two rival answers to the question, How can man be accepted by God? Many scholars still believe that this interpretation of the Pauline texts is essentially correct.

But other scholars are dissatisfied with this approach. The fundamental question is whether or not such an approach can do justice to the historical and sociological context in which Paul was writing. Paul understood himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, and the problem of the status of the Gentiles dominated his life and work. Can the highly theological interpretation given by the Reformation tradition be reconciled with this very specific historical situation? Or does it result in a distorted view both of Paul and of the Judaism he opposed? It will be the argument of the present work that the latter is the case: the Reformation tradition's approach to Paul is fundamentally wrong. But before embarking on this argument, a more detailed survey is needed first of the Lutheran approach, and secondly of the modern dissatisfaction with it.

1 The Lutheran approach

It is commonly asserted that 'modern Pauline studies began with the Tübingen scholar, F. C. Baur' (Howard, *Crisis*, 1). In one sense, this is obviously true: Baur was the first great exponent of the study of Paul by historical methods. But in another sense, the statement is misleading, for modern Pauline studies are still dominated to a remarkable extent by Luther's interpretation of the apostle.[1] Whereas endeavours such as synoptic source criticism and the quest for the historical Jesus can be traced back to quite definite beginnings in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rationalism, we must go back to Luther to find the origin and inspiration of much contemporary work on Paul. Of no area of Paul's thought is this more the case than with his attack on the adherents of the law, which is our present concern.[2]

Luther's interpretation of Paul is dominated by opposition to what he conceives as a terrible misuse of the law as a means by which sinful and deluded man seeks to earn salvation by his own efforts. In the 1535 lectures on Galatians, he comments on Gal. 3:10:

> To want to be justified by works of the Law is to deny the righteousness of faith. On this basis, when those who are self-righteous keep the Law, they deny the righteousness of faith and sin against the First, Second and Third Commandments, and against the entire Law, because God commands that He be worshipped by believing and fearing Him. But they, on the contrary, make their works into righteousness, without faith and against faith. Therefore in their very keeping of the Law they act in a manner that is most contrary to the Law, and they sin most seriously and grievously ... The righteousness of the Law which they think they are producing is in fact nothing but idolatry and blasphemy against God. (253–4)

Luther here and elsewhere shifts the emphasis away from the traditional view of sin as transgression of particular commandments, and asserts that it is precisely those who keep the commandments who in doing so manifest the essence of sin, since they rely on themselves and reject the grace of God.[3]

All this presupposes that when Paul condemns 'works', he means moral activity in general, and not just the Jewish 'ceremonies' which are abolished by the coming of Christ. Luther considers the latter view a disastrous error. In *De Servo Arbitrio* (1526), he writes:

> That is the ignorant error of Jerome, which, in spite of Augustine's strenuous resistance, – God having withdrawn and let Satan prevail – has spread out into the world and has persisted to the present day . It has consequently become impossible to understand Paul, and the knowledge of Christ has been inevitably obscured. Even if there had never been any other error in the Church, this one alone was pestilent and potent enough to make havoc of the gospel. (258)

If 'ceremonies' are all that Rom. 3:20 refers to, how would this help the argument that all are unrighteous? In fact, in the law of Moses ceremonies and the Decalogue are one, equally binding. Thus, freedom from the law means freedom from the whole law (285). Paul's condemnation of 'works' refers quite generally to 'all workers and all their works', but especially to 'their good and virtuous works' (271–2).

This, then, is Luther's view of the misuse of the law. We turn now to his view of its correct use: it was given in order to reveal sin, so as to terrify man's conscience and cause him to seek grace in Christ. In *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), he sums this up as follows:

> We must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability ... Now when a man has learned through the commandments to recognize his own helplessness and is distressed about how he might satisfy the law – since the law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned without hope – then, being truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself nothing whereby he may be justified or saved. Here, the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God ... (348)

All this does not make good works unnecessary, although they contribute nothing to salvation. The reason for this is as follows:

> Although, as I have said, a man is abundantly and sufficiently justified by faith inwardly, in his spirit, and so has all that he needs, except insofar as this faith and these riches must grow from day to day even to the future life; yet he remains in this mortal life on earth. (358)

Out of spontaneous love for God, the body must be reduced to subjection, which also enables one to serve others (358ff); 'Man, however, needs none of these things for his righteousness and salvation' (365).

Here, then, we have the ideas which were to become the second and third uses of the law in the classical Lutheran formulation: the law was given to provoke despair at one's own sinfulness, so that one might flee to Christ for mercy; it was also given to guide the earthly lives of those who are justified by faith. As Ebeling has pointed out, it is only the former that really deserves to be called a *usus legis* in Luther ('Triplex Usus Legis', 71).

We have discussed briefly Luther's interpretation of Paul's statements about the law under the two headings of the misuse of the law and its correct use.[4] Both of these spring from the fact that the law is a demand for complete obedience: it is misused when man attempts to earn salvation by fulfilling it, for it is intended to expose man's sin so that he seeks mercy in Christ. In the theology of *R. Bultmann*, the latter element recedes into the background.[5] In his article, 'Christ the End of the Law' (1940), Bultmann writes:

> As for the question of being inwardly weighed down by the law, it is absolutely clear that Paul never speaks of it. In its Lutheran form, this question is, at any rate, entirely foreign to Judaism ... His utterances about his past do not indicate that he suffered from an oppressive consciousness of sin. (39)

He warns that 'Paul is easily confused with Luther', which leads us to 'overlook the historical situation in which Paul is writing' (37). His complete rejection of the so-called *secundus usus legis* is accounted for by his view of the nature of sin.[6] In Luther, 'sin' may have its straightforward sense of acts which transgress the moral law, and which it is the function of the law to expose; or it may refer to the attempt to earn salvation, so that one is paradoxically disobeying the law in the very act of fulfilling it, because one does so in order to establish a claim on God.[7] Bultmann, with dialectical theology in

general, emphasizes the latter idea at the expense of the former. In his article, 'Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement' (1924), he writes:

> Man as such, the whole man, is called in question by God. Man stands under that question mark, whether he knows it or not. His moral transgressions are not his fundamental sin ... *Man's fundamental sin is his will to justify himself as man*, for thereby he makes himself God. When man becomes aware of this, the whole world is taken off its hinges; for man then puts himself under the judgment of God. (46–7)

This view of sin and the law (and, by implication, of Judaism) dominates Bultmann's interpretation of Paul. Paul

> says not only that man *cannot* achieve salvation by works of the Law, but that he was not even *intended* to do so ... But why is this the case? Because man's effort to achieve salvation by keeping the Law only leads him into sin, indeed this effort itself in the end is already sin.
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> (*Theology*, I, 263–4)

Sin is 'man's self-powered striving to undergird his own existence in forgetfulness of his creaturely existence, to procure his salvation by his own strength' (264), and this is precisely the nature of the Jewish keeping of the law. Thus, 'It is not only evil deeds already committed that make a man reprehensible in God's sight, but man's intention of becoming righteous before God by keeping the Law and thereby having his "boast" is already sin' (267). The Pauline term for this fundamental sin is 'boasting' (cf. Rom. 3:27), in radical contrast to the acceptance of God's grace as a gift, which is faith's attitude (281).

Bultmann's desire to refer as many as possible of Paul's statements about the law to its misuse as a means of achieving salvation is exemplified by his interpretation of Rom. 7, a chapter which had previously served as the *locus classicus* for the Lutheran *secundus usus legis*.[8] In 'Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul' (1932), he argues that it is to be understood against the background of Phil. 3:6 and Rom. 10:2ff, in which Paul speaks not of repentance from specific transgressions but of abandonment of zeal for the law (148ff); the essence of faith is therefore the renunciation of one's own righteousness (150). Thus, the sin discussed in Rom. 7 is the effort to achieve righteousness for oneself. 'The good' in vv. 14ff is to be understood not as what is morally good but as 'life', i.e. the authentic

life which is the Creator's purpose for man. Man knows of the possibility of authentic existence, but fails to attain it because he strives to achieve it through his own efforts (152). All that he is able to procure by this means is death (155), which is the meaning of τὸ κακόν. ποιεῖν and πράσσειν are thus equivalent to κατεργάζεσθαι: man wills what is good (life) but only achieves what is evil (death). Far from helping man to overcome sin, the law has awakened sin in him (156). Thus, Rom. 7 is no longer seen as an account of the moral struggle, in which the moral man is continually frustrated by his failure to overcome sin. This is not a subjective struggle at all, but a 'trans-subjective' struggle underlying all human life but only disclosed in the gospel (151). Rom. 7 is thus a retrospective analysis by the Christian of his own past, which he now understands for the first time. This view of Rom. 7 accords with the view of dialectical theology that 'sin' refers primarily not to individual actions but to the self-assertion and desire for autonomy which underlies the quest to establish one's own righteousness before God.

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of this whole theme in Bultmann's general theological work as well as his exegesis,[9] and this may be illustrated from 'Christ the End of the Law', where Bultmann interprets Paul's critique of Judaism as follows:

> He sees that the striving of the Jews is basically motivated by the *need for recognition*, and that in this connection this need to be recognized means fundamentally not seeking to be accepted in the sight of other men (though this will always be a concomitant of it), but rather to be accepted in the sight of God, the court of appeal which stands high above every human judgment ... A specifically human striving has merely taken on its culturally, and in point of time, individually distinct form in Judaism. For it is in fact a striving common to all men, to gain recognition of one's achievement; and this generates pride. (43)

Bultmann concludes:

> Thus it is an error to think that belief in the grace of God requires a sense of sin or a confession of sin, in the sense that man must admit to himself how much or how often and grievously he has sinned and continually is sinning. He does not need to consider frantically or artificially his

> immoralities, and does not need to contort his good works into bad. He is to consider the reason for his being, and to ask himself whence his life comes: whether it is from the grace of God or from his own powers, and whether his life is sustained from the effort to gain glory, whether he is driven this way and that by the need for recognition, or whether in the knowledge of his vanity he has seen through the comedy of this effort and so has become conscious of his sin in the sight of God. (48–9)

These excerpts indicate the immense significance that Paul's statements about the law have for Bultmann. His exegesis is motivated by a passionate theological concern.

According to *E. Käsemann*, the works of the law 'are for Paul a higher form of godlessness than transgressions of the law, and are thus incompatible with faith' (*Romans*, 103). Like Bultmann, Käsemann regards the Jew as an example of a general human phenomenon, although he is more concerned with 'the religious man' than with 'the need for recognition'. In 'Paul and Israel', he writes:

> The apostle's real adversary is the devout Jew ... as the reality of the religious man. For man, whether he knows it and acts correspondingly or not, is the being who is set before God: and this fact the devout Jew acknowledges. Certainly such a profession is no protection from illusion. In fact, religion always provides man with his most thorough-going possibility of confusing an illusion with God. Paul sees this possibility realized in the devout Jew: inasmuch as the announcement of God's will in the law is misunderstood as a summons to human achievement and therefore as a means to a righteousness of one's own. But that is for him the root sin, because an image is set in the place of God; man, in despairing presumption, erects his own work into the criterion of the universal judgment, and God becomes an approving spectator of our doings. (184–5)

Paul 'strikes at the hidden Jew in all of us' (186). His doctrine of the law is the 'radical spearhead' of the doctrine of justification ('Salvation History', 72), which now needs to be directed against a complacent, bourgeois church. The doctrine of justification

> undoubtedly grew up in the course of the anti-Jewish struggle and stands or falls with this antithesis. But the historian must

> not make things easy for himself by simply, as historian, noting this incontrovertible fact. If he does, he could equally well call Jesus a pious Jew who had a memorable fate and left behind him a series of impressive sayings. Our task is to ask: what does the Jewish nomism against which Paul fought really represent? And our answer must be: it represents the community of 'good' people which turns God's promises into their own privileges and God's commandments into the instruments of self-sanctification. (71–2)

Käsemann's statements are symptomatic of the fact that Paul functions in the Reformation tradition not primarily as a historical but as a quasi-mythological figure, whose gospel of grace was rejected by the church but who returns at certain key moments (notably the Reformation) to challenge the church's legalistic way of thinking.[10] Käsemann's version of this widespread Protestant myth may be illustrated from his article, 'Paul and Early Catholicism'. He claims that Paul was

> an individualist, doubtless one of the most significant in church history and surely the most controversial even in earliest Christianity. The later period was able to assimilate him only by setting the image of a saint in the place of his actual life ... Alongside this image of Paul, to which the ecclesiastical future belonged, there is, however, the real Paul as well. This Paul remains confined in seven letters and for the most part unintelligible to posterity, not only to the ancient church and the Middle Ages. However, whenever he is rediscovered – which happens almost exclusively in times of crisis – there issues from him explosive power which destroys as much as it opens up something new. His historical existence and activity is then repeated ... It is never long, to be sure, until orthodoxy and enthusiasm again master this Paul and banish him once more to his letters. However, the Church continues to preserve his letters in her canon and thereby latently preserves her own permanent crisis. She cannot get away from the one who for the most part only disturbs her. For he remains even for her the apostle of the heathen; the pious still hardly know what to make of him. (249–50)[11]

For Käsemann as for Bultmann, the essence of the Pauline doctrine of justification is the condemnation of the attempt to earn salvation by one's own efforts. Bultmann applies this to what he sees as a tendency of human life as a whole, self-assertion or the need for recognition. Käsemann uses it in a sharply polemical fashion against every form of conservatism, especially theological or ecclesiastical.

The approach to Paul taken by the representatives of dialectical theology (one thinks of scholars such as Bornkamm, Fuchs, Conzelmann, Klein and Hübner, as well as Bultmann and Käsemann) should not be lightly dismissed by those who cannot accept it. It represents much the most impressive modern attempt to reach to the heart of Paul's theology, and its theological seriousness compels respect, the more so as it has been engendered in part by the bitter experiences of modern German history. Although it can sometimes lead its advocates into bad-tempered and short-sighted polemic, on other occasions it attains a lucidity and profundity which makes New Testament scholarship from other traditions seem facile and superficial by comparison. On the other hand, this does not mean that its exegesis of Paul is correct: 'Profound theologians can be profoundly wrong.'[12]

This interpretation of Paul's controversy with Judaism obviously stems directly from the Reformation, and is not peculiar to dialectical theology.[13] But there has been a great deal of discussion about the extent to which opposition to the sinful attempt to put God under an obligation by one's obedience to the law is to be found in the Pauline texts. Whereas Bultmann and his followers have tended to see virtually every Pauline statement about the law in this light, scholars such as Althaus have emphasized that the traditional view of sin as transgression of the law is also of great significance to Paul.[14] More recently, U. Wilckens has rejected altogether the idea that Paul can see in 'works of the law' the essence of sin, arguing that Paul does not contest the desire to fulfil the law in itself, but only the possibility of such a fulfilment.[15] H. Hübner's recent book, *Law in Paul's Thought* (ET 1985) contains an attempt to mediate between these two positions; he argues that Bultmann's view is to be found in Romans but not in Galatians. Thus, in Gal. 3:10 Paul denies the possibility of a *quantitative* fulfilment of the law (38–41), whereas Rom. 3:27 criticizes boasting in one's fulfilment of the law (116). Similarly, Abraham is described as 'ungodly' in Rom. 4:5 in part because he wished to be justified by works (121), whereas there is no sign of this sinful boasting in Galatians (111).

On the whole, this debate has been carried on within the confines of the Reformation tradition. But other interpreters of Paul have questioned the Reformation approach *as a whole*. Is it really the case that at the heart of Paul's controversy with Judaism is an attack on the idea that righteousness is to be achieved by one's own efforts? Is there not a danger of reading back Luther's controversy with the Roman Catholic church into the first century, and so of failing to understand the historical circumstances of Paul's controversy with Judaism? We must now outline the views of some of the scholars who have questioned the traditional approach.

2 Opposition to the Lutheran approach

The first to claim that Paul's polemic against Judaism was motivated by a rather different concern was *Ferdinand Christian Baur*. He argued that Paul

> was the first to lay down expressly and distinctly the principle of Christian universalism as a thing essentially opposed to Jewish particularism. From the first he set this Christian principle before him as the sole rule and standard of his apostolic activity. In his Christian consciousness his own call to the apostolic office and the destination of Christianity to be the general principle of salvation for all people were two facts which were bound up inseparably in each other.
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> (*Church History*, I, 47)

In his conversion, Paul 'broke through the barriers of Judaism and rose out of the particularism of Judaism into the universal idea of Christianity' (47). This contrast between universalism and particularism dominated his work. This was the point at issue in Galatians; in the debates described in Gal. 2,

> The alternatives ... were either to do away with the distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians altogether, or to continue to be Jews, and deny to the Gentile Christians any privilege which would place them on the same level with the Jewish Christians. (55)

The Jerusalem apostles represented the particularist view, Paul the universalist: 'According to the former, it is in vain to be a Christian without being a Jew also. According to the latter, it is in vain to be a Christian if, as a Christian, one chooses to be a Jew as well' (57).