Thinking faith
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Paul the Pastor

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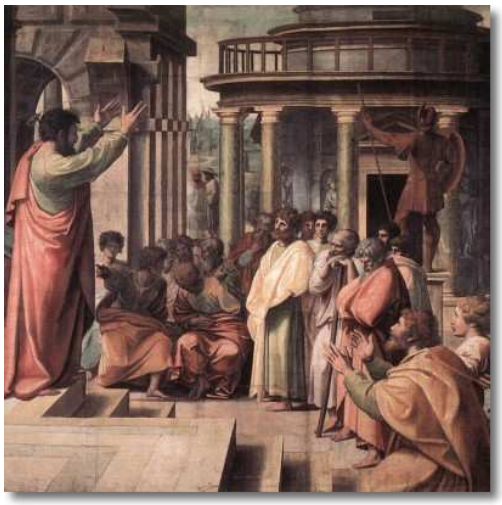
As the Pauline Year progresses, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP discusses Paul's role as a pastor to the early Christian communities he established, and looks at how he maintained his relationships with and support of these communities from a distance.

There can be no question in a brief article of a complete treatment of how Paul functioned as a pastor. It must suffice to draw attention to a number of aspects, which have particular importance in that they serve as challenging correctives to much of contemporary pastoral practice.



It took time for Paul to think of himself as a pastor. Originally he believed that he had done his duty by establishing churches and by staying with them for a year or so in order to initiate them into what it meant to live as Christians. Then he entrusted them to the Holy Spirit, and felt free to move on to new mission fields. This was the way he treated the churches of Galatia and Philippi. When he left there is no hint that he intended to return or even to maintain relations.

This attitude changed at Thessalonica. When Paul was forced to flee from the city, he knew that his converts there were being subject to persecution. On reaching safety in Athens he was desperate for information. For unexplained reasons he was not able to go back himself, but was able to send Timothy. The latter's return with the good news of the community's survival was the occasion of Paul's first letter, which initiated a correspondence in which he dealt with a number of the Thessalonians' pastoral problems. Paul had discovered the need for maintenance.

Paul's letters do not display a systematic pastoral theology. They were designed to deal with specific problems that arose in individual communities. Beneath the particularities of the solutions, however, lie principles of perennial value.

The historical Jesus

Paul's letters abound in hints which indicate how much he knew about the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. Paul could have drawn on many eyewitnesses, but there can be no doubt that the principal source of such knowledge was Peter, who had lived with Jesus since both had been disciples of John the Baptist, and with whom Paul spent two weeks early in his career as a Christian (Gal 1:18). Regretfully, from the point of view of biblical scholars, what Paul knew about the historical Jesus is not systematically displayed in any of the letters. The reason, of course, is that Paul would have thought of it as unnecessary, because the inculcation of the words and deeds of Jesus was a fundamental part of Paul's oral preaching (2 Cor 11:4). While with new converts he devoted considerable time and energy to ensuring that his converts had a very clear idea of who Jesus was. There were two reasons for this.

The first is that everyone is concerned about the distinction between real and theoretical possibility. The test is achievement: what man can do is what man has done. We know that man can walk on the moon because it has been done. It might be possible to walk on Mars but we do not know yet; it is a purely theoretical possibility. The gospel that Paul proclaimed was given reality by the fact that Jesus had in fact exhibited the self-sacrificing love that Paul demanded of his followers. It was not a utopia towards which one might aspire vaguely with the nagging fear that success was not really possible, because one man had actually lived that ideal. The historical reality of Jesus was fundamental to Paul's

gospel. Throughout his career Paul had to do his best in order to prevent his converts from escaping upwards into theology. He had to remind them continuously that Christology is what really matters. Believers must be followers of Jesus Christ, which is the will of God for humanity.

The second reason for the importance that Paul gave the historical Jesus is that he could not impose on his converts a series of commandments that would determine their way of being Christian. The reason for this we shall see below. But yet he had to give them some guidance. The only alternative was a role model whom they could imitate. The one possible candidate was Jesus, whom they had to know as well as possible. 'Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law which is Christ' (Gal 6:2). In his person and comportment Jesus both articulated the demand of God and at the same time modeled the response which is required of Christians. The 'new law' for Paul was not a list of requirements articulated by Christian leaders, but the challenge of the personality of the historical Jesus, which, of course, was much more far-reaching than any code of precepts.

Support of pastors

The second feature of Paul's pastoral attitude while resident in a community was his attitude towards money. He was convinced that he had a right to be supported by his converts, and argues this point at length in 1 Cor 9:1-14. Yet he did not use this right. He refused to accept the financial support of those with whom he lived and worked. This made his ministry extremely difficult, because his converts would have seen his refusal as an affront. Benefactions were what held society together. Patron-client relationships were the weft and woof of normal life in the Greco-Roman world. It was in practice impossible to reject a gift. Refusal might avoid incurring a reciprocal obligation, but it would generate ill will that could have unforeseen consequences. Paul's attitude, therefore, ran against the expectations of his world. It was inexplicable, and damaged his credibility.

For Paul, however, it made sense. Despite the difficulties his attitude caused, there was no alternative. He was astute enough to know that, if he accepted gifts, he would become the client of those who gave the most. The wealthier converts would take it for granted that they had the first claim on his time and energy. That was the way the world of benefactions worked. What then of the poorer members of the community? Were they to be ignored so that Paul could dance attendance on the rich?

High principles often create practical problems. It was one thing for Paul to reject financial support in principle, but it quickly became clear to him that, as the number of his converts grew, the less time he had to devote to earning his living. His income decreased in proportion to his investment in pastoral ministry. Paul's solution was to accept subsidies only from communities in which he no longer lived. Thus, for example, while working at Thessalonica he twice got financial aid from Philippi (Phil 4:16). The churches of Macedonia came to his assistance when he worked in Corinth (2 Cor 11:9). In these instances the gift came as a lump sum which left the individual donors anonymous. It was a gift of the community, and he had no problem in being its servant, particularly when distance made practical demands improbable.

The autonomy of the local church

Paul believed very strongly in the autonomy of the local church. It was the incarnation of the church of God, e.g. 'the church of God which is at Corinth' (1 Cor 1:2), and as such responsible for itself. It did not come under the orders of any external authority. This attitude is beautifully illustrated by the problem of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5:1-8. At the very beginning Paul makes it clear that the community should have dealt with the issue by expelling the sinner, 'Did you not rather go into mourning that he who had committed this deed may be taken out of your midst?' (v. 2). In fact, the community had done the opposite; they took pride in the sin. Paul felt obliged to correct them. But how could he do so? He was no longer a member of that community, and had no voice in its affairs. His solution was very subtle. He said, 'Even though I am physically absent, let us suppose that I am spiritually present when you meet about this matter, and in that case what I would say is this, "the sinner should be expelled"'.

It would be difficult to imagine a cleverer way for Paul both to make his own opinion heard and to insist that the responsibility for a decision lay with the

community. Perhaps the situation will be clarified if we think in terms of values and structures. It is the role of an outside authority figure to insist on values, whereas it is the duty of the community to determine the structures in which the values come alive. Thus Paul believed that he should stress the need for the community to purify itself, but felt that he could not impose a solution. The community had to decide how precisely this should be effected. He could point them in the right direction, but they had to find the way themselves. He thereby very carefully balanced his duty of parental oversight (1 Cor: 4:15) against the autonomy of the local church. He could suggest and guide, but his converts had to make the decision for themselves. Otherwise they would never mature as Christians.

Goodness by compulsion

The keystone of Paul's pastoral practice was his conviction that he could not impose a moral decision on his converts by means of a direct command. He felt that he could not treat a church as if it were an army of which he was the superior officer. This crucial insight for understanding his theology is perfectly illustrated by two incidents.

Onesimus was a slave who had injured his master Philemon. In the hope of mitigating his punishment he ran to Paul to beg him to intervene. Paul, of course, agreed, and his intercession is contained in the letter to Philemon. Paul tells Philemon that he has the authority to order him to do what is required, namely, to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ and not as a guilty criminal. Yet, Paul continues, because I love you, I prefer to appeal to you (v. 8). It would have been simpler for Paul to give a command that expressed his desire for Onesimus, but he felt that he had no choice but to take the riskier option of persuasion. Why?

Fortunately no speculation is necessary, because Paul himself answers the question, 'I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will' (v. 14).

Were Paul to have given Philemon a command, the latter would have felt himself bound to comply. As 'bound' he was a prisoner and could not have acted freely. His action would have been imposed by Paul, not freely chosen by himself. One has only to reflect for a moment on 'goodness by compulsion' to realize what a tremendous contradiction is implied. It goes against the very nature of the human being. Paul had to 'appeal' to Philemon to activate his 'free will'. Only an action freely chosen has any moral value.

This incident involving Philemon is not unique in Paul's letters. Precisely the same sort of moral issue was involved in the collection for the poor of Jerusalem. Naturally Paul wanted the Corinthians to be as generous as possible, and unthinkingly slips into the imperative mood, 'see that you excel in this gracious work also' (2 Cor 8:7). Immediately, however, he corrects himself, 'I say this not as a command' (2 Cor 8:8; cf. 1 Cor 7:6). Despite the form of his expression, the Corinthians should not understand it as a binding precept. Why? Once again no speculation is necessary, for Paul answers, 'Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly nor under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Cor 9:7). The freedom of cheerful choice contrasts vividly with reluctant acquiesence to outside pressure. The latter has no moral value. Personal initiative is of the very essence of a moral decision.

There is no better way to drive home this point, which is crucial for a correct understanding of Paul's pastoral practice, than to quote one of the best exegetes of the Pauline letters, St Thomas Aquinas, 'He who moves himself is free. He who is moved by another [i.e. takes orders from someone else] is not free. He who avoids evil because he sees it as evil is free. He who avoids evil simply because a precept of the Lord forbids it is not free' (Commentary on 2 Cor 3:17). The key sentence is the last one. In contemporary terms it means that a married couple who avoid contraception, not because they are convinced it is wrong, but simply because the Pope has forbidden it, are behaving like slaves. By mindlessly doing simply what they are told, their 'goodness' is by compulsion and, from Paul's perspective, has no moral value.

How did Paul come to this understanding of the deleterious effect of commands in the moral order? Ultimately it derived from his understanding of unredeemed humanity as 'enslaved' to Sin or the Law. Pagans were swept along by the consensus of false

values ('Sin') that ruled society. Jews gave blind obedience to the Law; it commanded, they submitted. As prisoners neither Jew nor pagan could change their condition. They were programmed. They could not choose freely. Paul saw with the clarity that is typical of his incisive intelligence that salvation must above all be characterized by freedom. 'You are set free for freedom' (Gal 5:1). Thus, for Paul to give orders regarding moral actions to his flock would be to return them to their unredeemed state. It would be to reduce them to the level of dolls manipulated by a puppet-master. It would destroy the maturity that is indispensable for moral adulthood.

Local leaders

Given his attitude towards commands in community, it now becomes clear why Paul did not select individuals to occupy positions of authority in his churches. It would have been to impose on a community a structure that it should have evolved itself. In his very first letter he says, 'We beseech you to identify those who labour among you and take the lead in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work' (1 Thess 5:12-13). The situation envisaged here is of believers, who of their own initiative use their Spirit-given gifts to meet the needs of the community. They 'take the lead' in ministering to others. They are not selected or invited. They claim their ministry by the success of their 'labour/work'. The purpose of Paul's intervention is to alert the community to what is already a fact. De facto leaders should be acknowledged as such.

The same situation developed at Corinth. 'You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you to submit to such people and every fellow worker and labourer' (1 Cor 16:15-16). Note the same emphasis on 'work/labour'. Ministry is not merited by a diploma, but claimed by successful service to the community.

Mention of the 'household' of Stephanas brings us to another point. The extended family certainly included women, who in consequence also exercised leadership roles in the community. In Paul's eyes women were fully equal to men in all aspects of community life; 'as Christians woman is not otherwise than man, and man is not otherwise than woman' (1 Cor 11:11). Thus Paul could accept a spectrum of leadership models: a single man such as Gaius of Corinth (Rom 16:23), a single woman such as Phoebe of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1-2), a married couple such as Prisca and Aquila (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3-5), and finally a committee such as Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus (Phlm 1-2). The determining voice was that of the community. Paul had the right to insist on the importance of the value of authority, but it was the duty of the community to determine the structure in which it was incarnated.

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