

Theo 3202 New Testament Exegesis: Pauline Epistles
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Second Essay: Compare the soteriologies found in each of the Pauline epistles. Does his soteriology develop, and how may it be summarised?

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Introduction

The first step in analysing Paul's writings is to decide which of the New Testament epistles are actually his. In this essay the seven least contested epistles are accepted as Pauline. This includes the four undisputed writings (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians and Galatians) and three widely accepted ones (Philippians, Philemon and 1 Thessalonians)¹.

In order to determine whether Paul's thought has developed over time, the order of the epistles must be decided. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on this matter, but this essay follows the order Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Romans, Philippians².

The main question of the essay is, "What is Paul's soteriological position, and how does his focus change over time?" One must be careful in reading too much into a change in emphasis in Paul's writings. It is not necessarily true that just because a particular theme emerges only in his later writings that it is a later development. Paul's epistles are primarily situational, and it may simply be that there was no need to raise the issue earlier. Also, since we do not have all his letters, we cannot be sure when Paul first raises certain issues.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 1.

P. T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 9-10.

L. E. Keck & V. P. Furnish, *The Pauline Letters*, pp. 16-25, provide evidence for excluding 2 Thessalonians, Colossians & Ephesians from the Pauline corpus, though opinion on Col is divided and many accept 2Thess.

² The possibility of Galatians following 2 Corinthians, and of Philippians following Romans is addressed in the relevant sections below.

That said, it does appear that there is a gradual shift in emphasis from Galatians to Romans in Paul's soteriological emphasis. The trend is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1, Soteriological emphases in Paul's epistles.

Epistle	Present Salvation			Future Salvation		
	what?	who?	how?	what?	who?	how?
Galatians	***	*	***	*		
1 Thess	***	*	***	*		
1 Cor	***	*	***	**	*	*
2 Cor	***	*	*	**	**	
Phm	***					
Ro	***	***	***	***	***	***
Php	***	*	***	*		*

(Number of stars is roughly proportional to the amount of emphasis, based loosely on number of verses addressing each issue).

The main body of this essay provides the evidence for this table, comparing each epistles' answer to the following questions: What is salvation, Who is saved, and how are they saved? Each question is investigated in terms of the present situation, and the situation after death. Following this an attempt is made to summarise Paul's soteriological thought and reflect on its significance for the modern Christian.

Galatians

Galatians emphasises salvation as freedom, from the present evil age (1:3), ritual (2:4), cultural/racial biases (2:11, 3:28), and 'elemental spirits' (4:8). Salvation consists not of abusing this freedom, but using it to show forth the fruit of the Spirit (4:22). Those who are set free cannot be complacent, but must pursue an ethical life lest they slip back (5:13-6:10). The saved

If this is yours, you are to be congratulated or no reaction of how you derived your roughly proportional - would help under good the results.

are also described as being heirs of God's promises, and part of God's family (3:16f, 4:6-7).

Salvation is experienced now by those who have faith in Jesus Christ, not those who focus on the works and marks of the Law (3:1-4:17) or who continue to do evil (6:7f). It is therefore not universal, and those without faith in Christ remain enslaved. This salvation of freedom is made possible through Christ, "who gave himself for our sins to deliver us..." (1:4, also 2:20, 4:5)³.

Paul mentions eternal life only briefly, as the reward of those who 'sow to the Spirit' (6:8) and thus exhibit the fruit. The future tense, and use of *kairos* to designate time implies that Paul is thinking of a future judgment and everlasting life, not life here and now, of eternally deep quality. Likewise corruption refers to the future corruption/destruction of those who fail at the judgment.

1 Thessalonians

The soteriological emphasis and doctrine of 1 Thessalonians is very close to that of Galatians, without the strong anti-works polemic. The freedom motif continues, though less emphasised⁴, as does the ethical dimension of realised salvation (3:12-13, 4:1ff, 5:22). Again Paul seems to have Christians specifically in mind when discussing realised salvation (5:9). Even excluding 2:14-16 as an insertion, the implication is that not everybody enters this saving relationship with God while living on earth. Those who are saved, are saved through Jesus, who died for them. The others, by implication, suffer wrath and sudden destruction (5:3,9).

³ As will become apparent, Christ's death is a central theme in Paul's soteriology (B. H. McLean, "The absence of an atoning sacrifice in Paul's soteriology" *New Testament Studies*, vol 38 (1992) p. 531).

⁴ Presumably because Thessalonica lacked the Judaizing problems of Galatia.

Again Paul is clear on the existence of eternal life with Jesus, made possible through the resurrection of the dead (4:15-17). Christians are obviously included in this, but the status of non Christians depends on whether Paul considers their destruction to be total and eternal, or perhaps of the body so that the Spirit may live (as in 1Cor 5:5). Paul does not speculate, whether deliberately or because he didn't see it as relevant we cannot tell.

1 Corinthians

*note the reference to an earlier letter in 1 Cor 5:9
— some suggest parts of this are collected in 2 Cor^{rs}.*

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians upholds his earlier ideas, and expands further on future salvation. Although salvation is experienced now, he sees that Christians are also in the process of being saved (1:18). Christ's crucifixion is the agent of salvation (2:2, 15:3), but ethical behaviour is also essential, both to avoid God's discipline here (11:29-32), and to inherit the Kingdom of God in the future (6:9-11). Paul gives a much more detailed exposition of what it means to live out salvation on earth, focussing on love and unity (e.g. chs 11-13) and for the first time he introduces the motif of suffering as a valid characteristic of the life of salvation (4:11f).

In Corinthians, Paul emphasises what until now he has mentioned only in passing: the future resurrection and the promise of eternal life, without which the Christian faith is useless (15:32). Whoever receives eternal life will retain their individuality, but their human body will be transformed into an incorruptible one (15:42). In heaven, we will finally see God face to face and will understand all that is to us now a mystery (13:12). As to who receives eternal life, although Paul says that "in Christ shall all be made alive" (15:22-23), he continues that it is specifically "those who belong to Christ". Paul seems to be saying that everyone who *does* receive eternal life, will do it through Christ.

An interesting aside is found in 7:14, where unbelieving spouses, and children, are made holy by the Christian. Strangely, cleanness/holiness is distinguished from salvation (v15). Verses

such as these suggest that Paul's soteriology was, like much of his theology, far from systematic.

2 Corinthians

Not surprisingly, the emphasis of Paul's second letter to Corinth is similar to that of the first. Paul continues to teach salvation as a present reality, characterised by freedom and life (3:17-18) and ethical responsibility (12:20ff). The emphasis on process increases (3:18, 4:16, 5:4f), as does the justification of suffering as a legitimate part of the experience of realised salvation (1:5-9, 4:7ff, 5:4ff, 6:5-10, 11:24-29).

Again, this suffering is tolerable because of the future glory that awaits the believer (4:17)⁵. Although Paul introduces the argument that because of Christ's death God no longer counts people's sin against them, judgment will still occur, where people will be repaid for their good or evil deeds (5:10). Again, though Paul also talks about failing the test (13:5), he does not explicitly say what happens to those who do. There will be punishment, but he is silent about the eternal consequences of this.

A curious verse is 4:4, where Paul claims that the god of this world blinds unbelievers to keep them from the gospel. In Romans it is God, not the god, who is seen to be the manipulator, which may reflect a strengthening of Paul's determination to defend the sovereignty of God, requiring him to reject some of the apocalypticism, that was common in his day⁶.

Philemon

One could hardly expect Paul to cover all of what is found in

⁵ See also C. J. Roetzel, "As Dying, and Behold we Live: Death and resurrection in Paul's Theology" *Interpretation*, vol 46 (1992) p. 18.

⁶ C. K. Barret, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 130.

the Corinthian correspondences here, no matter how briefly. His thoughts are certainly compatible, however. What Christians have in Christ is good, and ethical requirements are still part of the faith.

Romans

Present Salvation

Romans is no less situational than Paul's other letters. The focus on Jew/Gentile relations reflects the problems being experienced in the Roman church, and provides an obvious platform for an extended consideration of the salvation of Jew and Gentile. Although salvation is addressed far more comprehensively in Romans, it is likely that Paul had already given much thought to the themes that appear here for the first time.

The major motifs for salvation are still freedom and family. Freedom is specifically from sin, death and the law (5:6/ 5:23/ 7:1; 8:2), and is now strongly linked with baptism (6:3-6)⁷. As in Galatians, Christians cry, "Abba" through the Spirit, signalling their adoption into God's family (8:15-17).

Paul's strong ethical focus continues (esp chs 6,12-16), as does his promotion of suffering as a valid, even necessary, Christian experience (5:3, 8:17-18, 12:12). Paul spends a lot more time on the life of the saved in Romans. He develops the theme of the groaning of creation, subject to decay, which will, nevertheless, be set free from this decay by the glorification of the believers. Christians can strongly empathise with the creation, since they too groan, having experienced only a taste of what is to come (8:21-24). Christians should not despair in their suffering and groanings, however, because the Holy Spirit himself helps them through life, interceding for them and helping them to pray (8:26). Christians may be called to an exceptionally rigorous moral life, but they are not left alone to achieve it.

⁷ Also R. P. Carlson, "The Role of Baptism in Paul's Thought" *Interpretation*, vol 47 (1993), pp. 255-259.

Scholars are divided over how pessimistically Paul views the chance of living up to his ethical requirements, based mostly on two interpretations of 7:14ff. One view sees this as describing pre-Christian experience⁹. In contrast, Morris⁷ sees it as Paul's confession of his own post-conversion struggles. One should bear in mind Sanday & Headlam¹⁰, who point out that much discussion of the issue is far too technical for what Paul intended. He is talking about the time around conversion, but the details are not clear. That said, the pre Christian case is a little stronger, especially given 8:6 (to set the mind on the flesh is death) and the strong ethical imperatives to come in Philippians (esp 2:15-16). Paul does acknowledge that Christians sin (2:1-5), but this will lead to wrath, and isn't accepted by him as something which may remain a part of the life of the believer (8:6-9).

In summary, Christians are free from sin, and part of God's family. They must respond in a morally proper way, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It seems that Paul thought this to be possible, once having been set free from the body of flesh by Christ.

Paul maintains a clear distinction between the 'saved' and 'unsaved' on earth. The fundamental division is between those who have, and don't have, the Holy Spirit of God (8:9). The former group is characterised by those who believe (put their hope/trust in) the gospel (1:16) and bear witness to this by confessing Christ as Lord and believing in his resurrection (10:9). The latter group is portrayed very negatively, particularly in chapter 1 (though the purpose of this is to rebuke the faithful in ch2), and again in chapter 8. The majority of the Israelites are in the second category (9:6), while a significant number of Gentiles have been included in the first (9:30). Here there is little

⁹ Eg. J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, p. 194, but his conclusions are only tentative ("Only a very bold commentator would claim complete understanding of the precise line of argument of this passage", p. 189).

⁷ L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 288.

¹⁰ W. Sanday & A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 184.

development from Galatians, but the picture in terms of final salvation is significantly developed (see below).

Christ's faithfulness is the basis for the Christian's relationship with God¹¹. He enables people to die to sin (3:25)¹², and those who trust in this Good News receive the Spirit of adoption into God's family. Chapter 8 reinforces that God is the initiator of the whole process, having acted for Christians when they were powerless in themselves. Indeed, they were foreknown, and predestined to be conformed to Jesus' likeness (8:29).

Future Salvation

The general resurrection continues to be Paul's major expectation of the afterlife (5:2, 6:5, 8:11 etc). The significant addition in Romans is that the creation is seen as participating in the afterlife in some way. Through the glorification of the believers, the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" though Paul spoke of believers as being adopted into the family already, he also considers them to be groaning inwardly in anticipation of this (8:23).

Here Paul tackles a question very close to his heart, the future of his fellow Israelites. They have rejected his gospel and therefore, in his view, placed themselves outside God's family. Paul's despair at this situation is obvious (9:1-3)¹³.

¹¹ B. W. Longenecker, "Pistis (gk) in Romans 3:25 Neglected evidence for 'The faithfulness of Christ?'" *New Testament Studies*, vol 39 (1993), p. 480.

¹² Ziesler p. 112-4 outlines the argument for this interpretation of atonement/expiation/mercy seat.

¹³ Ro 9:6 cannot be read as Paul's final answer to the problem, as if he was no longer concerned when he realised that not all of his people were true Jews anyway- chapter 11 is crucial to the interpretation of ch 9.

In chapter 10 Paul restates that final salvation has been opened up for Gentiles as well as Jews. Chapter 11 begins by explaining that the present rejection of the Messiah by some Jews was necessary for this to occur. This is the context in which Paul's examples of divine manipulation must be understood. He is not discussing the salvation/condemnation of an individual by the arbitrary decision of God (Kummel p. 234), but is proposing that God manipulated the Jews in order to be more inclusive and bring about the salvation of the Gentiles as well.

Is God unjust? By no means! God used Israel in the short term to gain salvation for all Israel and the "full number" of Gentiles in the long term (11:25-26)¹⁴. God assigned *the nation* a task, in which it admittedly had no say, but this was not through any indifference to the plight of the individual: indeed the opposite¹⁵!

Unlike Longenecker and the present author, Kummel refuses to claim Paul as a universalist in the modern sense, though he believes Paul may have hoped for as much¹⁶. Kummel's reservation

¹⁴ B. W. Longenecker ("Different Answers to Different Issues: Israel, the Gentiles and Salvation History in Romans 9-11" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* vol 36 (1989), pp. 97-8) argues that the salvation of *all* ethnic Israel is crucial to Paul's argument in chapters 9ff.

¹⁵ The question remains as to why God had to harden the Jews to allow the Gentiles to enter. Apparently, for Paul, this was necessary because God will not simply save everyone despite their unbelief, but somehow will bring all people to believe in the Messiah (Longenecker, "Different..." p. 99.). The problem with this explanation is that Paul must surely have observed Jews dying without coming to believe in Jesus. This implies that he had a more cosmic, national focus, and presumably though the process continued after death.

¹⁶ W. G. Kummel, *Theology of the New Testament According to its major witnesses Jesus-Paul-John*, p. 243.

L. Morris, "Salvation", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 860 rejects even this, again for no compelling reason.

is altogether too conservative when the whole of Romans is considered¹⁷. Firstly, his objections to interpreting "All Israel" literally are not convincing. Secondly, it is difficult to see that Paul, who is convinced that God "proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (5:8); who believes that God has the power and right to manipulate things as he wills (ch 11)¹⁸; who will redeem the whole of creation; could allow anyone not to attain eternal life with him.

Equally difficult is the attempt to Paul's focus on the wrath of God and the punishment of sinners. The popular contemporary view that Romans focuses on justification by faith alone ignores 2:1-5. Paul certainly argues that works *of the Law* do not lead to salvation (3:20), but good works themselves are essential for it (2:1-5, 8:6, 14:16). Chapters 1-3 make it clear that Paul believed that every person deserved the wrath of God (esp 3:10), although we should bear in mind that the point of this section is more to bring the Jewish and Gentile Christians to a level playing field than to denigrate the human race in general. The purpose of chapter 3 is to remove any claim to the right to salvation.

The summary of the thought of Romans combined with that of Philippians.

Philippians

Although present salvation is still viewed as a process (1:6, 3:12), Paul assumes that perfection is possible in this life (2:15-16). It seems that the demands of Paul's ethical imperatives have increased since his first epistles. Perhaps this reflects not so much his developing optimism as his increasing despair as he ministers to people who fail to live up to his expectations (for example, the Corinthian church seems to have changed little after his first letter). If it is true that

¹⁷ See also Longenecker, "Different..." p. 102.

¹⁸ Unlike modern interpreters, Paul appears completely unconcerned with notions of free will and the right to self-determination.

Philippians contains the pinnacle of Paul's ethical demands, this may support a post-Romans date¹⁹.

Paul doesn't discuss who participates in salvation now, although his audience is obviously assumed to, and his discussion of the mechanism of entering the process of salvation is limited to a re-iteration of his position in Galatians (3:1-9).

Final salvation is still expressed in terms of being with Christ, through the resurrection from the dead (1:23, 3:11) and the transformation of the believers' bodies (3:21). Those Christians who imitate Paul (3:17) by striving (3:13-14) and standing firm (4:1) will live in heaven, having been rescued by Christ (3:20).

Paul includes one apparently universalistic verse (2:10), but it is hard to see how he could mean it to be universalistic given 2:15-16 and 3:18-19. O'Brien points out that the context of the original quote in Isaiah 45:22-25 includes both God's followers and his enemies, who are *forced* to acknowledge his authority. Paul is no rigid conformer to context, but this and O'Brien's make a universalistic interpretation at best a possibility, especially since "all" often means "a lot" in the New Testament.

In the context of Philippians a non universalistic interpretation is preferred. If, however, the previous interpretation of Romans is accepted, one could interpret 2:10 universalistically, claiming to have some insight into Paul's mind not provided in this epistle itself. Alternately, Philippians could be dated earlier than Romans and seen as an intermediary step. Again, it could be taken to be Paul's rejection of his earlier optimistic view, based on his observation of the continual resistance of most of Israel to the gospel. Given the extensive historical grounds for placing Philippians post Romans, and the lack of any other evidence of Paul changing his mind, it seems best to think that Paul remained optimistically universalistic, even if 2:10 cannot be apprehended as a proof-text for this.

¹⁹ In agreeance with P. T. O'Brien, p. 19-26, who argues this on historical grounds.

Summary

In the end the tension between God's wrath and the coming judgment is never totally harmonised. The broad picture is that we all deserve wrath, and indeed may be punished for our wrongdoings, possibly even resulting in some form of 'destruction'. Ultimately, however, Jesus' victory is total, his mission to save humanity and indeed the whole creation can be nothing other than a complete success.

To sum up Paul's thought, in this life people either enter God's family through faith in Christ or they don't. Even those who do have no room for boasting, because salvation is entirely instigated by God through Christ. Christians whose lives do not reflect their relationship with God can expect to be disciplined here on earth, and to face just as much wrath as any non-believer on judgment day. Fortunately, however, Christ died for all, bringing life to all. Although many tragically go through life on earth without knowing God, perhaps caught up in the struggles of Romans 7, eventually "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father", and so all Israel will be saved, along with the full number of the Gentiles. And we will all live happily ever after.

Oh dear!
 This is a fine piece of work Jason, well-argued
 and researched betraying both a handling of the
 writings of Paul and those of his commentators.
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