

O N E

“How the Mighty Have Fallen”: *From Luther to Schweitzer*

In order to understand the New Perspective(s) on Paul (NPP) and the currents that have led into this movement in the academic study of Paul, we must begin with the Reformation and the subsequent rise of historical-critical interpretation. In one sense, the NPP swirls around two figures—Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann. In order to understand *them*, we need to trace the historical-critical discussion a century before Schweitzer. In order to understand the rise of *that* discussion, however, we need to explore the impact both of the Reformation and of the subsequent theological declension in Germany on the study of Paul. Why do we begin with the Reformation, a movement that is markedly different from the theological positions of many proponents of the NPP? The NPP is fundamentally centered on Paul, and specifically his understanding of the “law,” “works of the law,” “righteousness,” and other related issues. It is this very cluster of issues with which the Reformation was exercised, and concerning which the NPP will vehemently dissent from the Reformers.

We begin our study by asking two questions of an introductory nature. What impact did the Reformation have on the study of Scripture (generally) and on the study of Paul (particularly)? How did the Lutheran church in Germany decline into patent unbelief in the course of a couple of centuries?

The Impact of the Reformation on the Study of Paul

Luther and Calvin

Martin Luther initiated his attempt to reform the church on October 31, 1517, by posting the Ninety-Five Theses on the cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany. By the time of Luther's death in 1546, it was clear that there could be no reconciliation with Rome. Luther had sought to reform Rome, but had been excommunicated. The Council of Trent, which met from 1546 to 1564 and defined the theological position of the modern Roman Catholic Church, furthermore, placed under *anathema* (curse) those who held to the distinguishing Protestant doctrines—a curse that remains to this day.

John Calvin (1509–1564) represented another wing of the Protestant Reformation and stood shoulder to shoulder with Luther on the key doctrines of grace that were at stake in the sixteenth century. Calvin's study of Paul is representative of the Reformers' close attention to the apostle. Calvin systematically expounded each of Paul's Epistles in commentary form, and also preached through Galatians, Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles (all of which had been translated into English by the 1570s, thereby influencing English Protestantism), 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians. Much more so than the late medieval church as a whole, emphasis was now laid on the systematic exposition of Scripture in both preaching and teaching. Paul, then, has received careful attention from the heirs of Luther and Calvin. In large measure this is so because Paul provides some of the most detailed scriptural discussion on salvation, not only a matter of intrinsic importance, but also one that has divided and continues to divide Rome and Protestants to this day.

Reformational Interpretation

The Reformers represented a new chapter in the history of interpretation in at least three ways.¹ First, many Reformers had been trained according to the canons of the recent humanist criticism, whose cry was *ad fontes*, or “(back) to the sources.” Part of this training involved a resurgence of interest in the “ancient languages” and “rhetorical analysis,” an interest that was carried over into Protestant readings

of the Bible.² Renewed attention would now be given not only to the historical but also to the grammatical context of the Bible. Second, Protestants self-consciously embraced the theological conviction *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). The consistent application of this principle would ensure a vital principle of interpretation: Scripture interpreting Scripture. Third, the historical training and sensibilities of the Reformers ensured that Lutheran and Calvinist biblical interpretation would be sensitive to the history of interpretation. In this way, Protestants could evade Rome's charge that Protestants had not embraced *sola Scriptura* but *nuda Scriptura* (bare Scripture), or Scripture read without the aid of tradition or other such external assistance. The Reformers thereby laid the foundation for exegesis of Paul that was both grammatically and historically grounded, while sensitive to the insights and reflections of past interpreters.

The Stage Set

The magisterial Reformers bequeathed to their heirs a carefully articulated and balanced understanding of the relationship between the doctrines of justification and sanctification. When biblical critics in seventeenth-century Germany began to depart from the *formal* concern of the Reformation (Scripture alone), they soon came to depart from the *material* concern of the Reformation (justification by faith alone). By their doing so, the very soteriology that Luther and Calvin had mightily resisted ironically found its way into these Lutheran churchmen's biblical scholarship.

How Did We Get *Here*?

We jump now from 1564, the year of Calvin's death, to 1826, the year that F. C. Baur began to teach at Tübingen. In the interim, Lutheranism had declined in Germany. We may briefly note one pertinent cause of this decline here. European philosophy had now radically embraced doubt as its epistemological starting point. This skeptical posture extended to biblical authority and the church's understanding of biblical teaching, especially as that understanding came to expression in systematic theology. Exegesis would assume an un-

precedented independence from systematic theology and the history of interpretation. H. A. W. Meyer reflects this stance in the 1829 preface to the first installment (1829) of his justly famous New Testament commentary:

The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historico-grammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. How the meaning so ascertained stands in relation to the teachings of philosophy, to what extent it agrees with the dogmas of the church or with the view of its theologians, in what way the dogmatician is to make use of it in the interest of his science—to the exegete as an exegete, all that is a matter of no concern.³

No longer would exegesis be governed by the teaching of Scripture as a systematic and theological whole. For many German students of the Bible, exegetical and systematic theology had effectively and finally parted ways.

Consequently, many came to view the Bible as simply a document of ancient history. Speculation began concerning the possible origins or sources of the biblical books. The Reformational or “precritical” principle of identifying the “historical sense” of Scripture with its “literal, grammatical meaning” was abandoned.⁴ In its place arose the critical principle of seeking “meaning . . . [not] in the received, canonical text,” but “behind or under it in hypothetical predecessor-documents or in hypothetically reconstructed life situations of individual pericopes.”⁵ This principle took the isolation of the text from its systematic-theological context to a new level.

F. C. Baur and the Tübingen School⁶

We are now prepared to consider Baur, who taught at Tübingen from 1826 to 1860. Baur formulated a reconstruction of the history of the apostolic period that dominated New Testament scholarship until the twentieth century and that consciously rejected such key tenets of historical Christian orthodoxy as revelation and miracles.⁷ Baur articulated his understanding of the historical and theological development of the early church in an influential article.⁸ This article, as Hafemann

comments, “laid out the foundation for his understanding of Paul and the history of the early church by applying the dialectical, evolutionary approach of Hegel’s philosophy to 1 Corinthians 1:11–12.”⁹

Baur advanced a theory of conflict as shaping early Christianity. Traditional Christianity had posited a framework of orthodoxy propagated from Jesus to the apostles to the early church. Traditionally, conflict in the New Testament had been conceived as the struggles between proponents of this orthodoxy and proponents of speculative or practical heterodoxy. Baur, however, understood the conflict to be between two competing forms or species of Christianity: Jewish and Gentile, represented preeminently by Peter and Paul, respectively. He saw evidence of this specific type of conflict in the Corinthian church. These two forms of Christianity had irreconcilably distinctive emphases. *Jewish Christianity* was said to have close ties to Judaism and the Mosaic law. James and Matthew were said to be literary specimens of this form of Christianity.¹⁰ *Gentile Christianity*, on the other hand, was said to focus on the doctrine of justification by faith apart from the works of the law. It was “Law-free” in this sense.¹¹ Paul’s teaching in his letters emphasized, rather, the Spirit (*Geist*).

The conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christianity was a tumultuous one and shaped early Christian history into the second century A.D.¹² But by the second century, Baur argued, an emerging “catholicism” had arisen that stressed ecclesiastical hierarchy, orthodoxy, and organizational unity. The most significant example of the church’s march to this “catholicism” is Luke-Acts, which was said to be a “mediating” book that sought to rewrite the history of the first century.¹³ The second-century ideals of unity and orthodoxy were projected onto the first century. The author of Luke-Acts had masked conflicts of the past, conflicts that could still be accessed by the modern critical interpreter through such letters as Galatians. Baur, then, came to the conclusion that only four letters of Paul (which he termed *Hauptbriefe*, or the “chief letters”) were authentic: Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Baur believed that they were authentic because they demonstrated conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. He rejected the remaining nine letters because, in Baur’s judgment, they lacked sufficient evidence of this conflict.

Baur’s work was tremendously significant. First, his judgments concerning the authenticity of the Pauline letters stand, although most critical New Testament scholars now admit 1 Thessalonians, Philipians, and Philemon. Second, he gave the first purportedly “historical” framework to early Christianity—one that had been formulated without reference to historic Christianity and “supernatural intervention” in temporal history.¹⁴ Third, while few follow his particular program today, Baur set the terms of subsequent debate for critical Pauline scholarship in the form of three questions:¹⁵

(1) Who were the opponents of Paul? What did they teach? Baur’s thesis placed at the center of the critical study of Paul the apostle’s conflicts with his opponents. This meant that the doctrines that occasioned this conflict—justification, faith, works, and the law—would continue to shape generations of discussions within historical-critical scholarship.

(2) What was Paul’s view of the law? How did it relate to his views of the gospel? How did he differ on this point from his opponents? Baur raised the question of the role of the Mosaic law in the teaching of both Paul and his opponents. He did so in such a way as to create distance between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries. Back of this question was the nature of Paul’s relationship to his Jewish heritage—was it friendly or hostile? Had Paul been influenced by Jewish or Hellenistic beliefs and practices? This concern too would exercise generations of historical-critical scholars.

(3) What is the “generating center” of Paul’s thought? Baur had argued that Paul’s teaching revolved around two foci: justification by faith alone and the Spirit (*Geist*), which Baur took “in the Hegelian sense as the infinite and absolute in opposition to the finite (the flesh).”¹⁶ The Lutheran tradition had historically maintained Paul’s theological center to be justification by faith alone. The question before critical scholarship now was which theological category—the forensic or the transformative—would be regarded as generative of Paul’s theology?

Critique of Baur

Before we proceed with our survey of the Pauline interpretation leading up to Albert Schweitzer, we may observe three points of criti-

cism that have been raised against Baur's thesis. One of the most successful engagements of Baur was mounted by J. B. Lightfoot. In his essay "St. Paul and the Three," Lightfoot demonstrated "that Paul did not stand in opposition to the chief 'apostles of the circumcision,' James, Peter, and John," as Baur had maintained.¹⁷ Lightfoot also raised the possibility of different groups opposing Paul. Although modern scholars do not follow Lightfoot in his identifications, they have picked up his insight and generally argue for diversity or plurality among Paul's opponents. In other words, those who opposed Paul at Galatia were not necessarily the same (in person or in doctrine and practice) as those who opposed him at Corinth.¹⁸

A second criticism has centered on Baur's view that conflict is at the heart of Paul's theology. Even if one concedes Baur's point, one need not make it, as Baur did, a criterion of authenticity. The judgments of authenticity drawn by Baur, after all, countered the virtually unanimous testimony to the contrary of external evidence.

A third criticism raised against Baur's synthesis is that although there is an internal consistency to his thesis, it is incapable of independent verification. The testimony of the New Testament documents themselves is one of harmony and unity of belief, purpose, and mission, even in the *Hauptbriefe*. In Romans 15:30–33, Paul prepares to take a Gentile-supported offering for the relief of Jewish Christians in Judea. In 1 Corinthians 8–9, 16, we see evidence of Paul's earlier preparation for this very offering. In Galatians 2:9, the representatives of the Jerusalem church extend to Paul the "right hand of fellowship." This is hardly a forced reconciliation of two opponents. We might also observe 1 Corinthians 1:13 ("Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"). Paul here explicitly repudiates the whole notion of competing parties in the church, whatever credence Baur might have given to them.

The Liberal Theology¹⁹

We turn now to consider the development of historical-critical studies of Paul through the nineteenth century and into the opening decades of the twentieth century. Our survey takes us through three distinct

movements: liberalism, the history of religions school, and the participationism of Albert Schweitzer. In the nineteenth century, liberal Protestant scholarship in Germany maintained that Paul’s thought centered on two central foci: the so-called juridical line of his thought, evidenced in Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone; and the so-called mystical-ethical line of his thought, evidenced in Paul’s language of the Spirit and of union with Christ.²⁰ This school maintained that these lines were not compatible with one another. Paul often “leaped from the one to the other without sensing the contradiction.”²¹ But the mystical-ethical line was said to be more fundamental to Paul. Baur had taken Paul’s teaching on *Geist* in a philosophical sense. The liberals were now conceiving this teaching in a moral sense.²² Such a direction suited the ethical or moralistic preaching promoted by liberal theology.²³

The failure of the liberals to reconcile or harmonize these two lines was also owing to a distinction drawn between Paul’s (subjective) experience and Paul’s (objective) theology. The latter, it was maintained, not only was the objective expression of the former, but also could not be expected to be consistent. In anticipation of our discussion below, we may note that this distinction was an important root of the consistency/coherency debate in the twentieth century.²⁴ In employing this distinction, liberal theology recognized that while “theology” reflected Jewish and Hellenistic influences of the day, nevertheless the experience to which it gave expression was timeless. Heinrich J. Holtzmann articulates this very point in his 1897 *New Testament Theology*:

And so, in the end, we may be permitted to say that the Jewish and the Hellenistic alike are the perishable in Paul, but for Christianity the permanent is what was originally Christian. The former, which are the factors involved in its historical and temporal conditioning, are the concern of our theological and scientific, the latter, which is the resonance of the eternal in the human soul, is concerned with our religious and practical interest.²⁵

In summary, liberal theology understood the essence of Pauline soteriology to be that by virtue of one’s mystical experience “in Christ,”

power is given to live a new life. This new piety, we may observe by way of criticism, is very much divorced from the redemptive acts of Jesus' death and resurrection.²⁶ Ironically, these theologians, many of whom taught within the Lutheran church, had returned full circle to a (de-sacramentalized) Roman Catholic soteriology.

The History of Religions School

Although to this school the question was strictly an academic one, liberal theology had debated the extent to which Pauline thought was indebted to Greek or Jewish thought. The history of religions school weighed heavily on the former: Paul could be explained by pursuing parallels with Hellenistic mystery religions. This interest of the history of religions school paralleled European interest in primitivism and colonial cultures seen, for example, both in music (Igor Stravinsky) and in art (Paul Gauguin). This scholarly movement also arose in the context of a growing European anti-Semitism. The scholarship of this school centered on Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* and Richard Reitzenstein's *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions*.²⁷ The history of religions school, like Baur, presented a critical reconstruction of Paul independent of historic Christianity and its major tenets.

Unlike Baur, however, these scholars made their recourse almost exclusively to the influence of the Hellenistic environment on early Christianity. That view claimed that Christ came in time to be confessed as "lord" in the sense of the gods of Hellenistic mystery religions; and that he, like other Hellenistic deities, came to be worshiped and venerated as one who had, through death, achieved "victory, resurrection, and immortality."²⁸

This group's focus was placed on the participation language of Paul, especially his "in Christ" phraseology and his sacramental theology (e.g., 1 Cor. 11; Rom. 6). The center of Pauline religion, then, was said to be cultic participation in the death and resurrection of this deity. A shift was made from doctrine to cult: the center of Pauline religion was thought to be less doctrinal or propositional than mystical and cultic participation in the risen and ascended Lord. Bousset summarizes this approach in *Kyrios Christos*:

We are now in a position to take a look also at the development and growth of the Pauline Christ-mysticism and the formula “to be in Christ, in the Lord” that sums it up. All that grew out of the cult. The *Kyrios* who was present in the cult became the Lord who rules over the whole personal life of the Christian. Paul’s idea of the Spirit, likewise reinterpreted and expanded from the cultic into the ethico-religious, is the vehicle for the introduction of Christ mysticism.²⁹

For all the history of religions school’s differences from liberal theology (its resistance to the projects of modernizing Jesus and Paul for the modern man, for example), it continued to take the nineteenth-century mystical-ethical line and divorce it even further from the remainder of Pauline thought. This school correspondingly rejected, against Baur, justification as a center for Pauline thought (as Baur had maintained). Hermann Lüdemann had earlier anticipated this rejection, arguing that “there was tension in Paul’s thought between the Jewish ‘doctrine of salvation’ ” (focused on justification by faith alone) and the Hellenistic “realistic doctrine of redemption associated with baptism.”³⁰ Hence, Paul was said to have two competing systems of redemption. For Paul, Lüdemann argued, the *real* doctrine that emerged was the Hellenistic, participatory one. Wilhelm Wrede later maintained a similar view. Wrede argued that justification was simply a polemic device to which Paul resorted in his conflict with Judaism.

By way of criticism of the history of religions school, we may observe that few follow this model today. Its central tenet, that the New Testament writers contributed nothing original, and that they simply absorbed and reprinted existing ideas, has been widely discarded. The abiding influence of the history of religions school comes in its stress on participation language in Paul and its corresponding de-emphasis of the so-called juridical language of Paul.

Albert Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer introduced a new phase in Pauline studies in his two most important works on Paul, *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History* and *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*.³¹ Schweitzer’s

scholarship signaled an important departure from the history of religions school. Unlike the history of religions school, which posited Pauline thought as taking root on non-Palestinian soil, Schweitzer argued for an organic connection between Judaism and Paul:

The solution must, therefore, consist in leaving out of the question Greek influence in every form and in every combination, and risk the “one-sidedness” of endeavoring to understand the doctrine of the Apostle of the Gentiles entirely on the basis of Jewish primitive Christianity.³²

We see, therefore, an explicit step toward a recognition of the “Jewish” roots of Paul. In taking this step, Schweitzer makes a decisive and conscious break from the history of religions school.

The main tenet of Schweitzer’s system is what he called “Christ-mysticism.” Like the history of religions school, Schweitzer stressed participation language (“being-in-Christ”) as central to Paul’s thought. While Schweitzer disagreed with the history of religions school concerning the origins of baptism and Lord’s Supper,³³ he agreed that Pauline participation was essentially realistic and sacramental. Schweitzer maintains that baptism “effects redemption,”³⁴ a view that was said to have been transmitted to Paul from John the Baptist. “[Baptism] is, for him, powers that go forth from Christ which cause the redemptive event to take place in it.”³⁵ It further effects the “forgiveness of sins.”³⁶

With respect to the Lord’s Meal (he rejects the term “Lord’s Supper”), Schweitzer maintains against Rome that neither Ignatius, Justin, John, nor Paul advanced a doctrine of transubstantiation³⁷ (although the former three are said to be initiating the process of the change).³⁸ There is no material change in the elements in the sacramental event. Schweitzer understands the language of “body and blood of Christ” in a horizontal manner, as the communion of the church, the mystical body of Christ. While the Meal is not chiefly vertical, the Meal is also not a bare sign—it “bring[s] about also that union which is to be experienced now in the present with the mystical body of Christ.”³⁹ In sum, in baptism, grace is infused into the participant and redemption

is effected. The chief significance of the Lord’s Meal consists of both its creation and demonstration of union with Christ.

From this participationist viewpoint, Schweitzer concludes certain things about Paul’s forensic language. He addresses this issue by agreeing with the charge that Paul’s doctrine of justification rightly leads to antinomianism:

Ethics are just as natural a resultant phenomenon of the dying and rising again with Christ as is liberation from the flesh, sin and the Law, or the bestowal of the Spirit. It is an operative result of the forgiveness of sin, which God makes a reality by the destruction of the flesh and of sin. Since Paul habitually thinks of redemption on the lines of the mystical doctrine of the being-in-Christ, it does not matter to him that in the subsidiary doctrine of righteousness by faith, he has shut off the road to ethics. What he wants this subsidiary doctrine for is to enable him, on the basis of the traditional conception of the atoning death of Christ, to conduct his controversy with the Law by means of the argument from Scripture. More he does not ask of it.⁴⁰

With Wrede, then, Schweitzer argues that Paul’s forensic language is an appendage to Paul—a “subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater; the mystical doctrine of redemption through the being-in-Christ.”⁴¹ He employed it for strictly polemical purposes; it does not lie at the heart of his thought. We will see this view surface again later in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Let’s take stock of what we have surveyed. We have seen that a couple of issues have shaped the critical discussion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, there is a search for the “core” or heart of Paul’s thought. Baur found this in Paul’s teaching of the *Geist* in a purely philosophical sense. Liberals also found this in Paul’s teaching of the *Geist*, but in a purely ethical sense. The history of religions school rejected (in principle) the distinction between theology and experience drawn by the liberals. It was not concerned with the ques-

tion, “What is *normative* for the church today?” Its interests were strictly descriptive. They drew a portrait of the New Testament writers as sponges absorbing contemporary Greco-Roman culture, specifically the Hellenistic mystery cults. This school brought to the forefront participation language as being at the heart of Paul. Schweitzer, as we have seen, agreed in principle that participation language was at the heart of Paul. He also agreed that forensic language was a peripheral concern to the apostle.

A second question exercising critical scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is whether Paul is Jewish or Gentile in origin. Participants in the critical discussion, many of whom had rejected Scripture’s divine origin, sought purely secondary causes to explain the origin and development of the biblical writers’ thought. The way in which the discussion had been framed by the turn of the twentieth century meant that one could choose between Jewish and Hellenistic sources. Hermeneutically, this meant that the interpretation of Paul was governed to some degree by (1) one’s determination of the location of the sources of his thought and (2) one’s prior reconstruction of those determining sources. Baur had resisted substantial Jewish origins for Pauline thought. Paul, after all, was said to be in conflict with Jewish Christianity. The history of religions school argued that Paul’s sources were decidedly Hellenistic. Schweitzer was among the first to break with critical orthodoxy and argue for “Jewish primitive Christianity” as the ground from which Paul had sprung.

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