PAUL’S CONTRIBUTION TO CHRISTIANITY

Ong Kok Bin

Next to its founder Jesus Christ, Paul the apostle, is universally recognized as the most significant contributor to the development and expansion of Christianity. He almost singlehandedly helped to give greater shape to the contours of the Christian faith that was known as ‘the Way’ in his time (Acts 9:2, 24:14). Yet, it was almost never to be; for Paul, as he was then known as Saul, was dead set against Jesus Christ and his disciples that came to make up the nascent church. In Paul’s own words, he “intensely...persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it” (Gal. 1:13). That streak of antagonism against everything Christian came to a grinding halt when Jesus Christ made a special (post-resurrection and post-ascension) appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). Saul underwent a conversion experience and became Paul, “a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1).

Paul’s contribution to the development of Christianity is in two forms: (1) his preaching, and (2) his writings. Luke, the church historian, informs us that Paul did not wait too long to begin preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. Upon his baptism, the apostle, at first, “spent several days with the disciples in Damascus” but then Luke reports: “At once he (Paul) began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20); a message that was once anathema to him. From that point on, the apostle did not relent from preaching and establishing churches where his legs would and could take him. Using Antioch of Syria as his base, he undertook three missionary journeys that covered a vast swathe of land that stretched from Judea in the east, to across regions in the northern arc of the Mediterranean Sea, to Corinth in the west. When the primitiveness of the modes of transportation is taken into consideration, such expansive coverage of territory is all the more remarkable. And when we add in the resistance from his opponents and the dangers from sea, rivers and bandits, we can only hardly begin to appreciate the energy of this apostle’s zeal to be the ‘servant of Christ Jesus’. Beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, abandoned; all these hardships and sufferings could not deter the man from accomplishing the mission that was entrusted to him (see 2 Cor. 11:23f.; Acts 9:15-16).

Paul’s preaching contributed to the geographical and numerical growth of Christianity. But it is his writings that have an enduring effect and influence on the theology and practice of the Christian faith. In all, Paul is credited with the writing of thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. They are in the form of epistles—letters written by the apostle to churches and individuals. Several of these letters constitute the earliest writings that came to make up the New Testament canon. The letters were principally written to encourage Christians to continue in their faith in Christ; but they were also written to address certain issues and situations that arose in those early formative years of the churches that the apostle had personally established. One was even written to a church (in Rome) of which Paul had no role in its establishment.

In that the letters were written to address issues and situations common to believers and that transcend time, these letters are often considered as ‘living epistles’. They are as relevant and applicable today as they were in the first century. This is what makes Paul such a significant shaper of the Christian faith. Through his letters, he has left his indelible imprints—the hallmarks of some of which are:

1. Salvation by Grace This is distinctly Pauline. Other writers may have made allusions to God’s grace, but none has quite connected grace with salvation in the manner that Paul has. His statement in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” has influenced Christian soteriology through the centuries. The Christian faith is about what God has done for sinful human beings.

2. The Ideation of Agape Love To the apostle, nothing is more supreme in the Christian life than the fruit and practice of love (agape). He calls it ‘the most excellent way’ (1 Cor. 12:31b). His passage in 1 Corinthians 13 is a standout description of what this agape love is. When we think of what the apostle once was—a legalistic Pharisee bent on destroying the church—we begin to see the journey he has made from that past strict obedience to the law to become a more amenable and pliable human who has truly tasted the love of God. In tasting this love, Paul finds it to be patient and kind; not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking and not easily angered. In fact, “it keeps no record of wrongs”. It “does not delight in evil”. On the contrary, it “rejoices” with that which is truthful; and, all the more, “It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”. It “never fails” (vv. 4-8a). And as Paul consumes this love, he becomes more and more its purveyor and dispenser.
3. Christology  Paul supplies us with a fuller and richer understanding of the Christ Jesus person. He intimates that this Christ pre-exists as (the Son of) God (Phil. 2:6), is preeminent above all things (Col. 1:15-18); but then he willingly lowers himself to our human level (Phil. 2:7-8), so that through his death we can be redeemed from our sins (Eph. 1:7); and even though he dies, God raises him from his death (Rom. 10:9), which becomes a proemissory proof that we who have believed in Jesus will likewise be raised from our death (1 Cor. 15:12f). To Paul, Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and in the last age to come, everyone throughout the cosmic universe will ‘confess that Jesus Christ is Lord’ (Phil. 2:9-11), pure and simple.

4. Ecclesiology  Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4:4, “There is one body”, is a very succinct statement of the oneness of the church. Its succinctness makes it all the more emphatic. Paul wants it known that the church of Christ is one and it is not divisible into so many entities each pledging allegiance to so many different lords or faiths or practices (of baptisms, for example). The apostle has seen divisions and it upsets him to no end.

To the divided church in Corinth, he asks pointedly, “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13). Against such a backdrop of divisions, he offers the human body as a prime example of one which is composed of ‘many parts’ and yet the many ‘form one body’. And in a very quick emphatic stroke of the pen, he writes, “So it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12f.).

5. The Theology of Baptism  Paul has more to say on this subject than any of his counterparts. Considering what the apostle has written, it is a dismay to think that many have undervalued the true spiritual significance of baptism and have reduced it to a non-obligatory status. Paul will have none of this post-Reformation theologizing. For him, baptism is that which marks a person as a Christian, just as circumcision marks one to be a Jew. In Colossians 2:10-12, Paul compares baptism to circumcision; stressing that it is not ‘done by the hands of men’ but by Christ, ‘the putting off of the sinful nature’: only Christ can accomplish this spiritual surgery.

Baptism is an union with Christ in his death and in his resurrection, the result of which is a ‘fullness in Christ’. Romans 6:3-14 gives a fuller picture of this theology on baptism. Per this passage, baptism is an immersion into the death of Christ and thus, ‘buried with him’ and ‘united with him like this in his death’. And in the same token of this death union with Christ, baptism also enjoins a person to be united with Christ ‘in his resurrection’. However, another significant spiritual act also happens in baptism: the ‘old self’ — ‘the body of sin’ is crucified with Christ on the cross. Until and unless a person through faith in Christ is baptized into him, his sins remain with him. It is only through a believing baptism, that one who becomes ‘freed from sin’ and comes under the grace of God.

6. Christian Ethics  Paul is adamant that life in Christ is a changed life. To the Roman Christians who might have the mistaken belief that they could continue to live the life of sin so that they could receive God’s grace all the more, Paul made it doubly clear to them, “By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (see Rom. 5:20-6:2). To the Thessalonians, he writes, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God” (1 Thes. 4:3-5). Indeed, Paul has a very clear demarcation between the old life under sin and the new life under grace (e.g., see Rom. 6:11-14; 8:1-17; 2 Cor. 5:17).

7. Eschatology  Paul provides us with some insight into the end times. He is certain that Jesus Christ will come again; though he is less certain as to the when. In this, he echoes the Lord Jesus, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thes. 5:2; Mt. 24:36-44). He is certain too that there will be a resurrection: “the dead in Christ will rise first”; after which, those “who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thes. 4:13-18). There will be a great transformation as this takes place. We will not be raised in the body of our death or burial, or, our present living body (for, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”, 1 Cor. 15:50); but ‘we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet … the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed’ (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Paul is certain too, that there will be a destruction of those ‘who do not know God and do not receive the gospel of our Lord Jesus’. This destruction is an everlasting “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thes. 1:6-10). It is not an annihilation of the soul (as per the Jehovah’s Witnesses), but an eternal separation from the glory of God (cf. Rom. 3:23). This divergence between resurrection and destruction in the end times is in accordance with the justice of God. As Paul puts it, “God is just” (2 Thes. 1:6).

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TEACHING AT SOUTH PACIFIC  Ken Sinclair will be making a trip to Australia and New Zealand this 23 October to 2 December. He is scheduled to teach the General Epistles at the South Pacific Bible College in Tauranga in New Zealand from 3 to 27 November. He will then return to Seremban via Australia on 2 December, upon which he will leave for Abilene, TX, on 7 December.