

The Epistles of Paul

We are reading this morning a few verses from 2 Timothy, chapter two. This was Paul's testimony, Paul's word to us. He says, "Remember Jesus Christ" [he was very concerned with the mediator], "raised from the dead" [the importance of the resurrection], "descended from David" [this is a tie in with the Old Testament covenant, the last Old Testament covenant, established with David]. Then he goes on to say, "This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained" [The freedom of God's Word]. "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory." That concept of predestination or election ("For the sake of the elect") is inseparable from the Lord Jesus Christ, the great goal, eternal glory. Paul had a magnificent way of wrapping it all together from the Old into the New into his present day. If you can continue to work with Paul and the other epistles in that broad setting, you will not go astray and your preaching will get richer all the time. But you will surely not be just a New Testament scholar. To understand Paul, as we will discuss, you have to open your Old Testament Scriptures. Let's pray.

Lord, our God, we pray that You will give us this comprehensive view of Your Word as the apostle Paul enables us to do that by the inspiration of Your Spirit. Help us also to understand the various details, the doctrines as he explains them and makes them applicable to the life of the church where he preached and for which he was so concerned and for the life of the church for which You, Lord, had him also working. Bless us here together in Jesus' name. Amen.

I would like to make an introductory comment on the revelation of the kingdom, covenant, and mediator in the epistles of Paul. Paul's epistles were written in the context of Paul's preaching and the establishing of the church, and from prison. There are two specific contexts from which he wrote - his working and his confinement. In speaking of biblical theology, we speak of the historic, progressive, organic development of theology. The question is, "Is there development in Paul's theology?" Did Paul grow? Did he have to make some refinements from when he was first a Christian to when he was in prison? Did his time in prison give him the opportunity to think longer about issues since he was no longer running from one church to the next? Do his prison epistles show the development of deeper insights? This has often been said. I have worked on committees for the Christian Reformed Church dealing with the problem of interpreting the passages that deal with women, particularly women in office. I have been amazed at the number of people trying to show that Paul developed, Paul grew after he wrote those passages. Is that true?

Thus, the first problem that you face as you do biblical theology and seek to incorporate Paul in the whole scheme of the progressive, organic, historic, adaptable progress of revelation, or the process of revelation, is how you will look at the letters. You might even look at Paul's sermons. Some of Paul's sermons that were preached when he was standing before King Agrippa were in a very different situation than when he was in Ephesus or Corinth. But the first thing to look at is, can his epistles be placed in a chronological order? Yes, to a great extent. There are some problems that people continue to discuss. One of the biggest problems is the date of Galatians. Was Galatians the first epistle, before even 1 Thessalonians? Was that written in 49 AD? Or was it written at the same time as 2 Corinthians and Romans, in 57 AD? You will find people discussing this issue, "When did Paul address the issue of the Judaizers?" Most of the conservative scholars say 53 AD, which is about right in the middle of that period.

If you look at the letter to the Galatians, it is not important whether or not it was his first letter. The issue he dealt with was an issue that affected all of the churches where he met Jewish people. And that was in

every context because wherever he went he sought out the proselytes as well as a small group of Jewish people. So the problem of the Judaizers, the relationship of the Old Testament law and the keeping of the Old Testament law by those in the new covenant, was an issue in almost every early church. One of the issues that the Judaizers brought up was, "What about circumcision as required in the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenant?" This was an issue that continued throughout the entire church era.

As you look at the order of letters, we know that 2 Timothy is the last. I think there is no argument on that all, because as we read from 2 Timothy, Paul has changed. He knows that his days are numbered. He gives a beautiful testimony. He sums up the Gospel and it is really no different than what he wrote in his first letters, whether it be 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, or Galatians. You will find this same basic theology throughout Paul's letters.

The second question that is often asked is, did the context in which Paul preached and wrote affect his theology? Can you go to Paul to understand the modern problem of contextualization? As I said, there is no doubt that as Paul wrote he was addressing specific situations in different congregations. The problem in the church in Thessalonica to which he addressed himself, was very different than the problems addressed in 1 Corinthians, where there was so much licentiousness and covenantal disobedient living. Paul's epistles and preaching address specific situations. There is definite, practical application and strong admonition to live according to the truth that was preached. Paul develops issues more fully as he applies them to different situations as they come to the fore in different churches. This illustrates again how important it is that you know the historical background of the books you are studying, that you pay attention to the historical dimension of exegesis as you work out your biblical theological understanding of Scripture. Paul addressed specific situations.

When doing biblical theology, historicity is a very important aspect to remember. You should not build your theology on the historic situations, however, which is what many people do. For example, feminists often do this. They look more at the historic situation than what Paul was saying to the situation. I learned this while working on study committees and reading feminist material.

As I have studied Paul and as I have read Ladd, Ridderbos, and Guthrie, I have seen that there is a clarification and an application of the same truths throughout Paul's epistles. There is a clarification and an application of the truths that he preached, that he summed up in the last days of his life. He clarified. He applied. He admonished. He urged. He prayed that the people would live according to that Gospel that he had preached. He says to the Galatians, "Oh foolish Galatians, how quickly you forget what I preached to you." He is consistent in his theology, but he is very relevant to specific situations.

The third question that I come across as I do my work trying to understand the biblical, theological situation, is the question of the structure of the epistles. Is there growth in that structure? And does that somehow affect the development of false theology? Structural exegesis has been making an impact on New Testament theology as it also has on Old Testament theology.

When I consider the structure, I find that Paul does a number of things rather consistently. When he addresses Israel, he says, "God made you covenant people, and you broke covenant. You became disobedient. You became apostate. Now God has restored you! So be what you are, a restored people of God." Writing to the non-Jewish audience, the emphasis is, "This is what God made you to be. You who were without the covenant [he uses the plural, "covenants"—the Abrahamic, Noahic, etc.]. God made you to be the very same as the apostate Israelites." He puts the Gentile as well as the Jewish Christians on the same footing. The Jewish Christians have a different background. With them, the covenant had been made, and broken. When God restores the Jewish people, He brings in the Gentiles and God makes

them His own. Read the first three chapters of Galatians, the first three chapters of Ephesians, and the first three chapters also of Colossians and Philippians. “This is what God has done. This is what He has done according to His promises, according to His great kingdom program and therefore this is what you are. Oh the sovereignty of God’s election, the sovereignty of the atonement, the efficacy of the atonement, the absolute sufficiency of Christ’s work! Through all this, you are what you are.” That is what has been called the doctrinal section in Paul’s letters.

Next there is the ethical section. “Be what God made you to be.” He does not tell them, “Change your life,” in the last three chapters of Galatians, or the last three chapters of Ephesians, or the last five chapter of Romans. Having told the people what God had sovereignly made them to be, he now tells them to live it, to be it, to the glory of God. By the Spirit of God and by the inspired Word, they have the means to be what they are. Doesn’t that make sense? That is one thing I learned when I was at seminary, that we need to address our congregations with the possibility that there are those who are not yet what they should be. Thus we must always keep the evangelistic emphasis. But I, as a boy at six years old, loved the Lord Jesus. I did not need an altar call. My father and mother had brought me to the foot of the cross as a baby. I lived there under their instruction. I lived there under their example. I was nurtured at the foot of the cross. I loved the Lord Jesus all my life. Of course, there are some areas in my life that are not consistent. I have told you about the episode with my daddy’s new car, and I could tell you a few worse situations too. But that is when I need to be reminded that I need to be what God has made me to be. It is not that I need to be converted. I need to grow in sanctification. That is what I found when I preached in Borkulo to a church of 760 members, old and young. There were many young people there, and I challenged them to submit to the Lord Jesus. They had already been baptized. They were covenant children from covenant families. But I still had to preach to them. I had to testify to them. I had to work with them that they would submit and surrender and have the great benefits of God’s sovereign salvation become a reality in their life. I had to admonish them, “Be what God made you to be.” That is what Paul does in the last part of his letters. That is what the prophets did so often too. They called the people to be what they were, what God had made them to be. “You are a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. You are My blessed and precious possession.” That was when the law was given, right? That was when the guide was given as to how the people should live. Paul follows that same structure.

Look at Exodus 19 to 24. Meredith Kline refers to this a number of times. The Gospel follows the pattern of “This is what God has done. This is what you are, be what you are.” When I dealt with my children, I always dealt with them differently than I did with other children. My kids were my kids. The other children I told to be the children of the Lord Jesus, but I also told my kids, “You are my children. I’m responsible for you. Now you better recognize that you belong to the Van Groningen tribe, all eight of you. That means that I as a covenant head in the family and your mother as my great helpmate and partner in life all the way through, we say to you, you are covenant children. God claims you. Be what you are.” I can tell you when the great changes came to the lives of my children, some earlier, some later. I will never forget when John’s change came. He was about 15 years old when one Sunday evening he came into the living room. We thought he had gone to bed, but he came and said, “Mom and Dad, may I sit and talk with you awhile?” So he came and sat between us. He took both of us by the hand and said, “Thank you, Mom and Dad, for being consistent with me. I have been a rebel. I have fought with you. I have tried to get the better of you. You always won. I am so thankful that you are what you are and that you have been what you have been to me.”

This is a letter from my 31-year-old daughter, who was reviewing her life with us on my 69th birthday.

Dad and Mom,

Mom, you will receive your letter in June. Dad, I want to tell you, there has been nothing in my life as meaningful, as important to me as you constantly telling us as kids, “You are ours, but more than that you belong to the Lord Jesus. Be what you are. You are our children, yes, but join us in the happy and blessed fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Be what you are.”

That is what the people of God need to hear, and it takes courage in this modern age to preach that. It is much easier to preach doctrine than to give the admonition, “I challenge you men and women to do what Paul did, to be what God made you to be by His sovereign grace. Live by that grace.” There is a consistent presentation in Paul’s writings of what was revealed to and through him. Paul’s contribution to the revelation of the kingdom, covenant, and mediator concepts is consistent with what came before, and he is consistent with what he does himself.

I want to move on to the second point. Paul was grounded in the Old Testament. Now I do not know of any recent Pauline scholars who have not emphasized this fact that Paul is thoroughly grounded in the Old Testament. His training as a Pharisee was without equal. He says that himself in Acts 22:1-8. He was thoroughly trained, not only in the Old Testament, but in the whole Judaic tradition. He knew it all, and with his legal propensities, he had it well organized and well categorized. He had a zeal for the truth that was equal to no others.

I want to urge you, as you think about this course, to ask yourself “What role do the covenant and kingdom play in Paul’s writings, in his message?” I would like you to think, first, of the theological concepts. All the concepts that Paul raises and develops are first stated and developed in the Old Testament. He writes of God the creator in Romans chapters one, two, and eight. The kingdom of our God is this great cosmos that He brought into existence at the time of creation. From one couple, He brought forth the whole human race, Acts 17. Paul never omitted his emphasis on God the sovereign creator, and he knew the role of man (Romans 1-2). He knew how tragically men had fallen and the effects of that fall, but at the same time he knew what it was to be restored in the image of God and true knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:10). He knew sin, its nature and its effects (Romans 1-2). “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5). He knew of the great antithesis, established at Eden, where the principalities and powers of darkness are on a raid against the kingdom of our Lord Jesus. He talks about these principalities and powers that Christ overcame, the *stoicheia*, in Colossians. The devil was real for Paul, as well as the devil’s henchmen, the demons.

Paul also dealt with the covenant—faith and obedience, covenant privileges and duties. He also dealt with the sacraments, in 1 Corinthians 11; Christ the mediator of the new covenant shed His blood. He also speaks of circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2. Paul emphasizes the continuity of the covenant, as Christ made this a reality in His death and resurrection. He also discusses the role of the law. Oh, how he does wrestle with that in Romans and in Galatians! But he never negates the law, rather he puts it in its proper place. Another of Paul’s emphases is God’s sovereignty in election and grace.

One passage that I go back to often is Ephesians 1, where Paul seems to forget that there are such things as semicolons and periods. It just goes on and on, giving that great comprehensive statement of God’s sovereignty in predestination and election. The efficacy of Christ’s atonement is for you who were dead in your trespasses and sin. He says this in Ephesians 2, but prior to that he had talked about how absolutely efficacious the atonement was. This is similar to the assurance of forgiveness when the sacrifices had been brought, from Leviticus, “And you shall be forgiven.” Paul was absolutely sure that Christ’s sacrifice was efficacious. He spoke of justification by faith, “For it is grace you have been

saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” He also emphasized that in Galatians and in Romans. He talked about the reliability of inspired revelation, the sure Word of God (as in 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

He talked about Israel and the church. This is a debated issue. In Galatians 3, Paul talks about Israel being the church: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule [addressing the church], even to the Israel of God.” Some people want to say, “..., and to the Israel of God,” but “even” seems to me be the more preferable translation. He spoke in 1 Corinthians 15 and Ephesians 4 of the resurrection and the ascension that had been prophesied, that had been sung about. He deals with the church, the people of God, in the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians and in Ephesians 1:22-23. Also, think of how he deals with the character of God. He does not come up with new virtues. You will find every virtue of God that Paul uses has also been used in the Old Testament. The Old Testament God is his God, the New Testament God.

Paul also talks about eschatological certainties, in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and in many other places. Yet again, Paul never separates himself from what the prophets had taught and what Abraham was looking forward to. Paul is firmly grounded in the Old Testament. More than that, he does not come up with a new Gospel by any means. Paul is an integral figure in the historic, organic, progressive, adaptable process of revelation. He understands his role in preaching to the New Testament church, the people of God. His congregations have to know the Old Testament. They have to know what Christ has done in fulfilling the Old Testament message. And they have to know what they have become and then live accordingly. God’s goals have never changed. God’s purposes have never changed. The method may have changed to an extent, before Christ and after Christ, before Pentecost and after Christ. There is adjustment in the method, but the purposes, goals, and character of God never change. The all-encompassing context, the kingdom, the covenant relationship and the covenant administration carries right through, organically, progressively, historically. Those four terms are as applicable when we study Paul as they were when we studied Noah, Abraham, and Moses.

I will turn to Paul’s doxologies. There are certain parts of Paul’s letters that are especially meaningful to me, but there is nothing that captures Paul’s faith and praise, his belief and his joy in the Lord as his doxologies. You may want to argue as to whether they are doxologies or borrowed confessions, but I do not see this as important. One of these is in Romans 11, after he has dealt with the remnant of Israel, the engrafted branches, when he considers how God will save for Himself a people. Romans 11:33-34, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?” What a unique expression of the sovereignty of God, God’s eternal purposes that He revealed step by step. “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay Him?” The absolute sovereignty of God. No one can say to God, “You owe me something.” It has all been sovereignly and freely given. Then in 11:36 is that great statement, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.” What a beautiful song. What a doxology, what a wonderful expression of faith and praise. He knew his God. Romans 8:36-37, “As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” “More than conquerors”—children love to talk about and act like heroes, supermen. Do you know where the concept comes from? From Paul. He talked about the great hero, the great superman, the Lord Jesus Christ. He and only He is the true hero.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height or depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be

able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ, Jesus Our Lord.

Every one of us can become heroes. Now I am not saying that we will become super-Christians over lesser Christians. I hear that from some people. No. But in this world, we can be heroes because of the love of Christ, through which we are more than conquerors. Every problem becomes a stepping stone to something higher and greater.

I have experienced that in my life. When I have suffered different trials, I have been knocked to the ground. If I had stayed on the ground, I could have cried in self-pity and said, "I have tried and I am not getting anywhere." Try working in a mission field. I have endured many difficult circumstances. But if by the grace of God you say, "I guess I was wrong; God is teaching me a lesson," then get up again by the grace of God and move on, it is amazing how every hard situation gives us a stepping stone to higher levels of sanctified, blessed service for the Lord. That is what Paul is talking about. We can become more than conquerors. Look what Paul went through; he has a testimony. This is a statement of faith and praise. "Look what God has enabled me to do. I am more than a conqueror."

When he finishes with the resurrection passage in 2 Corinthians 15, Paul says: "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" Paul is quoting from Hosea, the great covenantal prophet. The sting of death is sin, the power of sin is the law. "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Therefore be what you are; be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord. As Paul preached and as Paul developed his theology, he continued to make his own responses, a man of faith.

Let's move on. Ephesians 3:20-21: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen." God's power and love are higher than you can think, wider than you can think, more inclusive than you can imagine. Take the highest multiplied by the highest, infinity squared by infinity, and you still will not have the measurements of God's power and love, the incomprehensible and infinite power and love of God. That is what Paul writes to the church in Ephesus. This after he has talked about the tremendous election, predestination that God has worked out, that He has made us alive in Christ. He has made us one in Christ. And He has included the Gentiles in His great body of people. Oh, the love of Christ!

Paul sets down a confession of faith in Philippians 2:6-11, introducing it with, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." This may have been a confession in the church before Paul wrote it down. I will not argue about the origin of it, but he has written it as a message of God as well as his own testimony. Paul also says, in 1 Timothy 1:15-17:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who believe on Him and receive eternal life. Now to the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Jesus came to save sinners. Praise God! More than that, He took the worst of sinners. He took Paul—a murderer, a persecutor, a killer. More than that, He was unlimited in His patience. Think of Exodus 4:6,

“A God slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness.” He will not always be angry, but He will be so patient. Believe on Him, the eternal king. Paul begins with salvation and he finishes up with the eternal, immortal, invisible, only God, our King, the Lord.

I have given you, in this lecture, a summary of a series of six sermons. You may have suspected that. But it was these six doxological passages that really helped me to understand Paul more fully. I am convinced that Paul united the basic elements of the golden cable in a very meaningful, relevant, and adaptable way. He preached the kingdom, he preached the covenant, he preached the mediator. His emphasis is on interpreting the mediator, who is the king, the great mediator of the new covenant. He wrote about the kingdom, using the terms, “kingdom,” “king,” and “reign.” He uses these terms variously and in different contexts, but he is well imbued with this thought: “I have a sovereign king.” “Now unto the king eternal, immortal”—he is facing death, he has no fear. He tells us what the nature of this king, this kingdom, is. It is not about eating and drinking, Romans 14:17. For him, the kingdom idea was all-inclusive. When he wanted to sum it up he spoke of, “The kingdom of our Lord Jesus.” Luke summed up Paul’s teaching similarly in the last verses of chapter 28 of Acts: “And he preached the kingdom and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The kingdom inheritance and our involvement in it was to him the greatest treasure that we could have. Did he speak of the covenant? Yes, in so many different contexts. In Romans 9:4 and 11:27 he speaks of Israel’s past role and of their possible continued role. In 1 Corinthians 11:25, he speaks of the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ, and there he ties Jeremiah in with his own ministry in Corinth. And in 2 Corinthians 3:6, he says that believers are ministers of the new covenant, not of the old, but of the new through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. He refers to the old and the Mosaic covenant. (“The old covenant” refers to the Mosaic, Sinaitic formulation of the old covenant). But we are ministers of the new covenant, that same covenant in its new administration.

In Galatians 3:15-17, where he deals with the law and the covenant, Paul tells us that we are children of Abraham if indeed we believe, and we are therefore covenant members. Galatians 4:24 makes reference to this also. In Ephesians 2:12 he speaks about being absent from Christ, being without the covenants. If you are without the covenant you are absent from Christ. In the covenant, you are under the mediator of the covenant, and under the reign of the king. This is Paul’s framework, the covenant promises and responsibilities. The covenant, that love-life relationship through which God does His work, through the mediator, Jesus Christ—that is the context in which Paul writes. But let it not be doubted, the mediator, Jesus Christ, is at all times at the very center of his message in the context of the kingdom and covenant.

In concluding this lecture I would like to turn to Colossians I. You may already know what passage I will be referring to, Christ the supreme one. Colossians 1:15:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created” [this is a connection to the covenant of creation], “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church [the great mediator]; he is the beginning and the first born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Paul wraps creation, the whole administration, together under the atonement, under Christ, the image of God, who is the Lord of creation, the mediator of the covenant. “You are my Savior and Lord.” He made us to be that. Be what you are.