

## THE GREAT CONVERSATION April 2010

We engage Paul, the first and, perhaps, the greatest Christian thinker. His writings comprise most of our Christian Scriptures. Remarkably, Paul's voluminous correspondence was not, in his mind, intended to become part of a Bible. No! He was the apostle to gentiles composing *letters to churches*. Now, that says way more than it seems at first glance.

First off, Paul had once been Saul: devout and loyal Jew, a Pharisee, and mass-murderer of Christians who, to him at the time, were perverting all that made God holy. Now, having been personally seized by the risen Christ, he is Paul, authorized (there's that *authority* word again) to take the proclamation to *non-Jews*. That is to say, to *all outsiders!* Amazing! And perplexing!

Given his Jewish background, his need to ground identity in Hebrew scripture since the temple is now less compelling, his authority as Christ's apostle to all the outsiders, and *his growing awareness of the background and understanding of those outsiders*, Paul is compelled to *think* of how to convey to *them* who Jesus is, and what they as the Jesus community could be and ought to be. A big, big order not unlike our own. How to integrate who we have been, and what we may have thought once upon a time, with who we are now called to be, and how our thinking now *may be* enriched by others, and to do it in a fashion that allows those others unlike us to be included with us in the Jesus-Way. To get a sense of what a remarkable turnaround Paul represents, think of the Middle East, its endless and bloody exclusionary, tribal hostilities; then picture a person, once a dedicated participant in the slaughter, standing up and *proclaiming*, "No more! From now on, because of Jesus none of this is ever necessary anywhere among anyone, forever!" And being willing to die in order to get that message across! And then writing letters detailing how, in their own circumstances, ordinary Christian people could make the necessary changes in their own individual lives and in their lives together. The spirited power of God in Christ could make this happen in anyone, anywhere, Paul said.

Much Christian thinking began with Paul, and functions both to repeat and to interpret what he said. I perceive the apostle to be one of those people who thinks out loud or, more accurately, to think as he writes. Often his thoughts seem to be contained in those infuriating complex, compound sentences I never learned to diagram correctly in 7th grade English class. He goes on and on; and I'm bewildered as to how he gets from where he started to where he seems to end up. If you don't believe me, read his letters! But read them as penned by an impassioned pastor trying to convey *the mystery* of cross/resurrection to people he deeply loves and cares for, concerned much more for them than he is about grammatical correctitude. Or logical consistency. Paul is not driven by rational logic, but by the spirit of the risen Christ. It is the Christ Spirit Paul wants to convey much more than a well-formed argument, though he tries to do the latter, as well. Christian theology ever since has attempted the same.

Like Jesus, Paul assumes the integrity of God. What Jesus called the "Kingdom of God," Paul calls the "Righteousness of God." The two phrases function the same way: they insist against all argument that God is God. They protect the kind of God God is: the character of God, the "godness of God," if you will. It is a Character, a Kingdom, a Righteousness in which everything, everyone, finally, *belongs*; God includes and does not exclude. That, Paul says, is the Gospel, the Good News. Who would recognize as Good News such a Gospel more fully and more passionately than this transformed mass-murderer?

Which may raise a profound question: that of justice and peace. In the Psalms (Psa. 85), it is said that in the end time justice and peace will embrace. In the now-time, however, you see how logically impossible this vision is. If you've been wronged you want vindication. Peace does not lie in that direction. If you want peace, you seem to be overlooking the horrors being perpetrated all around. The two don't mix, remain alienated, in the now-time. Except, maybe, in the Jesus community where it occasionally is possible, where they are permitted to, and sometimes do, embrace. But, do they embrace, or remain separate and alienated, in you, in us? By what authority do you hold justice/peace apart? Together? What has Jesus to do with your response?