

**Introduction - an Overview of the Life and Work of St. Paul**

St Paul, more than any other person, helped the Church develop from a persecuted Messianic Jewish sect into a universal faith in which the gospel of Jesus Christ knew “neither Jew nor Greek ... neither slave nor free ... neither male nor female.” (Galatians 3:28). The enormous corpus of his recorded letters needs to be interpreted with care, because it does not in any way constitute a rigorous systematic theology. Furthermore, it is important to remember that “Paul’s thinking was anything but static, and that his understanding of the gospel was developing throughout his life; his experiences and deliberations combined to produce new insights into Christian faith.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is perhaps better not to attempt to extract St Paul’s teaching thematically across all his letters, but rather to study his writings according to the chronology and context of their composition, letter by letter. This is necessary precisely because St Paul composed his Epistles in response to the various needs, situations and circumstances presented by the very churches that he had established during his great missionary journeys.

St Paul (Saul before his baptism) was born in Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia not many years after the birth of Christ. Tarsus was a great centre of trade, government and education with a thriving Jewish community. It was no doubt in Tarsus that St Paul learned his trade as a tentmaker, which he used to support himself throughout his missionary journeys (Acts 18:3; 1 Corinthians 9:3-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:9). As a Hellenised Jew and Roman citizen, he probably used the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. His epistolary style and content show that he was familiar with the Greek philosophers, quoting both the Stoic Aratus and the poets Epimenides and Menander. However, his studies of the Torah drew him to the Pharisaic tradition; and as a young man he went to Jerusalem to study under

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<sup>1</sup> Morna D. Hooker, “Paul” in Adrian Hastings (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 521-524.

the great Gamaliel, the grandson and successor of Rabbi Hillel who stood for a more progressive and open-minded Judaism.

St Paul excelled in his studies (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:6) in an atmosphere in which “the most important activity of Jewish life became study.”<sup>2</sup> His zeal and idealism placed him with those forces lined up against the new Christian sect, which Palestinian Jews “had begun to regard as a serious threat to the ancient covenant with God.”<sup>3</sup> Although St Paul probably did not himself cast a stone at the proto-martyr Stephen, he consented to his death and witnessed the execution while taking charge of the assailants’ clothes (Acts 7:58). After that, Saul, as he was then, did everything in his power to eliminate the Church, raiding houses and making many arrests (Acts 8:1-3). His famous conversion on the road to Damascus, (until then a relatively safe city for Christians fleeing Judaea and Samaria), turned his life completely upside down and established his call from God to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, for which cause he would suffer much (Acts 9:16). His missionary journeys then sustained the purpose and context of his writings. With so many churches to care for, writing to them extended significantly his apostolic guidance when absent. Thereafter, his writings were recognised by the Church as being divinely inspired. One aspect of his earlier Jewish training that was helpful in his new ministry in the Church was St Paul’s ability to engage as a rabbi in disputes about the meaning of specific texts, as evidenced by his victory in bringing Gentiles into the Church without being circumcised, as some apostles had previously insisted (Acts 15:1-35).

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<sup>2</sup> Chaim Potok, *Wanderings: Chaim Potok’s History of the Jews* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1978), p. 299. Potok applies this love of learning generally to the Jews of first century Palestine; however, it would have been especially true of the Pharisees.

<sup>3</sup> Potok, p. 376. To understand “the complexity of early Jewish-Christian interaction,” see Jack T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. xviii f.

## Approximate Chronology of St. Paul's Apostolic Labours and Letters

YEAR	LIFE OF PAUL	
36	Paul's conversion	
37	At Damascus	
38	Flight from Damascus to Jerusalem, then to Tarsus	
39 - 43	Paul preaches in Syria and Cilicia, making his headquarters in Tarsus.	
44	Paul brought from Tarsus to Antioch; stays there one year before the famine.	
45	Visits Jerusalem with Barnabas to relieve the famine.	
46	At Antioch	
47	At Antioch	
48	First Missionary Journey - from Antioch to Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe	
49	... and back through the same places to Antioch	
50	Paul and Barnabas attend the Council of Jerusalem	
51	Second Missionary Journey - from Antioch to Cilicia, Lycaonia, Galatia	
52	... Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth (writes 1 THESSALONIANS)	
53	At Corinth; writes 2 THESSALONIANS	
54		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spring: leaves Corinth and reaches Jerusalem at Pentecost; goes to Antioch</li> <li>• Autumn: Third Missionary Journey - goes to Ephesus.</li> </ul>
55, 56		At Ephesus
57		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spring: writes 1 CORINTHIANS</li> <li>• Summer: leaves Ephesus for Macedonia where he writes 2 CORINTHIANS in Autumn.</li> <li>• Winter: goes to Corinth, writes GALATIANS</li> </ul>
58		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spring: writes ROMANS, leaves Corinth, going by Philippi and Miletus to ...</li> <li>• Summer: ...Jerusalem at Pentecost. He is arrested and sent to Caesarea.</li> </ul>
59		At Caesarea
60		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autumn: Sent to Rome by Festus</li> <li>• Winter: Shipwrecked at Malta</li> </ul>
61		Spring: Arrives at Rome
62		At Rome <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spring: Writes PHILEMON, COLOSSIANS, EPHESIANS</li> <li>• Autumn: Writes PHILIPPIANS.</li> </ul>
63		Paul acquitted at Rome; goes to Macedonia and Asia Minor
64		Paul goes to Spain (?)
65		In Spain (?)
66		Summer: from Spain (?) to Asia
67		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer: Writes 1 TIMOTHY from Macedonia</li> <li>• Autumn: Writes TITUS from Ephesus.</li> <li>• Winter: At Nicopolis</li> </ul>
68		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spring: In prison at Rome, writes 2 TIMOTHY</li> <li>• Summer: Paul executed at Nero's orders.</li> </ul>

### NOTE

*There is sufficient uncertainty about the DIRECT personal authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews by St. Paul for us to omit reference to this work here. Some also doubt the direct personal authorship of the Pastoral Epistles (opposite) but these have been included.*

*Dating of the Epistles is fluid to a certain extent and different commentators have varying versions of how these fit into the timeline of St. Paul's life and work.*

## Chronological Theological Commentary of St. Paul's Letters

## **(I) 1 & 2 Thessalonians (52/53 AD) - 2nd Missionary Journey**

These two letters to the Church at Thessalonica are probably the oldest of all the Epistles. The second may have been written by an amanuensis, perhaps either Silvanus or Timothy who are both mentioned in the opening greeting, but this letter still unquestionably reflects Pauline teaching. The first letter especially gives us insights into the eschatological beliefs of the first Christians in the period A.D. 30 to A.D. 50. The key texts are 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. They both reflect the fervour with which the first-generation Church expected the End Times. Such an expectation was both a consolation in times of persecution and a perpetual warning to maintain watchfulness and sobriety. In the first passage St Paul teaches the believers who have died in Christ that they will rise with him and that the living will also join them all in a type of Ascension. In the second passage, St Paul refuses to address questions concerning the timing of the End but he declares that it will be unexpected to most, thereby necessitating continual watchfulness. His references to faith, hope, love and spiritual armour are themes to which he will return in 1 Corinthians 13 and Ephesians 6.

In the midst of writing about the End Times, St Paul is also concerned that the Christians in Thessalonica should experience joy in the face of death. Writing of 1 Thessalonians 4:13, St Gregory the Great stressed that:

. . . it is unseemly to addict oneself to weary affliction for those of whom it is to be believed that they have attained to true life by dying. Those have, perhaps, just reason for long continued grief who are unaware of another life and have no trust that there is a passing from this world to a better one. We, however, who know this, who believe and teach it, should not be too much distressed for those that depart, lest what in others demonstrates affection be to us instead a matter of blame. For it is, as it were, a kind of distrust to be tormented by sadness in opposition to what everyone preaches. It is as the apostle [Paul] says, 'But we would not have you ignorant, brothers, concerning

those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.’<sup>4</sup>

This advice has remained sound for Christians living in many centuries including us in the 21st.

In the second letter to the Church at Thessalonica, the emphases have changed a little. Whereas in the first letter prophecies are not to be despised (5:19-20), in the second letter sound teaching to correct prophetic abuses seems to predominate. It may be in this regard that 2:2 refers to problems with Gnostic teachers who have airbrushed the future judgement of God out of the Gospel and this may also explain the uncompromising language used in chapter 1:7-10 concerning the Last Days. Taken together, these two Epistles show that the early Christian Church lived 'on the edge'—maintaining the apostolic tradition while earnestly waiting upon the Lord's return in glory to judge both the living and the dead. Much of the impetus to evangelise came from precisely this conviction that as much of the world as possible should know of these things in order to repent before the End came. In 2 Thessalonians St Paul “wishes to encourage the faith of the Thessalonians as well as to warn them against expecting the Lord’s advent too soon.”<sup>5</sup> St Paul's early teaching does not concern the condition of a ‘settled’ Church but rather that of a body soon to be shaken by global apocalyptic events. Such was the faith of the early Christians.

### **1 & 2 Corinthians (57 A.D.) - 3rd Missionary Journey**

St Paul makes his first journey to Corinth at the time of the writing of his letters to the church at Thessalonica. Corinth had been a boom town since its re-founding by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. and was still the first city of Greece, with much wealth and

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<sup>4</sup> St Gregory the Great, Letter 107, quoted by Peter Gorday (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture [ACCS], NT IX* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), pp. 84-85. Similar reflections are given from St John Chrysostom, St Ambrose, St Augustine, St Basil the Great and St Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>5</sup> Gorday, *ACCS NT IX*, p. 101.

many orators and philosophers.<sup>6</sup> Its wealth had been built on its strategic location between trade routes from north to south and east to west. Its reputation for sexual licence, at least in this period, is not deserved, based as it is on Strabo's writings about the city prior to 146 BC. A close reading of 1 and 2 Corinthians does not suggest that the sexual mores of the city were especially licentious, but rather that St Paul wishes the new Christians to understand how marriage can be lived as one's "own special gift from God" (1 Corinthians 7:1-7). As St John Chrysostom comments on 1 Corinthians 6:13, "Paul is not attacking the nature of the body but the unbridled license of the mind, which abuses the body."<sup>7</sup> However, Corinth was a restless and energetic city, religiously diverse and not stymied by inflexible inherited traditions. It had a thriving Jewish community and it was, of course, to the synagogues that St Paul made first resort in his preaching missions (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8). Certainly, the synagogue was the place to find and draw Jews into a faith in Christ; however, St Paul was perhaps also trying to offer amends for his deep personal awareness that "in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You [i.e. Christ]" (Acts 22:19; cf. 26:11).

## 1 Corinthians

The result of St Paul's evangelisation was a church with a Jewish Christian core and a substantial number of pagan converts. St Paul had previously lived in Corinth for 18 months; and as one Church Father commented, he "treats them with great confidence and loving affection, sometimes warning and sometimes censuring them, and sometimes treating them fondly as if they were his own children."<sup>8</sup> From the first letter, we know more about the individual constitution of this church than

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<sup>6</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, quoted by Gerald Bray (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VII, 1-2 Corinthians*, p. 2,

<sup>7</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 17.1*, quoted by Gorday, *ACCS NT IX*, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles, Proem.*, quoted by Gerald Bray (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VII, 1-2 Corinthians*, p. 1.

perhaps any other church. A microcosm of Corinth itself, most of its members were upwardly mobile and not temperamentally stable in their beliefs even after baptism. Most of the problems in the church, which St Paul addresses here, concern the unwillingness of some to receive their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ on an equal footing. The rich were unmindful of the poor (11:20-22), self-proclaimed spiritual athletes vied for positions of superiority (4:6-13) and showed all the hallmarks of overconfidence (10:1-13) with factions and rivalries multiplying like weeds (1:10-13; 11:18). St Paul also had to contend with a spirit of worldliness in the spheres of sexual morality (5:1-8), marriage (7:1-16), personal stability (7:17-40) and litigation (6:1-11). If this was not enough, then there was the problem of good order and liturgical assembly involving the respective roles of men and women and the necessary spiritual preparation for the reception of the holy Eucharist (Chapter 11) which was often sadly lacking.

Addressing the problem of division, St Paul insists on the centrality of Christ and the power of the cross which requires for any Christian community wisdom based not on the traditions and aspirations of men but upon the humility of God and a spiritual fatherhood based on love and service (chapters 1 to 4). Sexual immorality must be confronted both with pastoral discipline and sound teaching, the latter concerning the believer's relationship to Christ and the Spirit's indwelling of his body as a temple (5:1-12; 6:12-20). Secular litigation between believers must be resisted for it implies that the Christian community cannot resolve its own internal conflicts. In short, secular litigation is a failure of sanctification (6:11). Instability in social and personal relationships can only be addressed by loving fidelity within marriage and obeying God's commandments, as enjoined upon all (7:1-24). At one point St Paul seems to exercise a preference for virginity over marriage in that the former state has fewer distractions from serving God (7:32-35), yet he still approves marriage as honourable (7:38). As far as spiritual inflation and overconfidence is concerned, St Paul diagnoses pride as the root cause and strengthens the community in the wisdom and power of God to resist such temptations (10:1-13). The disregard for the

spiritually weak (in the matter of the offering of food to idols [10:18-31]) and the failure to have concern for the poor (in the celebration of the holy Eucharist) remain for St Paul problems of spiritual sensitivity and discernment which cause 'dis-ease' within the body of Christ (11:27-34). In chapter 12 and 13, St Paul re-emphasises the interdependency of all members within the body of Christ so that spiritual gifts may be exercised harmoniously for the building up of the Church in love, the greatest gift. Chapter 14 returns to the problem of spiritual inflation, this time in the matter of ecstatic utterance, glossolalia or speaking in tongues. Chapter 14 makes it clear that edification is of paramount importance and if tongues are to be employed there must be interpretation. St Paul, however, would prefer that in the gathering of the church understandable words only be used (14:18-19).

Most of the 1 Corinthians concerns St Paul addressing problems that have arisen within the church, yet in chapter 15 there is a change of gear as he addresses a heresy taught by some in the community, that there is no resurrection from the dead (15:12). The apostle sets out before the church the evidence for the resurrection in the appearance of Christ to many, including latterly to himself; and then he goes on to explain how without the resurrection the faithful would still be in their sins and that the departed would have no hope—a truly pitiful state (15:16-19). In fact, Christ is risen from the dead; and all those who follow Him faithfully will share in that resurrection (15:20-28). St Paul then goes on to discuss the manner of the resurrection in its spiritual and bodily aspects (15:35-49) and its timing (15:50-53). He closes his argument with a hymn of praise to the resurrection of Christ (15:54-56). Chapter 16 concerns practical matters of collections for the saints and St Paul's ongoing care for the church in his absence.

## **2 Corinthians**

St Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth really comprises two letters stitched together - chapters 1 to 9 and chapters 10 to 13. The first subsidiary letter (A) is written within a year so of his first epistle in Macedonia and sometime later, after

leaving for Illyricum, he writes again (letter B) when he hears that the situation in Corinth has significantly deteriorated.

In letter A St Paul is conciliatory and appeals to the church at Corinth from his apostleship of love that the fallen should be restored with gentleness (2:5-11). St Paul's reflection in verse 11 that "what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience" offers a profound linking of God's purposes with personal self-awareness and our personal responsibility to seek the Living God. There is a reference in chapter 3 to the veil of the Law, appropriate to the old covenant but superseded in the glory of the new whereby the believers are transformed from one degree of glory to the next by the Spirit (3:12-18). Yet Origen reflects that as Christians we have a responsibility to pray "day and night" to the Lord, because the veil of the Law can still limit our awareness of God: "If we hear negligently, if we bring no zeal to learning and understanding, not only are the Scriptures of the Law and the Prophets but also of the apostles and Gospels covered for us with a great veil."<sup>9</sup>

The rest of letter A in the eighth and ninth chapters concerns St Paul's collection for the hard-pressed church in Jerusalem and his teaching concerning Christian giving that supports this appeal. Already, we suspect, St Paul is mindful of Judaisers who are perhaps making common cause with the self-styled spiritual elite at Corinth and disturbing the community with their heretical doctrines. Certainly, this is the context for his more stringent tone of letter B when it becomes clear that the situation in his absence has degraded quickly.

In a personal context, throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians St Paul experiences suffering within himself (2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Corinthians 2:3) and setbacks in his preaching (1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28). As St Theodoret of Cyr stressed, St Paul "wanted to make it clear that his afflictions, which are sometimes described

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<sup>9</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Exodus 12*, quoted by Bray, *ACCS NT VII 1-2 Corinthians*, for 2 Corinthians 3:16, pp. 220-221,

in detail but often left imprecise, were “not a natural property of the body but something which was intended by God for a higher purpose” which might or might not become fully known by St Paul.<sup>10</sup> Yet St Paul was deeply aware that for himself, for the Corinthians and for Christians at all times that “as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Corinthians 1:5). Of course, St Paul prayed for suffering to be removed, but when the Lord said to him “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9), St Paul immediately responded, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10).

In a social context, Chapter 10 establishes the true nature of spiritual conflict and the authority that St Paul must employ in order to defend the Gospel of Christ. By Chapter 11 it is clear (11:3-4) that the problems in Corinth concerns preachers presenting a different Christ, a different Spirit, a different Gospel. Verses 22 to 33 reveal both the nature of the problem (the Judaisers) and the counterpoint of his own credentials in Judaism, followed by his autobiographical reflections concerning the sufferings he has endured and continues to endure for the sake of the Gospel. He makes it clear that his zeal before God for the community at Corinth exists in order to prevent the continuation of a worsening of the divisive and hateful and immoral attitudes and actions of which he has heard report (12:19-21). Finally, he warns them of his coming visit, and that they might be prepared, he urges honest self-examination upon all (13:5-6).

In both a personal and a social context, St John Chrysostom points out that St Paul’s insights into suffering are an important part of how God works with His people in all ages, because 2 Corinthians 1:5 is how

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<sup>10</sup> St Theodore of Cyr, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 350, quoted by Bray, p. 303.

. . . it was, too, in the Old Testament. By their trials the righteous flourished. So it was . . . with Daniel, with Moses and Joseph; from this they all shone and were counted worthy of great crowns. For the soul is purified when it is afflicted for God's sake: it then enjoys greater assistance. . . Affliction tears pride away and prunes out all listlessness and exercises patience; it reveals the meanness of human things and leads to much philosophy. For all the passions give way before it: envy, emulation, lust, desire of riches, of beauty, boastfulness, a swarm of these distempers.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the experiences of St Paul guide him into a theology that is both consistent with the historical Jewish understanding of God and also transformative for Christians then and now. We know little of what happened at Corinth when St Paul did return, but it is sobering to consider that St. Clement of Rome, writing some 20 to 30 years after St Paul's death, would still be dealing with Corinthian sedition and schism!

## Galatians

St. Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, a province in northern Asia Minor and extending some way into the centre and south, is not easy to date. It may have been written before 1 Corinthians or after 2 Corinthians, but certainly before Romans. In respect of Judaising tendencies, it deals with very similar issues to those in 2 Corinthians but in a much more theologically explicit way. The picture drawn therefore of the Pauline corpus of writings at this time is of churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece being harried by itinerant heretical preachers and being undermined from within by those of a presumably Jewish background who are trying to steer the Church back into the old covenant, its laws and its prescriptions. As a Pharisee trained Torah scholar of impeccable credentials, St Paul is all too aware of these tactics and the dangers they represent to the very foundations and character of the Christian Church and its faith in Christ. He is therefore

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<sup>11</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homily XXVI on 2 Corinthians 12*, quoted by Johanna Manley (ed.), *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary for Orthodox Christians* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1990), p. 335.

uncompromising in his resistance to these developments in the Galatian church or churches.

In chapters 1 and 2 St Paul immediately identifies the problem as a turning away toward a different Gospel than that which he had received from the Apostles in Jerusalem and handed on to them. The Galatians are being lured by those who have resisted the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem which permanently annulled the requirements of the Mosaic Law for Gentile believers. Even St Peter had to be corrected on this matter when he came to Antioch and was confronted by St Paul himself (2:11-13). St Paul now develops his theological response to those who would disturb the peace of the Church by substituting the old Law for grace. This is a theme to which he will return again and again and more especially in the letter to the Romans: “Man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). The law was a provision for a man in his fallen state, but it was this selfsame law that allowed Christ to be crucified; and then by His death according to this law He became accursed. His resurrection unravels death and the curse of the law, bringing in the new era of grace whereby the risen Christ lives in us even as we are crucified with him on the cross (3:10-14). This unmerited grace of God could never be set aside by a return to the law (2:17-21). This is serious business for St Paul (and for us all); so he exclaims: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth?” (3:1) The Holy Spirit is received by faith not by fulfilling the requirements of the Law. It is a faith evident in Abraham and his seed to whom the promises of God are made out. fulfilled in Christ (3:15-18).

St Paul does have a positive estimation of the Law, but its time has passed; formerly it acted as a tutor and a guardian (3:23-25), but now it has given way to a life changing grace and the power of the Holy Spirit whereby we become sons and daughters of God by adoption through faith, knowing freedom in God and not slavery (chapter 4). It is faith working through love that constitutes this freedom which Christ has procured for us (5:1-6). The Law is known to all and it is fulfilled in love

(5:14). We should walk then in the Spirit, as not being under the law, whilst resisting the works of the flesh which contend against Him (5:16-18). St Paul then contrast the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit, the latter defining a life of Christian discipleship.

St Paul closes in chapter 6 with councils of pastoral discipline and care based upon the law of love and life in the Spirit. With a final warning not to fall back into the dispensation of the law, St Paul closes with his benediction (6:11-18). In that closing benediction in which St Paul states that “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (verse 14) the theme of 2:20b is continued with St Paul’s personal emphasis that God loves “me and gave himself for me.” St John Chrysostom points out that St Paul is speaking

in a highly personal voice . . . burning with desire [to be one with Christ]. In just this way did the prophets often make the universal God their own, crying ‘My God, my God, I invoke You.’ [Psalm 62:1 LXX. Thus St Paul] shows that each of us ought to render as much thanks to Christ as though Christ had come for him alone. For God would not have withheld this gift even from one person. He has the same love for every individual as for the whole world.<sup>12</sup>

This challenge to “make the universal God” our own personal God applies not only to the Galatians, but to each of us and to all Christians throughout the centuries.

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<sup>12</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homily on Galatians 2:20*, quoted by Mark J. Edwards (ed.), *ACCS NT VIII, Galatians, Ephesians, Philipians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 33.

# A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a three-level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Corinthians 13:4-13: The Excellence of Love

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
<b>Exegetical</b>	<b>Historical / Contextual</b>  <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	St Augustine: “As this faith, which works by love, begins to penetrate the soul, it tends, through the vital power of goodness to change into sight, so that the holy and perfect in heart catch glimpses of that ineffable beauty whose full vision is <i>our</i> highest happiness .... We begin in faith, we are perfected in sight” ( <i>Enchiridion</i> 1:5; ACCS, p. 132; 13:10): FAITH WORKS THROUGH LOVE.	Faith in Christ is a path we choose to take in life that draws us to “our highest happiness.” As faith is lived out in love (of both God and others) through goodness, my “sight”—my knowledge of God and of myself—is momentarily perfected.
	<b>Allegorical / Typological</b>  <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	The phrase “for now we see in a mirror, dimly” means literally in Greek, “in an enigma,” “in a riddle.” Ancient mirrors were made from polished metal so the allegory is clear to ancient readers, that we see divine things with imperfect and partial vision.  St Clement of Alexandria wrote: “We know ourselves by reflection, as in a mirror. We contemplate, as far as we may, the creative cause on the basis of the divine element in us” ( <i>Stromateis</i> 1.94; ACCS, 1-2 Cor, p. 133).	St John Chrysostom on 1 Cor 13:12a: “Someone sitting in the darkness of night will not run after the light of the sun as long as he cannot see it. But when the dawn comes and the sun’s brightness begins to shine on him, he will eventually follow after its light.” In our lives, the dawning has come.
<b>Interpretive</b>	<b>Spiritual / Ethical</b>	St John Chrysostom urges: “Do not hastily pass by, beloved, the things spoken here, but examine each one of them with much care, so you may know both the treasure contained in them and the art of the painter. Consider, for example, the point from which [Paul] began, and his posited first cause of all its excellence [i.e. the excellence of love]. And what is it? Long-suffering. This is the root of all self-denial ... an invincible weapon... easily beating off all annoyances” ( <i>Homily</i> 23, 1 Cor 13).	As David Bentley Hart suggests, out of the long-suffering of the Crucifixion, Christ has “been raised up by God as the true form of human existence: an eschatologically perfect love - incomprehensibly present in the midst of history ...” ( <i>The Beauty of the Infinite</i> , p.1). SUCH IS LOVE.

	<b>Personal / Social</b>	Writing of 1 Cor 13.5, St Basil the Great reflected on how love seeks to discern its own defects: “A person living in solitary confinement will not readily discern his own defects, since he has no one to admonish or correct him with mildness and compassion ( <i>The Long Rules</i> , 7; ACCS, 1-2 Cor, p. 130).	“...faith and love, knowledge, and its application in action, are inseparable” (Pomazansky, <i>Orthodox Dogmatic Theology</i> , p. 359). FOR EACH OF US AND FOR HUMANITY.
<b>Transformative</b>	<b>The Call to Holiness</b>	In 1 Cor 13.11a and in 1 Cor 3.1,” St Paul uses the Greek word for baby, <i>nēpios</i> , to designate a child whose power of speech is not yet formed. Similarly, in 1 Cor 13:11b, when one grows up and “put[s] away childish things,” the same Greek word is again used. In Matt 18:2 when Jesus Christ calls “a little child” to him the Greek word is <i>paidion</i> meaning a young lad. A note in the OSB on 1 Cor 13:11 states, it is important to differentiate between being “childlike and being childish or immature.” However, neither biological age nor childlike innocence is St Paul’s concern. He is focused on teaching new Christians how to follow Christ—how to grow up in one’s understanding of the teachings of Christ. As Origen wrote of Rom 12:2: “The more one reads the Scriptures daily and the greater one’s understanding is, the more one is renewed always and every day. I doubt whether a mind which is lazy toward the holy Scriptures and the exercise of spiritual knowledge can be renewed at all” (ACCS, Romans, p. 308).	In 1 Cor 13:10 when St Paul writes of “the perfect” and in 1 Cor 13:12 that he “will know fully”, he is urging us to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may [know] ... the perfect [Gk, <i>teleios</i> , complete] will of God” for your own life. (Rom 12:2). Writing of 1 Cor 13:10, Ambrosiaster notes: “Everything which is imperfect will be destroyed. But destruction occurs by making the imperfect perfect, not by removing it altogether” (ACCS, p132). It is the same in our lives: As we understand better the teachings of Christ and apply them, our imperfect personalities are not destroyed, but perfected/completed.
	<b>The Call to Witness</b>	“Faith, hope and love abide” (1:13), but as the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart insists: “It is only as the offer of this peace within time, as a real and available practice [that is, Christ’s peace—lived out in faith, hope and love], that the Christian evangel (and in particular, the claim that Christ crucified has been raised from the dead) has any meaning at all; only if the form of Christ can be lived out in the	The reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is always present in history, independently of our personal witness (or limitations of that witness). Ambrosiaster is right: “Love is the greatest because while faith is preached and

		<p>community of the [C]hurch is the confession of the [C]hurch true; only if Christ can be practised is Jesus Lord ... It is this presence within time of an eschatological and divine peace, really incarnate in the person of Jesus and forever imparted to the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, that remains the very essence of the [C]hurch's evangelical appeal to the world at large, and of the salvation it proclaims" (pp. 1-2).</p>	<p>hope pertains to the future life, love reigns. As 1 John [3:16] says: 'By this we know His love, that He laid down His life for us.' Love is therefore the greatest of the three, because by it the human race has been renewed" (ACCS, 1-2 Cor, p. 134).</p>
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<sup>1</sup> In *"The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,"* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine "the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ..." (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader's contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages.

In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115 f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the "literal" or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.