

CHAPTER I

PAUL AND JESUS: SIMILARITIES

Now, as David Wenham states, much of Paul's doctrine seems in perfect step with the tradition of Jesus even though Paul made little mention of Jesus' words. This long puzzled me until I came to realize how much of Paul's doctrine was fueled by one erroneous conviction (that of the imminent Parousia) in such a manner as to accord with certain teachings of the Lord, yet without being drawn from the Lord's words. I will mention four inter-related examples here: divorce, treasure, government, and the Parousia.

1) Divorce

Like Jesus, he did not permit divorce. His fullest discussion of this is in I Corinthians 7:20, immediately prior to the passage listed above, where he issued the maxim,

Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called.

It is clear that he issued this because there was no point in making changes, such as divorcing or marrying, when the time was so short; nor was there any point in the slave seeking his freedom. This is one of the rare times when Paul appealed to the teaching of Jesus (To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord . . . v.10). But Jesus founded his prohibition of divorce on a totally different premise and Paul's maxim would not have pleased him. Jesus called a woman taken in adultery, then one who had had five husbands and was then living with a man not her husband. Would he have had them remain in the state in which they were called? The basis of Paul's admonition must actually be his erroneous belief that the end of all things was at hand. This is revealed by his concluding comment,

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none . . . For the form of this world is passing away (v. 29-31).

So, Paul reveals that he knew what Jesus had taught but he concluded, because of the nature of the teaching, that the end of all things must be at hand. He could not otherwise understand why Jesus would have issued such a teaching.

2) Treasure

Jesus issued a very firm teaching against laying up treasure on earth. Instead, he said,

. . . lay up treasure in heaven, because where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

Paul had a very similar doctrine, though stated in different terms. He said,

Set not your affections on things on earth, but seek those things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also shall appear with him in Glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

PAUL AND JESUS

He wrote To the Corinthians,

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (II Corinthians 4:17,18).

Taken at face value, Paul's doctrine was, in this case, certainly consistent with that of Jesus and contributed much towards my recognition of the significance of the true gospel during a time when I considered Paul's words to have been as inerrant as those of Jesus. But Jesus framed his teaching on the necessity, to our salvation, of where our hearts are sited. For those whose minds and hearts are set on earthly things, there is no hope of eternal salvation because the hearts are set on earthly things and are therefore not truly devoted to the Father in love. It is of no significance, in the mind of Jesus, how long the earth will stand or how long a person may be fated to live upon it. But for Paul, who expected Christ who is our life to appear immediately, whatever one may experience on earth is only a slight momentary affliction, and everything earthly is transient. Therefore one would be foolish to aspire to earthly treasure. Paul's language, emphasizing Christ's soon appearing, the momentary character of the earthly, and the transience of what we see, says nothing about the set of the heart as a condition of salvation. I conclude that Paul made these and many other wonderful statements on the basis of an erroneous conviction that the Lord's return was to be so soon as to render all earthly experience slight and momentary.

3) Government

Paul's conviction of the imminent end of the age heavily influenced his acceptance of the Roman authorities. Why rebel—why mount a revolution and go to all the trouble and grief of planning and executing a violent overthrow of Roman authority in Judea – when the Lord was about to take care of it any day? It is true that in his most extensive teaching of this subject (Romans 13), Paul recognizes that the authorities are of God and that this becomes a reason for our honoring them. But then he immediately follows with this:

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand (Romans 13:11,12).

Here again, Paul agrees with Jesus in his stance toward the Romans. Jesus also accepted the Roman authority in the story of the Tribute to Caesar. But Jesus framed his teaching with no thought of an imminent end of the age, whereas to Paul everything was about to end, including the Roman Empire. This was surely a dominant factor in the framing of Paul's entire gospel—but he was in error. One can only wonder how his letters would read had he been devoid of this one erroneous conviction. They certainly would be different!

4) The Parousia

Paul must have made himself acquainted with the teachings of Jesus. He pondered his words, such as those that absolutely prohibit divorce and other radical words such as the command to turn the other cheek, to love one's enemy and resist not evil. Then he concluded that such radical instructions could only be taken seriously if Jesus' return to close the age was to be so soon that obeying him would have little effect on this life. One might live with a contentious wife for a few days, weeks, or months. One might live with no thought for tomorrow, provided the Lord returns before tomorrow. So, Paul thought his doctrine of the soon appearing of the Lord was received from the Lord, but only because he failed to realize why Jesus said such things. He derived a reason – the eminent Parousia—but we know he was wrong. Paul's view here is

PAUL: THE STRANGER

similar to that set forth by Albert Schweitzer, the "interim ethic theory" that supposed Jesus' radical demands presumed a very short time before his return to bring this age to a close and inaugurate a new one. Schweitzer reasoned that the consequences of abiding by Jesus' radical commands could have been endured for such a short time but no longer and that since Jesus was mistaken in this presumption the commands are not now applicable.

How does this doctrine of the imminent Parousia compare with utterances of Jesus on the same subject? There are certain similarities, for Jesus emphasized the need to be prepared and also compared his return with the coming of a thief in the night:

Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this: if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Matthew. 24:42-44).

Jesus also compared his return to that of the master of a house who had put his servants in charge before his departure. He said,

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on watch. Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: watch (Mark 13:34-37).

Jesus' Parable of the Ten Maidens (Matthew 25:1-13) carries the same lesson of the importance of being prepared for his return.

We see that Jesus spoke repeatedly of his return to judge the nations and to receive his own unto himself. This is the Parousia that, Paul assured his disciples, was to occur in their generation. But Jesus had made no such promise as to the time of his return. He said instead,

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only (Matthew 32:36).

This is why he placed so much emphasis on watching and on being fully prepared:

Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Matthew 24:44).

It will be much too late to prepare once he appears.

Why was Paul so certain that the Day of the Lord was at hand? We can only suppose that it was sparked by another statement Jesus made in his eschatological discourse in Matthew's Gospel:

Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place (Matthew 24:34).

Given in the same context as the no one knows prophecy above, it is even today often taken to mean that Jesus himself thought his return in judgment would be in that generation. It is not difficult to understand how Jesus' disciples could have understood him thusly.

But when we see that this did not occur and then take a second look at the text, it is clear that this is not what he meant to communicate. He was only prophesying that the judgment on the Jewish nation, fulfilled when the Romans destroyed the nation and temple in the first Jewish rebellion in the late sixties, was to transpire before that generation passed away. This text consists of five segments that need to be rearranged because it deals with two different judgment events that are easily confused as it now stands. I have explained this more fully in Jesus: The Rock of Offense.

PAUL AND JESUS

The sequence of the segments in this discourse is incorrect. This is an assembly of isolated sayings gathered by early disciples who, like Paul, misunderstood them to mean that Jesus would return very soon.

So, on these points, watchfulness and preparedness, Paul was consistent with the Jesus Tradition. If he had stopped there, all would be well. Where he departed from Jesus was in deciding that the return was at hand and in using that belief as basic to his approach to the whole of life's relationships including slavery, marriage and government.

Jesus never said or did anything inconsistent with the reality with which we all have to deal. When, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles and they asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He responded, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

Jesus' response to this question points to the Parousia; the kingdom had already come, a fact for which they were not prepared. He knew that it would take much time for his Gospel to reach the ends of the earth (it hasn't reached it yet—not the true one). Being prepared is one thing, but not marrying or divorcing because the Lord is coming immediately is something else altogether. Therein Paul erred, as both Jesus and history confirm, and he gave bad advice based on this error that he may not have given had he known the truth of the matter.

One might, without giving it much thought, say that Paul was simply placing additional emphasis on preparedness. If that were all we had to consider, it would be hard to fault him. Yet I should note here that Paul never spoke of being prepared for the Lord's return as Jesus did, using Jesus' terminology. But when we consider how things looked from the perspective of the members of his churches, say of Corinth and Thessalonica, who took him seriously and lived single lives rather than marry, we can see how the error becomes very significant. After thirty or forty years, they must have seen that they had missed important experiences of this life unnecessarily because Paul did not know what he was talking about and they had made the mistake of believing him.

Now we proceed to examine, very briefly, three related topics.

Paul's Familiarity with the Jesus Tradition

These similarities between Jesus and Paul reveal, without a shadow of doubt, that Paul was very familiar with the Jesus Tradition, which is the body of Jesus' acts and teachings preserved in the minds of his disciples and perhaps on parchment. He took the message as he interpreted it and ran with it with all his might, with great zeal and full commitment. But he failed to understand it, not realizing the true foundation of the gospel. Consequently, he preached less than the Gospel of Jesus, his converts and disciples in all his churches believed less than the Gospel of Jesus, and the tragic results are clearly displayed throughout church history and modern Christendom.

Paul has no Oil for His Lamp

Jesus surely had this in mind when relating the Parable of the Ten Virgins, an integral part of the eschatological discourse of Matthew 24 - 25. You know the story: how the five wise virgins took flasks of oil with them as they prepared to meet the bridegroom, whereas the five foolish virgins took no flasks of oil, having only the oil that was in their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. Then, at midnight came the cry, "Behold the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." The foolish virgins found that their lamps were going out so that they were unprepared. The wise, who had extra oil, trimmed their lamps and went with the bridegroom into

PAUL: THE STRANGER

the marriage feast while the foolish had to rush to find more oil so that when they returned they found the door shut. They pled to be allowed in but the bridegroom only called out to them,

I do not know you (Matthew 25:1-13).

The wise virgins, anticipating that the coming of the bridegroom might be delayed, not only filled their lamps with oil but took additional flasks of oil. The foolish ones, like Paul, were so sure that the bridegroom's coming was imminent that they saw no reason to provide an additional supply. It is precisely after this pattern that the bridegroom has now been delayed for two millennia. All those who, like Paul, are found without oil for their lamps are in danger of being shut out when at last he arrives.

The Error of the Churchmen

So it is With the Churchmen. They look good and they sound good. One cannot tell, by merely looking, that there is any difference between them and true disciples precisely as one could not distinguish, by looking, between the five wise and five foolish virgins. They were virgins all, but there was a vast difference: no oil! This is what Paul and his followers did and continue to do – they fail to have oil for their lamps. This is the one essential for, without oil, lamps are useless. Paul has omitted the oil and this will be evident again and again as we continue our comparisons. It is particularly evident when we go to examine love as it appears in the doctrines of the two men.