



# The Order of Salvation and the Theology of Paul

## The Study of Paul Today

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As many—perhaps most—readers will have at least some awareness, the study of Paul continues to be dominated by the so-called New Perspective on Paul, the substantial reassessment of Paul’s theology that has emerged over the past several decades. Generalizations about this New Perspective need to be made with some caution. They are notoriously difficult, since the designation covers a spectrum of viewpoints that often diverge, sometimes even widely. Yet, if the label is at all meaningful, then some common concerns and convictions must be identifiable.<sup>1</sup>

Without attempting any kind of complete and documented description here, it seems fair to observe that what, as much as

1. The literature by this time is legion. For general surveys, see esp. G. Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), and S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). Both these volumes, while on the whole fair in their depictions, are also substantially critical of the New Perspective. For a favorably disposed summary, see D. Garlington, *In Defense of the New Perspective on Paul: Essays and Reviews* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 1–28 (“The New Perspective on Paul: Two Decades On”), and the personally orientated account of J. D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–88 (“The New Perspective on Paul: Whence, What, Whither?”).

anything, makes the New Perspective that, a new perspective, is a spectrum of reassessments of Paul decisively influenced by a reassessment of Second Temple Judaism in its various mainstream forms. In other words, the New Perspective on Paul is, more basically, a new perspective on Judaism in the Second Temple period; the reassessment of Paul stems from a basic reassessment of the Judaism of his time. It is worth noting here, moreover, that “new” here is relative. For the most part, this reassessment of Judaism, as applied to the study of Paul, is a matter of New Testament scholars arriving at conclusions about Second Temple Judaism and even about Paul that had already been reached by students of Judaism earlier in the twentieth century, notably by G. F. Moore and G. W. Montefiore. This primarily Protestant appropriation began approximately in the last quarter of the last century with the influential work of Krister Stendahl and E. P. Sanders, soon to be followed by others, notably James Dunn, who coined the expression “the New Perspective,”<sup>2</sup> and N. T. Wright.

A further fair generalization, particularly important for the concerns of this book, is the difference between the New Perspective, on the one hand, and the Reformation and subsequent confessional Protestantism, on the other, in their respective assessments of Pauline teaching—teaching that the Reformation tradition holds to be central for salvation. This difference especially relates to Paul’s teaching on justification. New Perspective estimates of this difference vary, and its extent is a matter of ongoing debate. But a difference between the Reformation and New Perspective appraisals of Paul does exist. It is bound up with the New Perspective view that when Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Christian he did not, as the Reformation tradition holds, abandon a religion of personal salvation by works for one of salvation by grace through faith. Rather, he exchanged one understanding and experience of divine grace for another.

2. J. D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95–122.

He repudiated a narrow, Jewish-centered view of God's electing grace for a broader, universal understanding, one that embraces not just Israel but all nations. One might say, on this view, that Paul, in becoming a Christian, went "from grace to grace."

Notably, the New Perspective sees Paul's teaching on justification by faith as reflecting concerns that are primarily (or even exclusively, for some of its proponents) corporate and ecclesiological, focused on the equal standing of Jewish and Gentile believers and how they are to relate to each other, rather than, as the Reformation holds, as critically constitutive for the salvation of individual sinners. In this way, the New Perspective decenters justification in Paul, not by questioning that it has an important place in his teaching, but by denying that it is central in his *soteriology*, especially as the Reformation tradition understands it to be central.

A basic consequence of these developments, particularly of this decentering of justification, as understood by the Reformation, is that the issue of the salvation of the individual has tended to become eclipsed or viewed as one about which Paul has relatively little concern or even interest. N. T. Wright, for instance, states that " 'the gospel' is not, for Paul, a message about 'how one gets saved,' in an individual and ahistorical sense." The gospel "is not, then, a system of how people get saved." The gospel, as Paul understands it, does not include what "in older theology would be called an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation."<sup>3</sup> Justification is spoken of in a similar vein. "It cannot, that is, be made into an abstract or timeless system, a method of salvation randomly applied." Romans is "not . . . a detached statement of how people get saved, how they enter a relationship with God as individuals."<sup>4</sup>

3. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 40–41, 45, 60; cf. 32.

4. *Ibid.*, 118, 131; cf. 129. I leave to the side here the question whether the pejorative use of "ahistorical," "timeless," "abstract," "detached," and "randomly

The New Perspective is preoccupied with broad, corporate, salvation-historical, covenantal, Israel-and-the-nations concerns. Properly so. Such concerns, as our own discussion will show, are undeniably not only present but prominent in Paul. But the New Perspective assesses them in a way that his teaching on matters related to individual salvation from sin is left aside as relatively unimportant and uncertain—or even dismissed as peripheral. If, for Paul, neither the gospel nor justification is directly concerned with the salvation of individuals, then it is at best unclear where Paul elsewhere addresses that concern and how he does it. Wright, for instance, says he is “perfectly comfortable with what people normally *mean* when they say ‘the gospel.’ I just don’t think it is what Paul means.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps I have missed it, but it is not at all clear to me on what Pauline or other biblical basis he would support that normal meaning.

This state of affairs, as much as any other consideration, has prompted this book. In view of reservations and denials that have accompanied the emergence of the New Perspective and are resulting in a diminished interest in the question of the *ordo salutis* in Paul, it seems appropriate to test these reservations and denials by examining his theology, especially his soteriology, in terms of this question and the issues it raises. The controlling question I want to address throughout concerns Paul’s understanding of how the individual receives salvation. Is that an appropriate or even meaningful question? If so, what place does Paul have for such reception? What does the application of salvation to sinners involve for him? Does he distinguish between salvation accomplished (*historia salutis*) and salvation

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applied” in the statements quoted in this paragraph unfairly caricature the Reformation and evangelical tradition that is primarily within their purview. In my view, they do caricature, at least when the best and most important representatives of that tradition are considered.

5. *Ibid.*, 41 (italics original).

applied (*ordo salutis*), and, if so, how important is the latter for him? What is the place of justification in his theology? Is it basic in his soteriology? These and related questions will occupy us.

While such questions are prompted by the development of the New Perspective on Paul, in addressing them here my primary concern is not to evaluate the New Perspective or interact in detail with particular views of its advocates. Rather, the New Perspective will remain in the background, coming into view only as it facilitates and to a certain extent situates my positive presentation of aspects of Paul's theology, primarily in his soteriology.

Regarding that positive presentation, it may be helpful to state at the outset that I see myself as working within the Reformation understanding of Paul and his soteriology, more particularly the understanding of Calvin and Reformed confessional orthodoxy, as I build on the biblical-theological work that has emerged within that tradition, particularly that of Herman Ridderbos and, before him, Geerhardus Vos, who have drawn attention to the controlling place of the redemptive-historical or covenant-historical dimension of his theology.<sup>6</sup>

### Paul as Theologian—Some Foundations

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Before we begin addressing the order or application of salvation in Paul, we will do well to spend some time on matters of a more general sort—matters that, it seems to me, pastors and other teachers in the church and, more broadly, other interested students of the Bible need to be clear about as they concern themselves with Paul's teaching, or "theology." While useful in its own right, this will serve to make explicit some of the controlling assumptions at work in this book as a whole. For the most part,

6. The major works of G. Vos and H. Ridderbos on Paul are, respectively, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), and *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (trans. J. R. de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

I will have to assert and affirm, rather than argue or develop, at least in any full fashion.

***Biblical Theology and Redemptive-Historical Interpretation***

Paul's teaching, especially any of its major themes, involves so-called biblical theology. Since there are widely differing, even contradictory, views of what such a biblical-theological enterprise entails, I should make my own understanding clear. Doing so will also reveal some of my basic commitments on matters of method.<sup>7</sup>

Biblical theology gives attention to the distinctive contribution of each of the biblical writers within his immediate historical circumstances or situatedness. That involves taking into account the fully "occasional" character of their writings, that is, the concrete concerns and specific problems of the original addressees. For reasons we will note presently, such an approach is especially called for in the case of Paul.

A biblical-theological approach, however, must recognize that each writer is part of a much larger scenario, a much larger *historical* scenario. Each with his distinctive contribution functions in the unfolding history of God's self-revelation. God's verbal self-revelation has its rationale as it is tethered to, and is a part within, the larger flow of the overall history of redemption. It functions as accompanying revelatory word, we may fairly generalize, to attest and interpret redemptive deed. In view here, globally considered, is the history that begins with the entrance of human sin into the original creation, which God saw was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), and then moves forward, largely incorporating along the way the history of Israel, God's chosen

7. My comments in the rest of this section follow esp. along the lines of the classic, still important treatment of G. Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), Preface, 11-27 ("Introduction: The Nature and Method of Biblical Theology").

covenant people, until it reaches its culmination, its omega point, in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ, God's final and supreme self-revelation.

The generalizations made in the preceding paragraph are in need of two important qualifications. First, particularly with an eye to special, or verbal, revelation, the terms "covenant history" and "covenant-historical" are more accurate than "redemptive history" and "redemptive-historical." While special revelation for the most part is redemptive, coming after the fall, pre-fall, preredemptive special revelation should not be overlooked or denied as an *integral* aspect of the covenantal communion, the bond of fellowship, that existed between God and his image-bearing creatures before the fall. Natural, or general, revelation (including "natural law") was never meant to function independently, apart from special revelation, whether before or after the fall.<sup>8</sup>

Second, it is fair to say, as a generalization, that verbal revelation is invariably focused on God's activity in history as Creator and Redeemer. It should not be missed, however, that with that historical focus verbal revelation at points refers beyond God's activity in history to his aseity, his self-existence, to his absolute freedom and independence from creation and history. This is beautifully intimated, for instance, in Isaiah 57:15, "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite'" (ESV).

The clearest, most explicit biblical warrant for the fundamental redemptive-historical, history-of-revelation construct in view here is the overarching assertion with which Hebrews begins: "God, having spoken in the past to the fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, has in these last days spoken to us in his Son" (1:1-2a). This opening statement, umbrella-like, covers the message of Hebrews in its entirety. As

8. On preredemptive special revelation, see esp. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 31-32.

such, it is fairly seen, even more broadly, as providing an overall outlook on the history of redemption and revelation as a whole.

This declaration captures three interrelated aspects of God’s “speech,” which, I take it, includes deed-revelation as well as word-revelation (that is, verbal revelation in the strict sense). (1) Revelation is expressly in view as a historical process. (2) The diversity involved in this process is accented, particularly for old covenant revelation, revelation through the prophets, by the two adverbs translated “at many times and in various ways,” which for emphasis are placed at the beginning of the construction in the original Greek. This diversity, whether or not it is within the author’s immediate purview, entails giving commensurate attention to the diverse modes and various literary genres that mark the history of revelation. (3) Christ is the “last days” endpoint of this history, which is nothing less than the eschatological goal of the entire redemptive-revelatory process.<sup>9</sup>

These three points bring us to an all-important observation about the study of Paul. We may say with Geerhardus Vos that Paul is “the greatest constructive mind ever at work on the data of Christianity.” Or, as Albert Schweitzer, from a quite contrary perspective, has evocatively put it, Paul is “the patron saint of thought in Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Paul’s theological genius, though unquestionably profound, is not our ultimate interest in considering his teaching. Nor is that interest finally his religious experience, though from every indication it was deep and exemplary. Rather, our deepest concern with him is as he is an apostle—that is, as he is an instrument of God’s revelation, authorized by the exalted Christ to attest and interpret the salvation manifested in Christ. Our abiding preoccupation is the

9. For more extensive discussion of redemptive-historical interpretation, see my chapters in S. E. Porter and B. M. Stovell, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 89–110, 174–87.

10. Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 149; A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (trans. W. Montgomery; New York: H. Holt, 1931), 377.

revelatory word that comes through Paul, focused on Christ's climactic, redemptive deed.

As we deal with Paul's teaching, then, we should want it to be said of ourselves, above all, what he himself said in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 about the Thessalonian church's response to his preaching, namely that they "accepted it not as the word of men"—though it was manifestly his and bore all the marks of his personality as someone living within the first-century Mediterranean world and having his roots in Second Temple Judaism—"but as what it truly is, the word of God." Ultimately and properly considered, Paul's teaching is God's word. This, I take it, is not just a pious but largely irrelevant patina on our work that may be safely stripped away and effectively ignored as we go about interpreting him. Rather, at stake here is a matter of sober, scientific, methodological, academic necessity for studying Paul—what, as he himself says, is "truly" (*alēthōs*) the case.

That Paul's teaching is God's word is true formally as well as materially—true not just in its content, but also in its oral and written *form*. To deny that the text is God's word, or to allege some factor of discontinuity between the text and God's word, or to find a tension between the text as a linguistic phenomenon, of purely human origin and so questionable and fallible, and a message with an allegedly divine referent dialectically embedded in that text, is to construe Paul in a modern or postmodern way that he would simply find foreign. At least that is so if we are to take 2 Timothy 3:16 and similar passages at face value.<sup>11</sup>

11. The passive verbal adjective *theopneustos*, "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), predicates of the documents that constitute "Scripture" a permanent, enduring quality resulting from their origin, and is best understood as pointing to God as their primary and ultimate author. This conclusion has been firmly established in the works of B. B. Warfield, not to mention others. Efforts made to evade it, such as that made recently by C. D. Allert (*A High View of Scripture?* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 153–56), who cites and attempts to refute Warfield, remain quite unsuccessful; see especially Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ): Presbyterian

A couple of implications of the word-of-God character of Paul's teaching may be noted here. One important methodological consideration is that, with all due attention being given to his immediate historical context, including relevant extracanonical texts and materials, in interpreting his letters the context that is not only *primary* but *privileged* is the *canonical* context. For any given passage in Paul, the ultimately controlling context is the expanding horizon of contexts provided by the rest of Scripture, beginning with his letters as a whole. This basic hermeneutical stance, it bears stressing, is not bound up with some abstract Scripture principle, as it is wont to be dismissed by some, but is anchored in a consideration already noted, the *redemptive-historical* factor. Paul's letters have their origin, their integral place, and their intended function within the organically unfolding history of revelation, and Scripture as a whole, the canon, with its own production being a part of that history, provides our only normative access to it.

A key part of Paul's theology as God's word is its *essential clarity*. As the Reformation was granted to recognize and confess regarding Scripture as a whole, the assumption, indeed the conviction, throughout this book is that for the church Paul's teaching in its central elements is clear. Just what some of those "central elements" are will occupy us later.

The primary sources for understanding and elaborating Paul's theology I take to be all thirteen of his New Testament letters and also pertinent materials from the latter half of Acts, in particular his speeches and other discourse material recorded there.

### ***The Problem of Interpreting Paul***

The essential clarity of Paul's theology must not be affirmed at the expense of ignoring a problem. A couple of rather arrest-

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and Reformed, 1948), 245–296 ("The God-Inspired Scripture"), as well as other pertinent chapters in that volume.

ing quotes point up the problem. Albert Schweitzer recounts a remark of Franz Overbeck to Adolf von Harnack, made one day when these two late-nineteenth-century New Testament scholars were together: “No one has ever understood Paul and the only one who did understand him, Marcion, misunderstood him.”<sup>12</sup> More recently, Herman Ridderbos has surmised that in Paul’s account of his ministry in 2 Corinthians II:23–26, we have an apt description of the history of the interpretation of Paul: “beaten times without number, often in danger of death . . . shipwrecked three times . . . in danger from my nation, in danger from the Gentiles . . . in danger among false brothers”!<sup>13</sup>

The issue here is not to what extent these and similar statements are warranted. Certainly Overbeck’s paradoxically expressed pessimism is not. But such assessments do point up an undeniable state of affairs: the problematic nature of Pauline interpretation down through the history of the church to the present. In fact, the New Testament itself anticipates this state of affairs. This not only points up the antiquity of the problem of interpreting Paul, but also and more importantly puts it in an explicitly canonical perspective.

The reference, of course, is to the generalization made about Paul’s letters in 2 Peter 3:16: “In all his [Paul’s] letters” (whatever may have been the specific contents of the Pauline corpus circulating at that time) there are “some things that are difficult to understand.” These things, Peter goes on to add, bringing out the dark side of the picture as a permanent warning to the church, “the ignorant and unstable twist, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” Notice, by the way, pertinent to our earlier point about Paul’s theology being God’s word, that this statement is New Testament evidence that already at the time

12. Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 39 n. 1.

13. H. Ridderbos, “Terugblik en uitzicht,” in *De dertiende apostel en het elfde gebod: Paulus in de loop der eeuwen*, ed. G. C. Berkouwer and H. A. Oberman (Kampen: Kok, 1971), 190.

2 Peter was written, Paul's letters as a whole were put on a par with the Old Testament and viewed as Scripture.

Peter's assertion of the overall difficulty in understanding Paul's letters prompts us to ask what constitutes that difficulty. Immediately come to mind all the limitations there are on the side of the interpreter, including the ignorance, sometimes sinful, and the sinful perversity we bring to the text in varying degrees. But Peter seems to have in view something distinct from the culpable distortion he mentions, an *inherent* difficulty, a difficulty intrinsic to the text. When we ask about that difficulty, no doubt more than one factor is involved.

For instance, according to 1 Corinthians 2:10, in a context where Paul brings into view considerations basic to his ministry as a whole, he says that the revelation granted to him through the Spirit involves "the deep things of God." The central clarity of Paul's teaching flows out of, as it has its roots in, the impenetrable depths of God's incomprehensibility. For example, the doxology at the end of Romans II, arresting as it is edifying, is an expression of that incomprehensibility.

To be noted here as well for subsequent generations of the church, like ours, is the difficulty bound up with what at first glance is a much more prosaic factor, the "occasional" nature of his writings already noted. Paul does not provide us with doctrinal treatises, but with letters—genuine letters directed to concrete conditions and problems in specific church situations. A notably pastoral, "practical" concern is always present, even in those sections of Romans where doctrinal reflection is most apparent. On balance, we may say, Paul's letters present, even in their occasional and often doxological character, a unified structure of thought, a coherence of theological thinking.

So a real difficulty in interpreting Paul is that in his writings we encounter a thinker of undeniably reflective and constructive genius with a decidedly doctrinal bent, but only as

he directs himself to specific church situations and problems and in doing so expresses himself in a way that is largely non-formalized theologically, in a nonsystematic or nontopical format. Paul is a theologian who is accessible only through his letters and records of his sermons. Although his letters are not theological treatises, in them we undeniably encounter Paul the theologian.

Another factor compounding the difficulty, especially for us at the historical distance we are, is that some of his letters are written largely against the background of a good deal of previous personal contact and extensive instruction now unknown to us in detail. A good example of this is his teaching on “the man of sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, where in verse 6 he writes, “Now you know.” What Paul seems to assume as more or less self-evident to his original readers has left subsequent generations of interpreters down to the present thoroughly perplexed and unable to arrive at any real consensus, a state of affairs that prompts from Vos, toward the end of his own lengthy treatment of the passage, the wry comment to the effect that we will have to wait on its fulfillment for its best and definitive exegesis!<sup>14</sup>

An analogy I have found useful over the years is to compare Paul’s letters to the visible portion of an iceberg. What projects above the surface is but a small fraction of the total mass, which remains largely submerged, so that what is taken in, particularly at a first glance, may prove deceptive. This point is made less pictorially by the hermeneutical principle expressed in chapter 1, section 6 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, that the teaching of Scripture is not only its express statements but also what follows “by good and necessary consequence.” Particularly in the case of Paul, we are going to make full sense of his letters as a whole, of his theology, only as we are prepared to wrestle with matters of “good and necessary consequence” and with

14. Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 133.

the sometimes nettlesome questions that emerge. This state of affairs in large part makes the extensive interpretation of Paul the arduous, even precarious, enterprise to which 2 Peter 3:16 alerts us.

With this factor of difficulty highlighted, an important caveat needs to be made. We must not stress difficulty to the point of losing sight of the more basic clarity to be recognized and affirmed. After all, Peter did not say that “all things” in Paul are “difficult to understand,” but only “some things.”

### *Paul as a Theologian*

All along I have been speaking of Paul’s “theology” and referring to him as a “theologian.” For many, that will not be a problem, but this way of speaking warrants some clarification, since for some it is questionable at best. The perceived danger here is that we will, as it could be put, “drag Paul down to our level.” Viewing Paul as a theologian suggests that he and his theology have at the most only relative authority, that however else we might want to privilege him, his theology has no more authority in principle than any other. This worry is by no means an imaginary one. That is clear from historical-critical approaches to Paul over the past century and a half, particularly as one surveys major works on his theology from F. C. Baur (1845) to James Dunn (1998).<sup>15</sup>

What offsets this leveling danger is appreciating Paul’s identity as an apostle, at least if we understand apostleship properly. In accordance with our earlier comments on his teaching being God’s word, we must not lose sight of the formal authoritative significance of his apostolic identity. Careful exegesis, which I omit here, will show that an apostle of Christ is someone uniquely authorized by the exalted Christ to speak authorita-

15. Baur appears to have the distinction of being the first to publish a theology of Paul.

tively for him. Regarding this authority, the apostle is as Christ himself.<sup>16</sup>

Paul the theologian, then, is Paul the apostle. That points to the God-breathed origin and authority of his teaching, its character as the word of God. It highlights the radical, categorical difference there is between his theology and post-apostolic theology. His teaching, along with the teaching of the other biblical writers, is Spirit-borne, canonical, and foundational. All subsequent theology, including ours, ought to be Spirit-led (Rom. 8:14), but, unlike Paul's, it is not Spirit-borne (2 Peter 1:21). Ours is noncanonical, no more than derivative of his.

But with that said, the appropriateness and value of approaching Paul as a theologian should not be missed. Again, that value resides in the redemptive-historical factor already noted. With the exception of the situation before the fall, about which we know relatively little since the biblical record concerning it is sparse, all verbal revelation, including Paul's teaching, is a function of the history of redemption and situated at some point in that history. In the case of Paul, like that of the other New Testament writers, redemptive history has reached its climactic endpoint in the death and resurrection of Christ and awaits his return.

Along with the important differences between Paul's theology and ours, there is much that we have in common. In terms of the history of redemption, we share with him and the other New Testament writers a common redemptive-historical *focus* and, further, we do so within a common redemptive-historical *context*. In this regard, 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 is particularly instructive. There Paul speaks of how that church “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for

16. Out of the vast body of literature on apostolicity in the NT, including apostolic authority, see esp. H. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (trans. H. De Jongste; rev. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), 1–52.

his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”

Here is a perennial word to the church, good for all times and places until Jesus comes again, one that captures as well as any the basic identity of the church. Christians are those who have renounced, however imperfectly, every idolatry for the service of the living and true God, a service that is bracketed and fundamentally conditioned by Christ’s death and resurrection and his return. So our theologizing, too, including our treatment of Paul’s theology, ought to be seen as just one aspect of this redemptive-historically conditioned “waiting service.” This, I take it, is one factor that protects our theology from undue abstractions and promotes its true concreteness. This, if you will, is its ultimate “contextualization.”

At issue here, in viewing Paul as a theologian, is whether Scripture, as canon, not only provides the content of our theology, but also contributes to our theological method—how we do theology. If our concern is to uphold “the system of doctrine” “taught” or “contained” in the Bible,<sup>17</sup> then especially in our systematic theology we ought to be alert to the ways in which that systematizing and integrating task is in evidence in the New Testament itself and begins to surface there.

In underlining this approach to our theological task, I do not understand myself to be saying anything other than what is affirmed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6, namely that the teaching of Scripture is not only what is “expressly set down in Scripture,” but also what “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” However, if there is a plus involved in what we are saying here, it is that recognizing continuity, particularly redemptive-historical continuity, between ourselves and the New Testament writers, especially Paul, not only in the content but also in the

17. The reference is to the formula for subscription to the Westminster Standards used in a number of denominations and institutions.

method of our theology, may contribute to ensuring that “the good and necessary consequence . . . deduced” is truly good and necessary.

### ***Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology***

Viewing Paul as a theologian in the way we have viewed him prompts a couple of observations on the much-mooted issue of the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology. First, in exploring Paul’s theology as an aspect of doing biblical theology, we should be aware that we are involved as well in doing systematic theology, or better, that our biblical-theological explorations will inevitably have systematic-theological repercussions. This is so because systematic theology ought to be radically nonspeculative in the sense that its very existence depends upon sound biblical interpretation. Exegesis is its lifeblood, so that the method of systematic theology is fundamentally exegetical.

Accordingly, systematic theology may be aptly characterized as large-scale plot analysis, that is, the presentation under various topics (*loci*), appropriate to the biblical metanarrative (God, creation, man, sin, salvation, the church, etc.), of the *unified* teaching of the Bible as a *whole*. Its distinguishing concern is to bring out and highlight the harmony, the concordant unity, that there is in the biblical documents in their historical variety and diversity. That God himself is the primary author of these documents guarantees that, despite remaining questions and uncertainties that we will always have, Scripture does have such harmony.

Biblical theology, then, is indispensable for providing and regulating the exegesis on which systematic theology is staked and from which it derives. So it is quite wrongheaded to view biblical theology, as do many (primarily those with a historical-critical orientation), as a purely historical-descriptive task, and systematic theology as a contemporary-normative statement

of Christian truth, with each discipline going its separate way, more or less independently. The result is a dichotomization or even polarization between them that continues to be widespread at present. No less polarizing in its effect and bound to lead to hopelessly confused results is the similar approach that sees biblical theology as concerned more or less exclusively with the “humanity,” or human side, of the Bible, with its historically rooted origin and contents, while leaving requisite concern with the divine side to systematic theology.

Instead, there should be a back-and-forth, reciprocal relationship between the two in their common concern with Scripture as God-breathed and normative. Specifically, to be involved with Pauline theology is to be engaged at least implicitly in systematic theology, within a common redemptive-historical context and with the same redemptive-historical focus. This is particularly unavoidable in the case of Paul. The closely intertwined histories of theology and Pauline interpretation, especially since the Reformation, make that reciprocity clear enough. For this reason, it will be appropriate at points throughout this volume to orient our treatment of Paul and relate our findings to developments in the history of theology.

Second, keeping in mind what has already been said above about the canonical context as privileged in interpreting Paul, it is essential for the biblical-theological task, and so for systematic theology, that Paul’s theology not be studied in isolation or as an end in itself. It needs always to be developed, reciprocally, along with and in the light of other New Testament, as well as Old Testament, teaching. This canonical control is, it seems to me, a consideration not sufficiently appreciated, typically by approaches associated with the New Perspective on Paul. One can become so absorbed with Paul’s theology on its own terms and in its own immediate historical context, that it becomes unduly detached from its canonical context and its divinely intended function within Scripture as a whole.

In this regard, the negative example of Marcion, already in the second century, serves as a permanent warning to the church against a one-sided “Paulinism.” A tendentious appeal to Paul in support of a distortion of the gospel is by no means an imaginary danger. Not without reason, Tertullian was reportedly prompted to call Paul *hereticorum apostolos*, “the apostle of heretics.” And subsequent instances of misguided appeals to Paul throughout church history bear out the aptness of this description.

With these general reflections on the study of Paul in mind, we may now begin to consider his teaching on the order of salvation—on the individual Christian’s appropriation of salvation.