

Pauline Spirituality

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Other than Jesus Christ, worshipped and served as Lord over all, no other person has had greater impact upon Christian spirituality than St. Paul.¹ Paul is hailed as the first and greatest of all theologians. His influence and the writings have shaped Christianity as the writings and theology of no other single individual have. Paul is celebrated as the fifth evangelist, writer, liberator pastor, theologian and a friend. What do we learn from Paul on spirituality? What was it like? In the apostle we meet a living spirituality worth investigating. No figure in early Christianity stands out in sharper relief than Paul.² There are three missionary journeys of Paul mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 13:4-14:26; 15:40-18:22; 18:23-20:38). There are two other journeys of the apostle. The one is captivity journey which takes Paul to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:31) and thus the Word reaches Rome, to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). The other journey is spiritual journey, the interior journey of Paul, the 'Pilgrims Progress' which he followed in the course of 30 years or so of missionary career.³

Source of Pauline Spirituality

It is a well known fact that there are more theological commentaries on Paul's letters and books than his life. Theology is not spirituality. Both cannot be identified. We have no direct access to Paul's spirituality. We have his letters but his letters are theological treatise and most of them deal with the problems faced by the community to which he wrote the letter. However, they are letters and as such we can see the mind and experience of Paul in them. The letters of Paul are very personal and through his letters, we can see his life and hear his voice.⁴

The Starting Point: The Call of the Apostle Paul

The starting point of the spirituality is Paul's call. The very fact Luke narrates the call of Paul three times in the Acts (Acts 9:1-20; 22:1-21; 26:2-23) shows the importance of the event to the early Christian community. The narrative is quite detailed, though it is somewhat dramatized.

The question often asked is whether to consider the experience of Paul as a call or conversion.⁵ Most of the scholars accept it as a call. The event on the way to Damascus is not only a turning point in the life of Paul but this experience was the foundation for practically every aspect of his theology. However, it is important to know how Paul considered this experience on the way to Damascus and what impact it had on his life. Paul in his letter to Galatians writes how he looked at this event. In the letter to Galatians Paul writes: "But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being" (Gal 1:15-16). This verse reminds us of the two celebrated Old Testament vocations, Servant of Yahweh and Jeremiah. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ...I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of earth" (Is 49:1.6).

As in the case of Servant of Yahweh and Jeremiah, Paul saw his call as the working out of a plan devised much earlier by God. The goal of that plan was the extension of God's grace to the gentiles. Thus he was called precisely in order to bring the good news to those who did not belong to the Jewish people.⁶ This he refers also in Rom 1:1 saying, "Paul a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle set apart for the Gospel of God."

The effect of his experience on his way to Damascus is more important. Paul tells about it in the letter to Philippians. "Yet whatever

gain I had these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:7-8). The Jewish piety is contrasted to life in Jesus and Paul says how he considered all rubbish. It has been rubbish what was valued by Paul once very much, using the image of profit and loss account to the advantages he enjoyed as a Jew with those that have come to him as a result of his being with Christ. All that he cherished, valued are considered as a loss and no longer valuable and he has willingly abandoned the things he no longer values. The things that he prizes are knowing Christ and being found in him.⁷

Another text that tells about the effect of event on the way to Damascus is found in 1 Tim 1:12-16. Though the Pauline authorship of Pastoral letters is questioned, the contrast between Paul's former life and his life in Christ is strongly emphasized in this passage. The call of Paul is the starting point of his spirituality. We shall see certain aspects of his spirituality.

Christ-Centered Spirituality

If Paul's mission begins with his encounter with the risen Lord, it continues in an intimate union with the Lord. The two expressions of Paul "in Christ" and "with Christ" show the close relation of Paul with Christ. Paul's spirituality was centered on Christ. That is what made him to say, "It is no longer I but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). The phrase "in Christ" expressed, "the most intimate possible fellowship of Christian with the living Christ, Christ being conceived as a kind of atmosphere in which Christians lived. "In Christ" expresses the intense feeling of personal belonging and of spiritual relationship with the exalted Lord."⁸ The phrase "in Christ" occurs 83 times in Pauline corpus and it is distinctively Pauline. Outside Paul's letters it occurs only in the first letter of Peter.

St. Paul uses "*in Christo*" first to refer to the redemptive act which has happened in Christ. Second, it expresses that believers are

living in Christ. Third, Paul exhorts his readers to adopt a particular attitude or course of action. Paul sees his whole life as a Christian. Its source, its identity and its responsibilities could be summed up in this phrase. This phrase is not merely a belief about Christ, but an experience understood as that of risen and living Christ.⁹

Equally striking expression in Pauline letters is “with Christ”. It denotes “in company of”. It refers predominantly future reference to be with Christ in heaven (Phil 1:23; 1 Thess 4:17); to appear with Christ in glory at Parousia (Col 3:4; 1 Thess 4:14).

Role of the Holy Spirit ✓

Paul brings out the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian life by his remarkable saying, “You are in Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom 5:8-9). In the above verse Paul provides us with a definition of a Christian, and the definition in terms of Spirit. It is having the Spirit which defines and determines as someone as being in Christ. A Christian without Spirit would have been a contradiction in terms for Paul. The implication is clear: in Paul’s understanding, it was by receiving the Spirit that one became Christian.¹⁰

Paul characterizes God as the one who gives his Holy Spirit (1 Thess 4:8). The Spirit of God dwells in the believers (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). They have been washed, sanctified and justified in the Spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11) and now are united to the Lord as one Spirit (1 Cor 6:17). It is the reception of the Spirit which constitutes each one of them as members of the body of Christ. The Christian experiences the indwelling of the Spirit. The experience of Spirit makes the believer to say that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor 12:3). It makes them to share in Jesus’ own prayer of sonship “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15-16). The fruits of the Spirit are enumerated in Gal 5:22-23.

Paul and Prayer

After the call, Paul is introduced as a man of prayer. When Lord appeared to Ananias asking him to go and meet Paul, Lord said

to him, "...Look for a man of Tarsus, named Saul. At this moment he is praying" (Acts 9:11). As a Jew and later as a Rabbi, Paul must have been steeped in prayer.

In the life of Jesus, we see that Jesus chose places to engage himself in prayer. He withdrew to a lonely place to pray (Mk 1:32-35; 6:31ff). However, Paul did not go to remote place to pray. Jesus preached in the countryside, whereas Paul was a man of cities.¹¹

Paul led a life of prayer. Frequently, in his letters he shares his prayer with congregation, from the initial thanksgiving. For example, in the letter to the Romans Paul begins the letter, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world... without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers" (Rom 1:8-9). His teaching leads to and ends in prayer: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways..." (Rom 11:33-36).

Paul's prayer was constant. "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (Eph 1:16). "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you. While Paul was praying for the congregation, he was asking them to pray for him, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God" (Rom 15:30) (cf. Eph 6:18-20; Col 4:2-4; 2 Thess 3:1).

Thus we see Paul's spirituality is to keep awake and to be steadfastly alert and active in fervent prayer at all times. While speaking about prayer Paul uses the expression 'always' 'at all times' with all perseverance' and 'watchful'.

Paul was praying in all circumstances and in all places; on his travels (2 Cor 11:23), in the house where he was a guest with Lydia, Jason or Aquila (Acts 16:15;17:7;18:3.7). He was praying when he was writing letters (Gal 6:11). He was praying when he was in prison (Acts 16:25). Both on and between the lines of his letters Paul is

Here we see a great difference between Jesus and Paul. Jesus was called a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He was called a glutton and drunkard (Mt 11:19). Jesus accepted the invitation for a meal especially from the marginalized, poor, sinners and tax collectors whereas such friendship and cordiality was not found in the life of Paul. Paul seems to be an ascetic and austere Person. He subdued his body (1 Cor 9: 24-27). Jesus was fond of nature. He was found in seashore and on the mountains. He enjoyed the nature, and observed the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Paul does not seem to be absorbed by nature.

Jesus had friends. He was taken care of by women (Lk 8:1-3). He was a friend of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. His mother and brothers were with Him. Paul seems to be a lonely person. No friend of Paul is mentioned in his letters or in the Acts of the Apostles.

Perhaps, because of the lack of a family of his own and of friends, Paul's love affection and concern were concentrated on the community. Members of the church he established became his spiritual children. His co-workers were his brothers whom he mentions several times in his letters. Paul was an apostle and able organizer of the congregations but apparently with few close friends.¹⁷ Perhaps that helped Paul to travel far and wide in the Roman empire and preach the Word of God.

Ideal Pastor

Paul was a lover of his community. He considered it as his first and foremost responsibility to take care of the members of his community. All his efforts and labours were oriented towards the spiritual welfare of his people. His love for his flock and his dedication to his responsibility is well brought out in his farewell speech at Miletus, while taking leave of the elders (Acts 20:18-35).

Many farewell discourses are recorded in the Old Testament: Jacob's farewell speech to his sons in Genesis 49th chapter; Moses' farewell speech in the book of Deuteronomy; Joshua's farewell speech in 23rd and 24th chapters of Joshua. The farewell speeches of Saul,

David, Tobias and Mathathias are found in the Old Testament. The New Testament gives only two farewell speeches: those of Jesus and Paul. Thus it emphasizes the importance of those two figures.¹⁸

The farewell speech of Paul at Miletus brings out his pastoral zeal, his attachment to the community and concern for their welfare. Paul's ministry at Ephesus lasted for 3 years (Acts 20:31). Referring to his ministry Paul says: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia" (Acts 20:18). Paul refers not about himself but what others experienced of him. He was one with his community, he was familiar to them. His ministry can be summed up like this: he is someone who had been among the people, one whom people knew and could bear witness to. His presence among his flock was more important than the words he spoke.¹⁹

In his pastoral ministry, Paul served the Lord in humility. In his letters, he called himself servant of Jesus Christ (Col 1:1). First and foremost he was sent by Christ and not the community and hence Paul understood his service first and foremost as service to Jesus Christ.

Paul says he did his ministry in tears: "Serving the Lord with all humility and tears, enduring the trials that came to me" (Acts 20:19). In his letter to Corinthians he writes, "I have written to you at a time of great sorrow, in anguish of heart and with many tears" (2 Cor 2:4). He exercised his ministry with emotional intensity.²⁰

Paul served the Lord in all humility. He emphasizes humility as a fundamental pastoral attitude. Humility means insignificance, abjection, littleness and worthlessness. Paul showed his humility in his behaviour towards others. The social aspect of humility is shown in being undemanding for oneself and concerned for others (cf. 1 Thess 2:4-8).

Personally Paul was humble making simple judgement on himself: "I am the least of the apostles. I am not worthy to be called an apostle" (1 Cor 15:9).

Paul understood the theological aspect of humility. He had a deep realization of his true worth before God. He had a strong sense of God as Creator, Lord, Master, and a merciful giver of all good things. That is why he describes humility as the basic attitude of one who serves the Lord as the Lord had served.²¹

Paul and Suffering

Suffering has a great role in the spirituality of Paul. He had to endure great suffering and hardship in his ministry. For Paul, suffering is the true sign of genuine apostolate. It is true that prodigies and signs of the Spirit were signs of apostolate. Paul made prodigies like making the lame to walk and raising the dead (Acts 14:5-18; 20:7-12) but they do not constitute major aspect of Paul's ministry. External signs are not the only marks of genuine apostolate.²²

Paul says that the suffering is the hall mark of true apostolate. "Are they ministers of Christ?... I am better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings and often near death" (2 Cor 11:23). Then Paul enumerates all the sufferings he underwent during his ministry (2 Cor 11:24-29).

We have to see how Paul considered his suffering. Paul gives a new meaning to his suffering. Paul sees his suffering as a prolongation of the sacrifice of Christ. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, "... always carrying in the body of the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). It is the only place where Paul uses the Greek word *Nekrosis* (death). 2 Cor 4:7-15 tells us that the apostolic suffering and fragility are not just human pains caused by oppression and persecution. The dying Jesus himself is present in it, visible in the body of the apostle.²³ The daily experience of life and deliverance means also for Paul as encouragement to continue and endurance.²⁴ Paul sees his suffering as a participation in and a representation of the passion Jesus.²⁵ 2 Cor 4:10-11 is an extraordinary statement, summit of 2 Corinthians and the most profound insight ever articulated as to the meaning of suffering

and nature of authentic ministry. Paul saw his ministry as a dying which he identified with that of Jesus.²⁶

Conclusion

Paul had not written any treaty on spirituality like St. Francis de Sales or Tanquerry. We have his letters. Paul's spirituality is found in his ways of living, piety and praxis. Paul's spiritual life begins with his call, on his way to Damascus. His experience of the Risen Lord had a deep impression on him. His spirituality is Christo-centric spirituality, his whole life was "in Christ." That made Paul to say "Christ lives in me." In Paul we meet a living spirituality inspiring and worth imitating.

(Footnotes)

¹ R.P. Maye, "Spirituality" *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (ed.) G.F.Hawthorne and R.P.Martin, (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993) 907.

² J.D.G.Dunn, *Jesus and Spirit: A Study Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians*, Grand Rapids, Westmister, 1997) 199.

³ L.Legrand, "The Spiritual Journey of Paul," *The Word is Near You* (ed.), A.A.Xavier's Pontifical Institute, 2002) 476.

⁴ N.A. Rosaeg, "The Spirituality of Paul," *Studies in Spirituality* (14) 2002. 49.

⁵ D.G.Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* (London: Continuum, 2000) 26-27. "There has been discussion in recent years about whether or not this experience can appropriately be labeled a 'conversion'. Kreister Stendhall argued that we should speak not of Paul's conversion but rather of his call. Serving the one and the same God, Paul receives a new and special calling in God's service....Rather than being 'converted' Paul was called to the specific task – made clear to him by his experience of the risen Lord of apostleship to the Gentiles. However, the Jewish scholar Alan Segal insists that Paul was both converted and called."

⁶ J.Murphy O' Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1996)79-80.

⁷ M.D.Hooker, "Philippians," *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. XI (Nashville Abingdon Press, 2000) 526-527.

⁸ J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1998) 391.f.n.4. "It was Deissman who brought the formula 'in Christ' to the centre stage. Just as the air of life, which we breathe is 'in us' and fills us, and yet we at the same time live in this air and breathe it, so it is also with the Christ intimacy of the Apostle Paul Christ in him, and he in Christ."

⁹ J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 396-400.

¹⁰ J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 423.

- ¹¹ W.A.Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social Setting of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 9.
- ¹² N.A. Rosaeg, "The Spirituality of Paul," 60.
- ¹³ N.A. Rosaeg, "The Spirituality of Paul," 61.
- ¹⁴ J.M. O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 86. Jerome Murphy O'Connor is of the opinion that there was no norm for rabbi to learn a trade. Rabbis practicing a trade dates from A.D.70 period when condition in Jerusalem changed radically for worse. Then rabbis had to work in order to survive, and necessity was transferred into virtue, "All study of Law without labour comes to naught at the last and brings sin in its train (m. Abboth 2.2).
- ¹⁵ J.M. O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 87.
- ¹⁶ N.A. Rosaeg, "The Spirituality of Paul," 75.
- ¹⁷ N.A. Rosaeg, "The Spirituality of Paul," 75.
- ¹⁸ Carlo M. Martini, *The Testimony of St. Paul* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1983) 51.
- ¹⁹ Carlo M. Martini, *The Testimony of St. Paul*, 52.
- ²⁰ Carlo M. Martini, *The Testimony of St. Paul*, 54-55.
- ²¹ Carlo M. Martini, *The Testimony of St. Paul*, 59.
- ²² L.Legrand, "The Spiritual Journey of Paul," 480-481.
- ²³ J.Lambrecht, "The Nekrosis of Jesus: Ministry and Suffering in 2 Cor 4:7-15" *L'Apotre Paul, Personalite, Style* (Leuven: University Press, 1986) 120ff. Nekrosis means "dying", "a process of wasting", "putting to death." As a minister, Paul thus carries Jesus dying in his body.
- ²⁴ J.Lambrecht, "The Nekrosis of Jesus: Ministry and Suffering in 2 Cor 4:7-15," 141.
- ²⁵ G.Soaes-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Paul" *Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action*, edited by S.Kuthiralkattil, (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2003) 181.
- ²⁶ J.M. O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 86-87.