

# The Year of Faith: Paul's Strategy of Evangelisation

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## Introduction

The year-and-a-bit from October 2012 (the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council) to the feast of Christ the King in November 2013, has been declared a Year of Faith by the Pope, with the particular aim of underlining the importance of preaching the gospel to a world that seems largely indifferent to it. It seems good, therefore, to inspect the 'gospelling' of one of the most determined preachers in the early Church, namely St Paul, who proudly proclaimed himself the 'Apostle of the Gentiles'.<sup>1</sup> In this short essay I should like to argue that nothing was more important for Paul than sharing the 'good news' about his beloved Jesus, and that no price was too high for him to pay in the execution of that task.<sup>2</sup> Paul's enthusiasm may in turn serve as a model and as a stimulus for our own evangelising efforts.

## Where was Paul coming from?

To understand Paul, we need to know that he is the heir to three basic narratives, three cultural locations, or overlapping 'worlds', in which he was at home, but with regard to each of which he had reservations,<sup>3</sup> namely Second Temple Judaism, Hellenistic culture, and the Roman Empire. Paul remained a citizen of all three of these worlds, and we need to hear all three of their narratives if we are to grasp him in his full reality. In particular, we have to grasp that Paul was not a 'convert from Judaism'; despite his remark in Galatians 1:13 about 'my former way of life in Judaism', he is still telling the story of God and the People of God

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 11:13

<sup>2</sup> See 2 Corinthians 1:8, for example.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful account of these three worlds, see N. T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK., 2005), pp. 3-13

in which he grew up, but with two ‘added ingredients’. The ingredients were, first, that God had unmistakably raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, which carried the uncomfortable implication that after all the Jesus-movement, what would later be dismissively called ‘Christians’ (that is to say, those Jews who were foolish enough to believe that the Messiah had come), was correct in naming Jesus as God’s Anointed One. Secondly, Paul, along with, indeed, the whole Jesus-movement, was driven to capture the reality of Jesus by using of him language that had been hitherto reserved only for God. We are so accustomed to this language now that we no longer recognise what a shock it was for them.

We need to bear these three worlds in mind, and Paul’s reservations about each of them, as well as the difference that his encounter with Jesus had made, as we turn now to consider Paul’s attitude to the gospel.

### **How did Paul understand the gospel?**

In this section, we shall look first at what Paul thought was the heart of the message, then at the imperative that he felt was upon him to preach the gospel, and some images that he uses to convey how he regarded his ‘gospelling’, and finally we shall consider what you might call the ‘shape’ of his apostolic activity.

What was the heart of Paul’s message? In a passage that is sometimes described as the ‘summary’ of his gospel<sup>4</sup> he describes it as ‘the power of God, leading to salvation for all those who believe, Jew first and then non-Jew. For in it, God’s righteousness is revealed, from belief to belief, as it is written, “the just shall live from belief”.’ Now we must always remember with Paul that when we are reading his letters, we are hearing, as is often remarked, just ‘one side of the telephone conversation’, even in the Letter to the Romans, where he is on something of a diplomatic exercise, trying to win over the benevolence of his hearers. But we should notice the word ‘power’ here, implying that there is something tangible about the faith, and that it has to do with ‘salvation’, a wide-ranging term that means at least rescuing human beings from all the alien forces that loom over them. We should also observe (and this is important for the argument of Romans) that it is first for the Jew and then for the non-Jew. Paul’s gospel is that of the old story of God and the People of God which is unfolded in what we call the ‘Old Testament’, but with a new angle, in that it has to do with Jesus, and also with a personal commitment to

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:16-17; all translations in this essay are by the author.

which Paul gives the name of ‘faith’, or, as I have translated it above, ‘belief’. Neither word works perfectly, but the content is that of a personal commitment to Jesus and to God, rather than a belief in certain propositions. If that is so, then anyone, not just members of the historical People of God, can commit themselves in this way.

There is another passage where Paul is a little more explicit about what he sees as the heart of the gospel. It comes near the end of 1 Corinthians, and many scholars<sup>5</sup> regard it as the climax of that remarkable letter; it comes here, apparently, because some of those Corinthians, who were always a bit unpredictable in their reactions, were in great doubt about whether there could possibly be a resurrection from the dead. This is how Paul starts the argument (1 Corinthians 15:1-8):

I am making known to you, brothers and sisters, the gospel that I gospelled you, which you received, on which you take your stand, through which you are being saved, in what terms I gospelled you – unless, of course, the faith that you came to was pointless.

For I handed down to you in the first place, what I had also received, that Christ

*died* for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures

and that *he was buried*

and that *he was raised* on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures,

and that *he appeared* to Kephas, and then to the Twelve,

then he appeared to upwards of five hundred brothers and sisters at once, of whom the majority remain to the present day, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to Jacob, then to all the apostles.

Last of all, as though to an abortion, he appeared also to me...

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<sup>5</sup> See K. Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (Wipf and Stock, 2003), p. 11, and A. Thisleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 1169-1178.

The way Paul structures this makes it clear that Resurrection (and its implications for what God is doing in our world) is central in his evangelisation. Some call this the ‘gospel of four verbs’ (printed here in *bold italics*); and we should notice that for Paul Jesus’ death is important, and that it was (he does not explain how) ‘for our sins’, but also, in a phrase that reappears in connection with the Resurrection ‘in accordance with the Scriptures’, which means that Paul saw Jesus’ death and resurrection as part of the old story of God and the People of God. And, apparently to counter any notion that Resurrection means nothing more than that ‘Jesus lives on in us’, Paul insists on a number of accessible witnesses, most of whom actually knew Jesus, and therefore that there could be no doubt whatever that the one who had died that brutal death was indeed living, and, in the earliest expression of it that we have, ‘[God] raised Jesus from the dead’.<sup>6</sup> We shall not be faithful to the gospel as Paul understood it, if we do not proclaim the Resurrection.

In addition to this, what you might call the ‘content’ of the message, we should, it seems, have a certain urgency about our preaching. Paul’s view, again in 1 Corinthians, is that it is something that he simply has to do. While defending himself against a slightly unexpected charge, that of not accepting funding from the Corinthians, he roundly (if at times obscurely) asserts (1 Corinthians 9:16-23):

If I gospel, I have nothing to boast about, for an obligation lies upon me: woe to me if I do *not* gospel: if I do it willingly, that’s my reward – but if I do it unwillingly, I’m entrusted with a position of trust.

So: what’s my reward? It is that when I gospel I make the gospel free of charge, so as not to abuse the authority that the gospel gives me.

You see, although I am free in every respect, I made myself a slave, in order to win over most people:

To the Jews I became a Jew, to win over the Jews, to those under the Law, under the Law, in order to win over those under the Law.

To those not-under-the-Law, [I became] like one not-under-the-Law (I wasn’t not-under-the-Law of God, but in-the-Law of Christ), in order to win over those not-under-the-Law.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:10

I became sick to those who were sick, in order to win over the sick – I became all things to everybody, in order that I might be sure of saving everybody. I do everything for the sake of the gospel, in order to have a partnership in it.

What are we to make of this? The context is that, as part of his consideration of the difficult question, raised by the Corinthians, of whether it was permissible to eat food that had been sacrificed to false gods, Paul is offering his own approach as a possible model. Here the point is that he is so animated by the need to preach the gospel of his beloved Jesus that he will do anything, forego any rights, adapt himself to any audience, if it means that the message gets delivered.

At this point it may be illuminating to list some of the images that Paul employs to describe his gospel strategy. Perhaps the most striking is that of the ‘ambassador’, longing for the Corinthians to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20); however he is not the kind of ambassador that is protected by his function, but undergoes appalling sufferings: ‘servants of God, in much endurance, in tribulations, under pressure, in tight corners, getting beaten and imprisoned, in political anarchy, in hard work, staying up all night, and eating nothing...’ (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).<sup>7</sup> Paul would certainly suggest that we should expect our gospel strategy to lead to that sort of thing. Other images he uses are ‘apostle’, or ‘person sent by God/Jesus’.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes he uses priestly or cultic language, to emphasise that it is God’s work that he is doing;<sup>9</sup> when trying to sort out the factions that have grown up at Corinth based on his supporters and those of Apollos, he uses the striking metaphors of ‘gardener’ and ‘builder’ (1 Corinthians 3:6-9b, 9c-15), which powerfully challenge the reader. And, very charmingly, and not at all inaccurately, he sees himself as a loving parent (Philemon 10; 1 Corinthians 4:14-15).

What, then, of the ‘shape’ of his work? If Luke is right about this, his tendency when he arrived in a new city was to go first to the synagogue (e.g. Acts 13:14-43), where the message met with initial success, but was then rejected, so Paul turned to the non-Jews (e.g. Acts 13:44-52), who received the message with some enthusiasm, even if Paul was sometimes a bit nervous at the outset (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). He clearly regularly

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<sup>7</sup> Compare the grim experiences alluded to in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13, and particularly 2 Corinthians 11:23-28.

<sup>8</sup> You find this everywhere in Paul, but perhaps the most striking instance is at Romans 1:1, the proud claim at the top of his most influential letter.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 15:15-16 is the most striking instance.

made quite an impact, even if he was not physically on good form (see Galatians 4:13-15). After that, Paul spends time establishing a community in whichever city it might be: he baptised some people (though he seems a bit confused about it: 1 Corinthians 1:14-16); he worked with others,<sup>10</sup> but prided himself on not being a financial burden to the community,<sup>11</sup> even if he did chivy them about their behaviour.

How precisely he structured the communities is not clear. Only at Philippians 1:1 is there reference to ‘overseers and servants’.<sup>12</sup> There clearly were heads of household, who were structurally important in the communities: Stephanas, for example, at 1 Corinthians 16:15-18, and Gaius at Romans 16:23; for the most part, however, Paul leaves us with the (possibly misleading) impression that the leadership was ‘charismatic’.<sup>13</sup> Certainly he had difficulties keeping some of his communities (especially those feuding Corinthians!) together, and describes himself as having ‘concern for all the churches’ (2 Corinthians 11:28). So he had often to make visits to them, menacingly in the case of the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:18-21), more affably in the case of the Philippians (Philippians 1:27; 2:24). In addition, realistically, Paul had to use emissaries: he could not be everywhere in the Mediterranean world, and so he sends Timothy to Corinth<sup>14</sup> and Timothy and Epaphroditus to Philippi.<sup>15</sup> In addition, of course, and this is what we know Paul for, there are the letters, as a way of being powerfully present to his churches.<sup>16</sup> It seems that Paul dictated, though occasionally he would seize the pen from his amanuensis (Galatians 6:11), which would be another way of making himself present. Certainly the letters are a remarkable way of making himself present, not only to their original addressees, but down the centuries and in translation, to countless Christians on whom Paul can still exercise his powerful spell. It is a remarkable fact that Paul uses the basic shape of letters in the ancient world, which generally took the form of opening greetings, thanksgiving to the gods, the main body of the letter, and finally the closing salutations. Paul, you will find, uses all of these,<sup>17</sup> except that the ‘main body’ is greatly enlarged to deal with

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<sup>10</sup> Silvanus and Timothy at 2 Corinthians 1:19, and Evodia and Syntyche at Philippians 4:3, for example.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:13-18, though he is insistent that he had every right to live off them; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10.

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes translated, a bit tendentiously, as ‘bishops and deacons’.

<sup>13</sup> This may be the implication of Romans 12:4-7 and the long and subtle chapter on ‘the body’, 1 Corinthians 12:1-31.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:16, and he has to warn them to welcome him as is fitting, cf. 16:10-11.

<sup>15</sup> Philippians 2:19-24, 25-30, and there was clearly some ambiguity in their attitude to Epaphroditus.

<sup>16</sup> Galatians 4:20; and see 2 Corinthians 10:10.

<sup>17</sup> Except that in Galatians and 2 Corinthians he is so cross with his correspondents that he cannot bring himself to make a thanksgiving: Galatians 1:6 and 2 Corinthians 1:3.

various situations that have arisen in the group he is addressing since he was last there. In the Letter to the Romans, one of Paul's more tactful exercises, since he is probably dealing with a group he does not know and needs to win over, since they have heard bad things about him, the main body is an immense, and at times impenetrable set of arguments about what God has done in Christ (Romans 1–4), the grounds for Christian confidence (Romans 5–8), and the position of his beloved fellow-Jews (Romans 9–11), given that the gospel has gone out to the Gentiles. Basically he is making imaginative and creative use of the media of his day; and their effects abide.

### **Appeal to a Powerful Experience**

This lasting effect may have something to do with the fact that when he preached, something happened. We have already mentioned Romans 1:16 and the characterisation of the gospel as the 'power of God'. We get an echo of this in 1 Thessalonians, possibly Paul's earliest surviving letter, when he says, not without a hint of pride, that 'our gospel did not happen to you just in rhetoric, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much fulfilment' (1 Thessalonians 1:5). He is here clearly appealing to something in the experience shared by himself and those whom he had evangelised; we cannot easily reconstruct it, but that sense of the tangible presence of the Spirit runs throughout the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> Likewise he appeals to the experience of the Galatians (Galatians 3:1):

'you *stupid* Galatians<sup>19</sup>, who has bewitched you,  
before whose eyes Christ was portrayed as having been crucified?'

Paul does not explain precisely what he means, but presumably it was some very powerful experience of which neither he nor they could be in any doubt, as he continues, 'the One who generously supplied you with the Spirit, and who works miracles among you' (Galatians 3:5).<sup>20</sup> Paul makes reference to similar phenomena when trying to get the Corinthians on side, and reminds them of his fearful arrival at Corinth,<sup>21</sup> and how 'my rhetoric and my proclamation was not a matter of clever persuasive rhetoric, but in a demonstration of the Spirit and of power...the power of God' (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Once again, he does not explain what he is referring to, but the Corinthians clearly knew what he was talking about.

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<sup>18</sup> See Acts 4:31 for a powerful instantiation of an experience of this kind.

<sup>19</sup> Some translate this as 'you crazy Celts'.

<sup>20</sup> The word for 'miracles' here also means 'powers'.

<sup>21</sup> From a failure in Athens, according to Acts 18:1.

He repeats the dose in 2 Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12:12), in a somewhat sarcastic context, but once again, he is appealing to something of their shared experience: ‘the signs of the apostle were worked in your midst, with all endurance, signs and portents and miracles<sup>22</sup>’. Clearly things happened when Paul preached his gospel.

### **Conclusion: Preaching the Gospel Today**

What can we draw from the example of this energetic and indefatigable apostle as today we progress through the Year of Faith? It seems to me that there are four conclusions to be drawn.

1. Paul was a child of his time, heir to several overlapping narratives; in his case the three narratives are those of Second Temple Judaism, Hellenistic culture, and the Pax Romana. He had reservations about all of these, but he was also proud of them and worked within them. We are also children of our times and heir to more than one narrative; for example, the writer of these words is Christian and Catholic and a teacher, and one who has worked very largely in what is said to be the secularising atmosphere of Western Europe and North America, but who has also spent many years teaching New Testament in South Africa, which is in several respects a very biblical culture. All these contexts, and those of you, the reader, are the context in which we preach the gospel, and affect the way that we do it.
2. Paul was absolutely obsessed with Jesus, and, it is not too strong to put it in this way, head over heels in love with him. Look at the first ten verses of 1 Corinthians and count the number of times Jesus’ name is mentioned. At times it seems that Paul cannot write a sentence without mentioning the name of his beloved. That must be a model for those who would preach in the Year of Faith, especially if you live in a culture where ‘Jesus’ or ‘Christ’ is a profanity, rather than the name of someone you love.
3. Paul, we have seen, was accustomed to tangible results from his preaching. Extraordinary things happened when he preached the gospel. There are places today, normally among the poor and marginalised, where the same phenomena are detectable. It is

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<sup>22</sup> Or ‘powers’.

proper to ask whether this is also our experience, or how we might allow it to be so, in this year of faith.

4. Finally, Paul, in writing his letters, uses, as we have seen the basic shape offered by the media of his day. He does so in a way that is creative and imaginative, but has also stood the test of time. It is perfectly true that some portions of his letters are obscure to us today, and at times we are baffled as to what is going on. Nevertheless, if you read reflectively through the letters attributed to Paul, even though you may not understand everything he says, something happens to you. That has been the experience of readers down the century, often to their surprise. So the question to us today is: what media is the Spirit calling us to employ, imaginatively and creatively, to proclaim the gospel in this Year of Faith, in terms that will stand the test of time?