

Paul's Inclusive Theology: a Consistent View throughout the Pauline Corpus

Originally published: <http://www.preachingpeace.org/teaching-resources/articles/25-articles-ebooks/articles-by-friends-of-preaching-peace/335-paul%E2%80%99s-inclusive-theology-a-consistent-view-throughout-the-pauline-corporus.html>.

Matthew J. Distefano
www.allsetfree.squarespace.com

© Matthew Distefano 2016

Except for brief quotations, no part of this essay may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the author.

In this essay, I am going to attempt to articulate what I believe is a consistent message contained within four of Paul's letters, namely, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians. I believe that message, although actively disputed throughout Christendom, is that God, through Jesus on the cross, was actively reconciling the world to himself. In simple terms: I believe Paul was what we would now label a Universalist.

THE BACKSTORY

When Saul the persecutor was transformed into the Apostle Paul, it was not a conversion from Judaism to Christianity. Rather, it was a transformation from violent religious zealot¹ to devout follower of the non-violent Lord. Listen to how the book of Acts describes Paul's encounter with the Risen Christ:

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."—Acts 9:1–5

Notice that Jesus does not ask Paul if he wants to be "born again" so that he can be saved. No, that is not the point of this encounter. It was Paul's violence and persecution that was the problem. While Saul was still "breathing threats and murder" against Jesus' disciples, the Risen Christ reveals himself within Paul and addresses the problem of violence—"why do you persecute me?" In all of Paul's eagerness to please God, to follow the Law like the good Pharisee that he was, he missed the point entirely. Yet, it is the apocalypse within him that then leads to a good majority of our Christian theology—for better or for worse it seems, as Paul's inclusivism often gets exchanged in favor of dogmatic exclusivism. I would now like to show why I believe that is an incorrect view.

ROMANS 5: 12 – 19

Romans 5 is the first place I would like to go to discuss Paul's universalism. In verse 12, Paul begins what appears to be a logical sequence. He argues:

1. Adam's sin lead to death.
2. All have sinned.
3. Therefore, death spread to all.

¹ Paul's self-designation in Philippians 3:6.

Then, in verse 14, Paul intentionally makes a parallel between Adam and Christ when he says that Adam is a type of “the one who was to come.” Although Adam and Christ are related, Paul argues in verse 15 that what Christ offers, namely a free gift, is going to be different than what Adam brought to all, which was sin and death. In fact, Paul will go on in that verse to weigh the free gift as “much more” than the sin and death Adam introduced into the world. As I also point out in *All Set Free*, what Paul is doing here is employing a rabbinical hermeneutical method called “ka va-chomer.”² When he does this, it is to place great emphasis on the thing that is “much more,” which, in this case, is the free gift of grace.

I will not fail to mention that also in verse 15; the language to describe those who sinned and those who receive grace is slightly dissimilar to verse 12. Instead of using the more inclusive sounding “all,” Paul uses the word “many,” but again makes a strong parallel between Adam’s sin and Christ’s grace. Sin and death abounds to “many”—which, unless Paul is making a direct contradiction, is in fact all—but how *much more* does the grace of Christ abound to the very same “many”!

In verse 18, Paul concludes his argument by stating, “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” Some may point back to Paul’s use of the word *lambanó* in verse 17 and argue that one must actively “receive” Christ’s grace to have life. However, this interpretation has two problems. First, using that interpretive method, one would be taking a single verse—nay, a single *word*—out of the overall thrust of Paul’s argument from vv. 12 – 19, which is noted above. Second, when Paul uses the Greek verb *lambanó* in conjunction with a divine gift of some sort, the receiver is always passive.³ Furthermore, since none of us, including Paul, cannot truly know something without experiencing it (*tacit* knowledge); let us think back to Paul’s own conversion experience. While on the road to Damascus, what did Paul actively do to *receive* the revelation within him? Or, rather, was it a flash of light that completely knocked him on his rear-end? And what did Paul actively do to *receive* the grace that unshackled his blinded eyes? Or, rather, was it the grace of Christ moving through Ananias that caused the scales to fall? I believe Paul is intentional in his use of the verb *lambanó* and given the evidence—Paul’s first-hand conversion experience *as well as* the self-evident tenor of the argument he presents in vv. 12 – 19—I would have to conclude that throughout this passage, “all means all” . . . all of the time!

ROMANS 11:32

Many Christians—primarily Calvinists—point to a specific passage from Romans to argue in favor of an exclusivist theology. Romans 9:22 reads: “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience objects of wrath that are made for destruction.” However, as Paul continues his argument in chapter 11, notice how these

² Hardin, “Romans 5:12 – 21, an Exegesis,” 2.

³ Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 58.

“objects of wrath” are described. In 11:28, these hardened⁴ Jews (non-elect), who Paul, in verse 26 states will indeed be saved anyway, are described in two ways. First, per the gospel, “they are enemies of God.” *No dispute from anyone there*. However, per “election”—that is to say, per the argument at hand—they are beloved.

Objects of wrath, yet beloved by God and endured with much patience . . .

What is striking then is that in spite of multiple instances, where in which Paul writes that even the “elect” were at one point “vessels of wrath” prepared for destruction, many of those same “elect” still hold to an Augustinian exclusivism, where they are “in” and others are “out.” I believe a bit more humility should be in order, as Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians⁵, goes so far to say that by nature, *all* are “children of wrath.” (Ephesians 2:3) Thus, it is safe to say that all of us, at some point, are both “vessels of wrath” and “vessels of mercy.” In hindsight, and again drawing from Paul’s *tacit* knowledge, Saul certainly could be described as a “vessel of wrath,” while Paul a “vessel of mercy.” Philosopher Thomas Talbott explains how it is our subjective experience that is the lens with which we interpret God:

In Paul’s scheme of things, therefore, the vessels of wrath, no less than the vessels of mercy, are objects of God’s mercy; it is just that, for a person’s own good, God’s purifying love sometimes takes a form that a sinner will typically experience as wrath.⁶

When we refuse to live in love and refuse to live in the spirit of grace and forgiveness, we will experience God as wrath. But, through the context that “God is love,” it is in fact mercy. That is why Paul can conclude Romans 9 – 11 with:

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they now have been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (11:30 – 33)

Indeed, we humans see things through a glass, darkly.

ROMANS 14:11 AND PHILIPPIANS 2:10⁷

⁴ In a Hebrew sense, a “hardening” of one’s heart is thought of in the same way as to “have strength and courage.”

⁵ I am concluding that while Paul may not have written Ephesians, the letter is consistent with a Pauline theology.

⁶ Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 70.

⁷ Philippians 2:10 is part of an early Christian hymn, which includes 2:5 – 11. The passage, in its entirety, reads: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—

I will begin this section by using an extended quote from my book, *All Set Free*. Then, I will expand on the phrase, “Jesus is Lord,” as I feel it is all too often misinterpreted and frankly, downplayed by many Christians. Regarding the passages at hand, I write:

On two occasions, namely Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:10, Paul informs us that all will acknowledge that “Jesus is Lord.” Most Christians contend that all will bow and confess, but some will do so as if *defeated soldiers on a battlefield*. Thus, once God gets his acknowledgment, *then* his enemies can be cast away forever. But is this so?

Paul, in Philippians 2:9 – 11 writes: “For this reason also, God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Jesus, as Lord, is given authority to judge both the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1) (. . .) The judgment of Jesus is rooted in mercy and grace—dying for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8), forgiving while being murdered (Luke 23:34), and returning from the dead with the word of peace (John 20:19 – 23). As judge, Jesus consistently displayed perfect justice—not deeming some guilty and some innocent, but all guilty (Romans 3:23), yet all shown mercy (Romans 11:33).

If you take a look at Romans 14:11 notice that the NASB and NRSV read: “every tongue shall *give praise* [emphasis mine] to God.” The Greek verb translated as “confess” or “give praise” (depending on translation) comes from the Greek verb *exomologeó*, and indeed implies not only “confession,” but a giving of praise and open declaration of Jesus’ lordship. In this case, Paul seems to be arguing that all will openly confess that “Jesus is Lord,” giving praise all the while. Furthermore, if you take a look at the Old Testament passage in which Paul is referring (Isaiah 45:23), you will not notice any contextual evidence that suggests that God will then reject such praise. It seems the presupposed notion that God will yet cast some off into eternal darkness, even after they declare that Jesus as Lord must be read into Romans 14:11.⁸

even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” In *The Jesus Driven Life* (pp. 240 – 41), Michael Hardin displays just how strong a connection is made between Adam and Christ in this passage, which even strengthens the connection Paul makes between the two in Romans 5:12 – 19, as I previously discussed.

⁸ Distefano, *All Set Free*, 106–7.

Now, if we focus on what “Jesus is Lord” really means, we should look at the cultural and historical context because without it, we will fail to see all of the implications of such a claim. We will inevitably reduce that phrase to mean something like: “Jesus is Lord of my life.” However, more accurate and vastly more profound, when the early Christians declared that Jesus is Lord, what they were also saying was that Caesar—who was to be viewed as the “end all and be all”—was not. Instead, Jesus Christ, the one who was brutally murdered and believed to have risen from the dead, was Lord of all, including Caesar himself! You can see why the consequence of not bowing down to the almighty Caesar was persecution and often death. Sadly, the first and second century Christians knew this all too well.

To conclude: it is my opinion that all will confess “Jesus is Lord” and give praise all the while precisely *because* of his mercy and grace. When we see Christ for who he truly is, how could we not confess through and through? Surely, Jesus will rule like a lion, but, unlike any Caesar could ever do, he conquered sin and death like a lamb.⁹ We all should be quite glad because of this! Someday, I have strong convictions that we *all* will be.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:22 – 28

Very similar to Romans 5:18, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:22, makes a parallel between Adam (a man of dust—15:47) and Christ (a man of heaven—15:47). 1 Cor. 15:22 reads: “For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” In vv. 23 – 24, Paul goes on to flesh out the details as to how this will happen when he writes: “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.” Talbott explains this passage in the following manner:

After informing us that “in Christ shall all be made alive,” Paul went on to say, “but each in his own order” (v. 23) It is as if he had in mind the image of a procession and then quickly listed three segments of the procession. At the head of the procession is Christ, the first fruits; behind him are those who belong to Christ at the time of his coming; and behind him are those at the end of the procession, which is the third and final stage of Paul’s “each in his own order.”¹⁰

Now, one could still say that some will remain *not* “in Christ,” and thus *not* be made alive. However, I believe there are two issues with that interpretation. First, one would have to again ignore the strong parallels Paul makes between Adam and Christ in order to believe the “all” that describes the death in Adam is more inclusive than the “all” that describes the life in Christ.

⁹ See Revelation 5:5 – 6. In his vision, John turns around and expects to see the “Lion of the tribe of Judah,” but instead, sees “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.”

¹⁰ Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God*, 61. I will also note that in the footnotes of the NRSV, an alternate translation to “then the end” is “then come the rest.” In other words, “the rest” are included in the “all” that are made alive in v. 22.

Second, when Paul claims that the “last enemy to be destroyed is death,” I believe he is stating that there will someday be nothing—not even death—that will keep anyone from being included “in Christ.”

So, what does Paul mean when he mentions “death”?

When talking about death, Paul does so in two paradoxical sounding ways. First, in one sense, Romans 6:6–7 tells us that we must *die* in order to be freed from sin. Yet, in Romans 7:9 – 10, Paul says that he *died* once sin was revived. In other words, according to Paul, death (to your own fleshy desires) delivers you from sin but (in a spiritual sense) is the consequence of sin. So, when death, the last enemy is destroyed, it is done so in my opinion, for two distinct reasons.

1. The very thing we all need to do in order to live is to die to ourselves. Once we all do this, we no longer need death as a means by which we find life.
2. When we all die to ourselves and indeed find life in Christ, death, the final enemy, will be destroyed because life in Christ is eternal.

Once death is destroyed—that is to say, once the only thing that can keep us from God is done away with—the Son subjects himself to the Father so God “may be all in all.”

Not all in some.

All in all!

COLOSSIANS 1:15 – 20

Like Philippians 2:5 – 11, Colossians 1:15 – 20 is a part of an early Christian hymn. In this passage, Paul again uses strong, inclusive language when describing the scope of Christ’s reign. Similar to 1 Corinthians 15:24, in Colossians 1:16, Paul even includes all “thrones, dominions, rulers, or powers” as subjected to Christ. Even these “powers and principalities¹¹” that put Jesus to death are included in the “all things” that are reconciled to him. (1:20)

And how are “all things” reconciled to God?

Paul tells us “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (1:20). The peace of Jesus is pervasive throughout the gospels and is central to Paul’s gospel as well. During his life, Jesus embodied peace. During his brutal murder, he did not resist his persecutors but rather, uttered the words of forgiveness continually.¹² During his brief appearance after his resurrection, he offered the word

¹¹ See Ephesians 6:12.

¹² Luke 23:34.

of peace—*shalom*.¹³ In consistent fashion, the cosmos are reconciled to God through the peace the Son displayed from the cross.

And because of this, Jesus is given the name above all names¹⁴ and will come to have first place in everything (1:18).

Not some things.

Everything!

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like to close this essay by again placing emphasis on the importance in noticing the consistency in Paul's language throughout the four letters that I commented on. In Romans 5:12 – 19, Christ is paralleled with Adam and in fact, offers a gift that is “much more” than what Adam offered. In Philippians 2:5 – 11, language to describe Christ is precisely contrasted with how Adam is described in Genesis 1 – 3 in the Septuagint.¹⁵ In 1 Corinthians 15:22, and similar to his letter to the Romans, Paul again correlates Adam to death and life to Christ. The point I believe Paul is trying to make is that whatever was done in Adam, was in the same way—nay, in a way much greater—undone by Christ.

I believe for someone to conclude a dualistic eschatology from the aforementioned passages, one would have to modify the gospel according to Paul. As Paul argues in his letter to the Galatians, there is no other gospel.¹⁶ The gospel, then, according to Paul, is about what God has already done, not what anyone has to now do. We love simply because he first loved us.¹⁷ There is freedom in that love. That is why it is gospel. That is why it is good news!

¹³ John 20:19 – 23.

¹⁴ Philippians 2:9.

¹⁵ Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life*, 240 – 41.

¹⁶ Galatians 1:6 – 7.

¹⁷ 1 John 4:19.