



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Foundational Teachings in Paul's Letters:

Week III

A 10-Week Online Course by Rev. David J. Fekete, Ph.D.



May 2017

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Apostle Paul was crucial to the spread of Christianity all over the Mediterranean region. His place in the history of the Christian Church is unparalleled by other Apostles--at least so we can infer from his letters.

But aside from spreading the gospel message among the gentiles, his preserved letters have provided Christianity with some of its most powerful doctrines and teachings. Paul was a preacher, and most of his letters are doctrinal arguments. (Paul's style draws on schools of philosophy called Cynic or Stoic.) So Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, has drawn on Paul's letters to construct doctrines about who Jesus was, and how the process of salvation works. If Paul doesn't interest us for our own religious edification, Paul merits our attention because of the powerful influence he had on the history of Christian thought.

We will look at Paul from a Swedenborgian perspective. As a Swedenborgian, I am interested in truth wherever I find it. Although one can find disparaging passages in Swedenborg's writings about Paul, we need not assume prejudice against Paul, ourselves. As countless Christians affirm, in Paul there is beauty and truth. We will attempt to be a fair reader of Paul and of Swedenborg. When we find doctrinal opposition, we will lay out both sides of the argument. In this way, one will be able to see how and where Swedenborg's theology differs from Paul's, and where the two are in accord.

There is another problem one confronts when reading Paul. There is Paul as we find him in his letters, and there is Paul as Christianity has interpreted him. Some of the most problematic Pauline doctrines, from a Swedenborgian perspective, come from Paul as Protestant Christianity has interpreted him. But Paul is such a capacious writer that often doctrines that Protestants derive from Paul—such as the doctrine of the atonement or of salvation by faith alone—do not agree with other passages in Paul. In short, these doctrines are taken from sections of Paul's letters, while ignoring other passages that contradict such doctrines. Furthermore, some of these doctrines derive from an incorrect reading of Paul.

So we will read Paul as he appears in the letters, but with an eye to the history of the interpretation of Paul. We will also compare Paul with Swedenborg. Finally, Paul may not have

written all the letters attributed to him. Scholars now agree that some of Paul's letters were written by the church a generation after Paul. These letters are called the "deutero-Pauline letters," among which is a sub-category called the "Pastoral Epistles."

While we will emphasize the genuine Pauline letters, we will also consider the deutero-Pauline letters. For in the history of Christianity, and in Christianity today, many religious denominations do not distinguish between genuine and deutero-Pauline writings.

The chart below lists the genuine Pauline letters and the deutero-Pauline letters.

GENUINE PAULINE LETTERS:

Romans
 1 Corinthians
 2 Corinthians
 Galatians
 Philippians
 1 Thessalonians

DEUTERO-PAULINE LETTERS:

2 Thessalonians
 (Colossians)
 Ephesians
 Pastoral Epistles:
 Philemon
 1 and 2 Timothy
 Titus

SYLLABUS

WEEK I: Paul's Authority and Biography

Readings: Acts 9:1-19; Philippians 3:4-10; Galatians 1:1-2, 11-24; 2:20; 1 Timothy 1:8-12; Philippians 1:7, 12-13; Colossians 4:3; 2 Corinthians 11:1-33; 12:1-6, 9-10.

WEEK II: Christology

Readings: Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9; Philippians 2:5-11.

WEEK III: The Doctrine of Reconciliation and Predestination

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5:17-19, 21; Romans 5:6-11; 8:3, 34, 28-30; 1 Timothy 2:5-7; Ephesians 1:3-11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

WEEK IV: Faith Part 1

Readings: 1 Corinthians 8:1-7, 10-13; 10:25-29; Galatians 2:3, 11-13, 15-17; 4:10; 5:2, 3, 12; 6:12; Romans 4:1-8; 1:17; 3:20-25; Titus 3:3-8; Philippians 2:12-13.

WEEK V: Faith Part 2

Readings: Galatians 3:6-14; James 2:14-26.

WEEK VI: The Life of the Spirit

Readings: Galatians 5:13-25; 6:9-10; Romans 2:6-10, 13-14; 7:7-25; 8:1-4; 12:9-21; 13:8-10.

WEEK VII: Old Self/New Self

Readings: Colossians 3:5-17; Ephesians 4:22-5:2, 8-14; Titus 1:5-9; 2:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24; 2 Timothy 2:22-26.

WEEK VIII: Love

Readings: Romans 5:9-10; 8:31-32; 5:1, 11; 5:5; 8:37-39; 13:8-14; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

WEEK IX: Sin

Readings: Romans 8: 1-17; 7:7-25; 6:1-2, 12-13; 5:12-19; Ephesians 2:1-10; Romans 6:1-2, 12.

WEEK X: Women in Early Christianity

WEEK III

Intercession, Justification and Predestination

In the next three weeks, we will see Paul as Protestant Christianity has seen him. We will look at the Protestant doctrines of Justification and Intercession, and then spend two weeks on the important protestant doctrine of “salvation by faith alone.” Both these doctrines Swedenborg was at pains to refute. Recall that Swedenborg was raised as a Lutheran, so he was brought up with these doctrines. Perhaps he opposes them so strongly because he is also rebelling against his own former beliefs. I think of how strongly smokers who have quit are offended by others’ smoke.

The Paul we look at the next three weeks may be distasteful to those raised or converted to Swedenborg’s theology. But seeing these Pauline doctrines is of great import. They form the cornerstone of Protestant faith today and in the past. We need to know about these doctrines. But we will see a much different Paul after these few weeks. We will see a Paul quite in harmony with Swedenborg. Unfortunately, it is a Paul that Protestants choose to ignore often.

There are several terms for the doctrine of reconciliation. It is sometimes called intercession and also justification. The doctrine of reconciliation is strongly emphasized in Protestant Christianity, but recently an encyclical has been put forth by the Catholic Church stating that there is essential agreement between the Catholic and Lutheran doctrine of justification.

The doctrine of justification, or reconciliation, requires a strong articulation of the trinity. That is, the doctrine of reconciliation requires that God the Father and God the Son be two separate persons. This doctrine states that God was angry with the human race because of human sin. Jesus “intercedes” on our behalf and calms the Father down. Jesus thus “reconciles” God to sinful humans.

When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ dies for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

(Romans 5:6-10)¹

We find this idea of intercession in Romans 8 also. It is brought up in a wide reaching discourse on sin, the law, life in the spirit, and intercession. After Paul has condemned himself for the sin he does, he talks about Jesus sitting at the right hand of God and interceding for him.

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. . . . Christ Jesus, who died--more

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved

than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us
(Romans 8:3, 34)²

Another way of saying this is to say that Jesus bore our sins on the cross. So the sins of the whole human race were put on Jesus, and Jesus was sacrificed on the cross the way animals were sacrificed in the Jewish temple. By taking on the sins of the whole human race, Jesus “reconciled” God the Father to humanity. So Paul will say, “God made him who had no sin [Jesus] to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). By taking our sin upon us, Jesus reconciled us to God,

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled himself to us through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.
(2 Cor. 5:17-19)

The doctrine of predestination is also woven into the fabric of justification doctrines. Predestination means that God has already decided whom He will save and whom He will damn. Those whom God will save are called the “elect”. There is nothing a person can do to change one’s fate. So the doctrine of predestination denies free will.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son . . . And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified .
(Romans 8:28-30)

The doctrine teaches that God saves and damns according to His own pleasure and will. No one and no amount of effort can make a person godly or ungodly—it is all God’s work, not a person’s. We see the doctrine of predestination presented in conjunction with Christ’s blood sacrifice, taking our sins away,

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will . . . In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us . . . In him we were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.
(Ephesians 1:4-5, 7, 11)

For Swedenborg, there are grave problems with the doctrines of reconciliation and predestination. First, God dwells in Christ bodily, so they are one Person. Jesus cannot intercede with the Father because they are intimately one. Second, no one’s sins can be transferred to someone else. So our sins cannot be placed on Jesus to be carried and atoned for. We are responsible for our own good and evil. True, God gives us the power to resist evil and to do and love good, but we are the ones who take action to form the image of Christ in our hearts. Third, there can be no predestination.

² Ibid.

Swedenborg calls the doctrine of predestination a “cruel heresy.” God is all love and mercy, God could never predestine someone to hell. Furthermore, Swedenborg teaches a robust doctrine of free will. We are free to choose good or evil. God guards our freedom zealously. Only in freedom can we make life choices that remain with us. And only in freedom can we love God as of ourselves. If predestination were possible, everyone would be predestined to heaven. God wishes to give heaven’s blessings, joy, and happiness to everybody.

Questions for Reflection

- 1) Would it be possible to have a doctrine of intercession without a strong doctrine of the trinity?
- 2) Is there another way to understand Jesus' sacrifice of atonement (justification) without an idea of two gods? Can Jesus take away our sins without there being a God the Father to whom Jesus reconciles us?
- 3) Have you met others who hold these doctrines of Justification and Intercession in your life? Predestination? Can you maintain good relations and friendships with others who hold differing doctrines than you do?