

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea (Part 2)

Co-missioners,



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Today Steve Kuhl will plunge us into the scandals that lie at the heart of St. Paul's thinking about God and his proclamation of Christ crucified. We can't urge you strongly enough to take the time for a close and careful reading—all the more if the theological milieu you interact with regularly ignores the distinction between Law and Gospel and touts an amenable god.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea

([continued from Part 1](#))

by Steven C. Kuhl

The Remarkable Duel

This brings us to the **second major point** about Paul's dangerous idea about God. If meaninglessness is rooted in the wrath of God upon sinful humanity, how is meaning (a sense of glorying in God and one's existence before God) possible?

For Paul, the solution to meaninglessness is so ingenious that no human being could have ever imagined it. For it is nothing less than an incredible duel within the Godhead itself, God resolving to oppose Godself, right within the confines of human history. In short, the solution entails a change in God. Not a change *of* gods, as though simple idolatry were the issue, but a change *in* God, God changing God's own approach to humankind.

As Paul explains it, only as God changes—overrules, overthrows—his natural, critical approach toward sinful humankind is Meaning possible. And that, according to Paul, is exactly what God is doing “in Christ.” The phrase “in Christ” is for Paul a technical term for identifying the basis of a new, meaningful (justified) kind of existence before God, one in which people can actually *glory in God*, rather than *despair of* God (cf. Romans 3:24, 26; 6:3, 11, 23; 8:2). Therefore, for Paul, Meaning is secured neither through the revelation of an eternal, but hidden, Meaning rooted deep within creation (as traditional theism proposes), nor through the potential, but in no wise guaranteed, outcome of continued human striving and evolution.

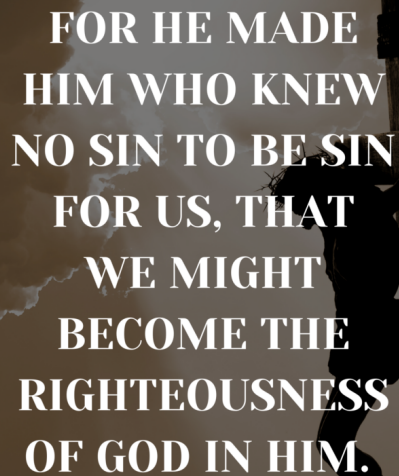
Rather, Meaning is secured only as God negates, supplants, overrules his righteous wrath on a fallen world, thereby effectively changing his nature, that is, his approach towards humanity in history. **Paul's dangerous idea about God, then, is not only about how a holy and wrathful God is dangerous to a sinful humanity. More importantly it's about how *God endangers***

Godself in the event of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world's salvation.

In the event of Jesus Christ, God's wrath, which is holy and righteous in every respect, is overruled by God's mercy, thereby establishing the basis—through faith in Christ—for a justified, meaningful human existence. Paul describes this change in approach as follows:

For while we were still weak [helpless under the wrath of God], at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

For Paul, Meaning (i.e., a justified, meaningful life in which one can "boast" or "glory in God," and hence, in one's own existence) is the outcome of a conscious change of approach by God toward sinful humankind. This approach, as Paul speaks of it, is not a mystical experience or a new idea about life, but a real historical, one-of-a-kind event which begins with God becoming, not just one-of-us, but one-*with-us* in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus so sides with sinners that he actually "becomes sin" for them (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21), subjecting himself to the judgment and death which befalls them.



**FOR HE MADE
HIM WHO KNEW
NO SIN TO BE SIN
FOR US, THAT
WE MIGHT
BECOME THE
RIGHTEOUSNESS
OF GOD IN HIM.**

2 Corinthians 5:21 nkjv

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What this means is the central concern of Christian theology. Elsewhere Paul describes what Jesus was doing when he “died for us” like this: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law [i.e. the wrath of God and meaninglessness] by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

As Paul views reality, humankind is “by nature” a creature under God’s wrath, burdened with meaninglessness, in a word, “cursed.” As Paul envisions it, the event of Jesus Christ, the pinnacle of which is the cross, is nothing less than a “remarkable duel (*mirabile duellum*) between life and death,” as the old Latin hymn put it, a battle between the God encountered “in nature,” who is right in condemning sinners to death, and that self-same God who “in Christ” desires that all shall live. In the cross this conflict within God is played out right in the confines of human history. (This very thought so exhausts traditional monotheism that Christianity had to come up with new language—Trinity—to confess the God they had come to know in Christ.)

In Jesus Christ, God the Son so sides with cursed humanity over against God's law and wrath (God's curse) that law and wrath are left with no alternative but to curse and condemn Jesus *with* humanity. At this point, *the point at which Jesus submits himself to judgment and death*, the old-world view of law and wrath comes undone, or more precisely, implodes. For the Jesus who is wrapped up in the fate of sinful humanity is also the Son of God! And for God's law and wrath to curse Jesus, the Holy Son of God, is high treason, blasphemy, an attack on the very God whose honor they are obliged to serve.

The result is a great reversal unlike anything that is seen in nature: *Resurrection*. "In Christ" wrath is overruled by mercy, and death yields to life. Thus, says Paul, "Christ is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4), for the law and wrath have no claim on him or on those whose lives are wrapped up with his through faith. "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness [a justified, meaningful existence] for everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

As a result of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ—for Paul, *the* crucial fact upon which his whole argument depends (see 1 Corinthians 15: 12-28)—a new zone has been established in space and time where Meaning is secured, where people can "glory in God" and "boast" of their new-found existence in Christ. That zone is identified by Paul elsewhere as the "'new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:16; Galatians 6:15) and its entry is marked by "faith." "Faith" is Paul's favorite term for describing human beings who are "in Christ," who are themselves changed by the change in God. Faith is Meaning secured.

Here Paul's theological anthropology comes into play, anthropology which, formally at least, resembles George Herbert Mead's concept of the social self. The self is essentially a relational reality: *we are* our relationships. In the case of

Paul's theological anthropology, *we are as God is to us*. For Paul, then, faith is not primarily a psychological phenomenon but a wholistic description of the new person or self in Christ. Faith means "It is no longer I (the sinner self) who lives, but Christ (the righteous self) who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Conversely, "sin" is not primarily understood by Paul as a deed either. Rather sin is a wholistic description of the person under wrath, regardless of what they are doing at the moment. Faith describes the person to whom God shows mercy; sin describes the person to whom God shows wrath (Romans 7:4-6).

The deeds that a person of faith performs are called "the fruits of the Spirit" because they are a response to the overall reality of mercy (Romans 8:9). The deeds that a sinner performs are called "works of the law" because they are a response to the overall reality of wrath (Romans 7:7-14). Theologically, how we are related to God makes all the difference in the world.

Faith Comes from What Is Heard

According to Paul, God approaches people in this new and merciful way through something very earthy: the "Word," the "proclamation of Christ" (Romans 10:14-17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; etc.). "Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17) just as the wrath of God is mediated through the "communicative structures" of the natural world, so the mercy of God is mediated through the "communicative structures" of the new creation [6] in its impact on the world through the Church, the body of Christ in the world (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12).

And yet, there is this difference. Everyone "naturally" participates in and connects with the reality of wrath. That is the starting point of human existence and the basis for the doctrine of "original sin." But not everyone participates in the

Christological world of mercy, nor do they automatically connect with it. Moreover, this disconnect is not simply a function of geographical proximity to communicative structures of the gospel or due to some particular predisposition of the individual person. It is simply that not everyone who hears the proclamation of Christ outwardly necessarily “hears” the message or connects to it inwardly, that is, believes. Some remain unbelievers and under wrath, even though the “word is near” (Romans 10:8), while others become believers and enjoy mercy and a sense of meaning.

This fact, that some connect with the Word and some do not, undergirds a great dilemma for Paul (Romans 9-11), such that he is beset with “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (Romans 9:2). For the dilemma highlights **the most dangerous aspect of Paul’s idea about God: Grace**. For Paul, grace is not the “gestalt of grace” referred to in modern versions of traditional theism, namely, a hidden meaningfulness that only needs revealing. Rather, the term “grace”—it means simply God’s “favor” or “pleasure,” referring to God’s new approach towards humanity in Christ—implies no constraint (gestalt) whatsoever on God’s part to give it. Nor is there any meritorious feature in the human character to warrant it, not even the fact that humankind is God’s creature (Romans 9: 21 ff). Grace implies God’s freedom, specifically, that disturbing freedom exhibited in the fact that God “has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses” (Romans 9:18).



African Lion

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Given this freedom on the part of God, Paul became keenly aware that unbelief does not simply implicate human beings as sinners, but, far worse, it implicates God as holding back on grace. The end result is that grace is as scandalous as the wrath it is intended to overcome, if not more so.

For Paul, this scandal of grace is *not* a problem of metaphysics or logic or biblical interpretation, but rather a practical problem that emerged in his own missiological experience with his own people, even as it continues to emerge in the missiological experience of every believer today. Some believe and some do not; some are saved and some are not.

This scandal of grace is a peculiarly Christian problem. After all, the unbeliever who has no sense of salvation in Christ simply casts it aside as a non-problem, as a logical inconsistency. Not so the person of genuine faith who knows she is saved by grace and no merit of her own; a person marked by a concern for the salvation of others because she shares with Paul the same "mind" as Christ (Philippians 2:1-5; Romans 15:3). For this person of faith, that some are saved while others are not

is an enduring problem and a constant source of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (Romans 9:2).

Ironically, then, what is usually presented by traditional theism as the most endearing aspect of the Christian message (namely, God’s grace) is for Paul its most problematic aspect. Indeed, it is at this point of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” for those who are perishing that the question of the “mystery of our existence” is most acute for Paul. And, significantly, he has no answer to it. All he has is a simple counsel: let that problem be God’s problem [7]—and proclaim Christ (Cf. Romans 11:33-36).

For since the coming of Christ, the world has become a much more complicated place. Since the coming of Christ, God exhibits two very different approaches to the world. Paul identifies them as two kinds of “righteousness”—two paths to a meaningful or justified existence. One is the old, straightforward, “natural” righteousness, “the righteousness of the law,” which for sinners ultimately means that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). This old righteousness ultimately undergirds the experience of meaninglessness, not because of any fault in the law, but because of sin (Romans 7:7-13).

The other kind of righteousness is the new, unpredictable “Christological” righteousness, “the righteousness of faith,” which ultimately means—even for sinners, especially for sinners!—that “the one who is righteous through faith will live” (Romans 1:17). This righteousness establishes Meaning in the world.

Both approaches are from the self-same God (no Gnostic dualism here) and yet both are diametrically opposed (no simplistic monotheism either). Both approaches are holy and good in themselves, and yet only as the new supplants the old is true

holiness and goodness –a meaningful existence, the new creation–established in the world.

Endnotes

[6] These “communicative structures of the new creation” are usually referred to as the means of grace. Luther’s listing of the five ways the gospel “offers counsel and help against sin” is a helpful way of identifying this communicative structure. They are: 1) the spoken word, 2) baptism, 3) Holy Communion, 4) confession and forgiveness, and 5) the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles, Article IV” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Theodore Tappert, translator and editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 310.

[7] I am much indebted to Robert Bertram for this understanding of Paul. The phrase “let that problem be God’s problem” actually comes from a paper Bertram delivered under the title, “Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus. That Depends: *Which* Salus? Some Theses on Luther’s De Servo Arbitrio,” for the 1997 Luther Congress at Hamburg, German. Bertram shows how Paul’s concern about *God’s freedom* to save or not to save human beings, as opposed to humanity’s freedom to choose or not choose salvation, was the central issue for Luther in his debate with Erasmus on free will.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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