

## Chapter One: The Gospel of Paul

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Colossians 2

Many still seem to think that Christ is Jesus' last name. By proclaiming my faith in Jesus Christ, I have made two acts of faith, one in Jesus and another in Christ. The times are demanding this full Gospel of us now.

Richard Rohr

### A Confession

Most every Sunday, Presbyterians begin their worship with a confession of sin. It is almost the first thing we do. We hear the prelude, we respond to the call to worship, sing a hymn, and then, “bam:” confess your sin!

Often times I wonder if this confession should not come at the end of our worship. Ease into it; have it as a cathartic response. Takes a while to be convinced of sin. Certainly much more time than walking in the door of the church. Yet, we persist with haste.

I may be alone in this feeling. Perhaps the more common experience is relief. Like the release of having carried something far too heavy and then finally being able to set it down. Perhaps the confession of sin is that for others. It is not this way for me.

For me, the weight of sin is more like extra weight. I want to lose it, but it lingers. I wish I could lose extra weight by saying, “I don’t want you there; go away.” Wouldn’t it be great if after a short, mumbled prayer the pastor said, “In the name of the Lord you are thin!” But my wishes are unrealized. No. I acknowledge my sin like extra weight: “forgive me for words poorly spoken.” I confess, but I know for certain my penchant for poorly spoken words will persist as will the guilt I carry for such offenses.

If you are like me, then the moment of confession is confusing in terms of affect. There have been times in my life where I have been forgiven, redeemed; offered mercy I did not deserve. None of them resembled a corporate prayer of contrition where I am immediately forgiven. My experiences of mercy have been long in coming, filled with silences, sleepless nights, tense words, even tears. Forgiveness is not something I do in an order; forgiveness is not "next."

So why do we do this? Again, if you are not like me, and this moment of confession is a great relief, then there is the answer. Relief. Perhaps I should reframe the question. Why do I continue to do this? The best answer is: Paul.

The gospel of Paul is this prayer. The mercy of God is ready if we but acknowledge our sin; the love of God is ready for us if we confess; the freedom of Christ is already at hand if only we say the word and open our heart. We offer the prayer of confession at the beginning of every worship service for one reason: we are the spiritual heirs of the Apostle Paul. We believe in the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that reconciles us with the Father and secures our eternal life. This is the "blood of the cross" offered for us. It is not a process or a cathartic release. The gospel of Paul is built upon a victory already won.

## The Gospel before the Gospel

The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee, a zealot, a persecutor of the followers of Jesus. In the time following the death of Jesus, Paul, then known as Saul, had a hand in the martyrdom of Stephen and was known far and wide as a dangerous man. Traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, Paul was confronted by the risen Christ. Jesus appeared to him and asked him to stop persecuting his followers. To make his point he rendered Paul blind (the opposite of what he done in his ministry).

What follows after the encounter on the road to Damascus is a bit of mystery. The book of Acts records that Paul is healed of his sight, but then there is a gap. The gap is roughly a decade. Legend has it that Paul traveled to Antioch on the coast of what is now Turkey. Here he lived with Christians and gained a new understanding of who and what Jesus is, how he is the Christ. Another legend is that he spent this decade in mystical prayer in a desert hermitage. No one knows for sure how Paul spent this decade.

We do know from the Book of Acts that after this time he asked if he could become a missionary to the Gentiles. Peter was the rock of the church of the Jews; Paul asked if could be the feet of the gospel to the Gentiles. The leaders of Jerusalem told him "yes" with two conditions. He must proclaim the gospel to the Jews first wherever he goes and only then to the Gentiles. Second, he must send money back to help the poor of the church. Agreeing to these conditions, Paul spent the next decade of his life traveling throughout Asia minor, mostly in what is today Turkey and Greece.

Concurrent with these travels, Paul wrote letters to churches. Most of his letters were to churches he himself planted. He wrote to the church in Corinth, to the churches of Galatia, to the church at Thessaloniki. Likewise he wrote letters to the church at Philippi, Colossae, Ephesus, and Rome. Some suggest he also wrote letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. None of these letters are what we might consider a lengthy tome. Some are less than a thousand words. All together it would take an interested person a day to read the entire sum of his writings.

The last four, five years of his life were spent under arrest. Paul was a citizen of Rome and thus could not be summarily put to death without the due process to which citizens were entitled. Jesus could be judged and put to death in a day; Paul's crucifixion would require a number of years.

As was lifted up in the introduction, a key to understanding our faith, our worship, and our theology is to know the chronology of New Testament. The thirty years from when Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus to the moment of his death in Rome is the first generation of the church. Paul's letters are the first writings we have. Before we can take up the second generation, and heart of our inquiry, we need to grasp the first generation. We need to know the gospel of Paul before we hear the gospel of Jesus.

## The Cosmic Gospel of Paul

In the passage of Colossians offered above, there is a key line: "I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel." We know from his letter to the Galatians that there were "other" gospels. We also know from reading forward, after Paul, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke would describe Jesus as preaching the gospel. Moreover, we know that in the third and fourth generations of the church a whole other set of gospels came to pass (known as apocryphal or Gnostic).

The letter to the Colossians has, perhaps, the clearest expression of what Paul meant when he says I proclaim the gospel of Christ. I call this gospel "cosmic." I am not alone in this. Many others have come to make this distinction. What I mean by "cosmic" is rather narrow in its scope. By cosmic I mean Paul saw Jesus as the Christ, the transcendent one who was the fullness of God, the Word, the beginning and the end. He did not consider Jesus and his earthly life as a key to his gospel. The key to his gospel is this very cosmic proclamation:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

"Cosmic" means looking to Jesus as the Christ. The Christ is visible and invisible; Christ is firstborn from the dead. Mostly, though, Christ is the way in which God chose to "reconcile to himself all things." The blood of the cross is about "making peace."

A "cosmic" Jesus has a tenuous grasp of earth. He is "seated at the right hand of God." Jesus of Nazareth is no more. Jesus Christ is "lord of all". He is the key to the sweep of history; he is the origin of life; the culmination of God's love. He is all these things. All good things. Yet, the more we proclaim the cosmic Christ the more our belief in him travels further and further from the one who walked around Galilee. In this distance we lose something.

These cosmic images are important to consider as the ideas and confidence of the first generation of the church. When we get to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they too will have cosmic elements. Jesus will hear a voice from heaven; there will be angels attending to him in the desert; Satan will come to tempt him; and, Moses and Elijah will be recalled from the dead to pay a visit to him. In addition, as we will see below, there will be genealogical claims about Jesus that will have cosmic purpose. These claims will come to full bloom in the Gospel of John.

Here our purpose is more of contrast. When we turn to the gospels these cosmic elements will still be there, but they will be lesser, private, hidden. In Paul, the cosmic is directly in our view. We need to see this difference and know the “cosmic Christ” so to better appreciate the earthly Jesus of Mark. In the next chapter, when we explore the parable of Jesus and parable of Peter, the cosmic will be set aside. It is important to know what Mark was setting aside in order to see what he took up.

What is put aside or lessened are three points key to Paul’s gospel. Paul’s gospel has three significant features. 1. Jesus Christ is the “first born of all creation.” 2. He is the “fullness of God.” 3. His cross and blood and sacrificial death makes peace and reconciliation for heaven and earth. Before we explore these three features, bear in mind, Jesus went about Galilee proclaiming the gospel. We do not believe he told people, “I am the first born of creation; I am the fullness of God; and in my sacrificial death heaven and earth will be reconciled. Especially in the Gospel of Mark, the gospel of Paul is not seen as the gospel of Jesus.

## Birth and Death in the Gospel of Paul



What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? **Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.**

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For **sin will have no dominion over you**, since you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6.1-14

In our first congregation, I was lucky to be part of a very active ministerial. The pastors in the group were diverse in a very homogenous way. From the outside looking in, it was white protestant men. Yet, of those men, there were Pentecostals and Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, Lutherans and Nazareans. Hence, there was a theological spectrum within a similar demographic.

Once a year I hosted the meeting. And, once a year the Baptist pastor led me into our sanctuary. He walked to the baptismal font and lifted the lid. With a dramatic flair he stuck his head into the empty bowl. Looking up he would say, "I still don't see it! How do you get those critters inside this bowl? How can you dunk 'em in such shallow water?"

A few years later I was preaching at his congregation, Victory Baptist. Our eldest son, Josh, came with me. Let us say the service was a bit livelier than First Presbyterian. As Josh and I sat in the front row an elder waxed long in a speech. I pointed out to Josh the area where a cross was lit on the back wall of the chancel.

I whispered to him, "do you know what is beneath the cross?" Being a savvy kid, he slowly said with suspicion, "what's up there?"

"A jacuzzi," I said with excitement.

Josh stared forward and then finally he said, "that's so the pastor can dunk people. Just like John did to Jesus." His look of satisfaction over figuring it out is a great memory.

In order to see and understand the gospel of Paul, we need to understand the power of baptism. Although Paul claims he was not sent to baptize, he offers it as key to experiencing salvation from sin. You cannot understand the cosmic Christ of Paul without coming to see the freedom from sin that happens in baptism.

Let's put before us once again the two key sentences in the Apostle's Creed.

Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

From birth to death without a moment's pause. From conception to burial without a moment to breathe. Although it seems odd, it would be unfair to criticize this leap. We must know of the omission without finding the need to see it as a flaw. The reason for this is that Paul, and the legacy of Paul in the Apostle's Creed, is describing, confessing, offering their belief in God. They are not trying to capture our life, our fullness. This is about God not us. More importantly the leap is a deep expression of love. We can see this if we understand the leap in terms of baptism.

There is nothing a child needs to do in order to earn my love. Each of my children are loved from the moment I believe they are to be. They don't have to say certain things, be certain people, or even refrain from certain mistakes. The beauty in Paul's gospel is that he sees this unconditional, unearned love. When we venture into the merit system at the heart of Judaism in the first century, Paul's belief in an unmerited grace is powerful. Can you imagine an infant making an effort to earn the sacrament? Can you imagine your own child as needing to be worthy of grace?

Paul's gospel is built upon this idea of unearned, unworthy grace. In baptism we can connect to it. The child we baptize is a gift. We rejoice in the gift. Paul's gospel is saying, in Jesus Christ we are seen as this child again. All of the life we've lived, all the wrong turns and misdeeds: in Jesus Christ we are a child reborn for new life. We are to be baptized into the death of Christ and thus made right.

In 1987, not long after Josh was born, the associate Pastor from First Presbyterian Church of San Diego paid us a visit. Rev. Dennis Falasco was there to discuss having Josh baptized. My wife, Kathy, grew up in the church, her parents were members, but we were not. After some idle chit chat Dennis got down to business. "Are you baptized," he asked me?

"Twice," I said.

Dennis quickly retorted, "didn't the first one take?"

I explained that I was baptized in the Lutheran Church as an infant. But I grew up in and became a member of a Wesleyan church. "They don't believe in infant baptism. So I was dunked."

Although Paul's letters have many components and facets, there is one key argument, one essential claim, that binds them together. And it is this: in the death and resurrection of Jesus we are reconciled to God the father. Jesus was the atoning sacrifice that has restored our relationship with God. This is the gospel we receive in baptism.

Paul says, "we are crucified with Christ;" and he also says it is in baptism that we find the door, the point of entry, the same path to walk that will make this sacrifice our salvation. Consider the argument he put forth to the church at Rome.

Paul is pleading with the Romans to abandon a sinful life and to find the power of living by faith offered by grace. He will make a similar claim to all the churches to whom he writes. Paul believes that if we believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and we are baptized into this death and resurrection we will be set to free to live a better life, a righteous life. This is the good news of Paul in its clearest form.

Although Paul does not say it directly here (i.e., "this is the good news I preach"), this is the good news he defined at other times, and it is the persistent theme to be found in all his letters. If you enter the death of Jesus in your baptism, you are vouchsafed for a resurrection like Jesus. Your life is no longer to be lived in the shadow of death. You are freed from the "wages of sin" and offered the gift of eternal life.

After baptism, Paul claims, “sin will have no dominion over you.” Dominion is power. For Paul, entering the salvific death of Jesus destroys one power (sin) with a greater one (righteousness). To prove this claim, Paul will make a genealogical argument.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

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. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5.12-21

The most important part of his argument for our endeavor is to understand, the role of Adam. From this one came sin. This is the beginning and from this beginning came a genealogy of sin. Generation after generation bore the weight of misdeed; generation after generation was under the “dominion of sin.” Paul will argue, as will generations of theologians after him will develop more thorough going arguments: Adam lost the perfection of creation in rebellion; Jesus regained this perfection by being the sinless sacrifice for creation.

Just as the Apostles’ Creed leaps over the life of Jesus, so does the genealogy of Paul. He leaps from Adam to Abraham, from ancient covenant to new covenant in Jesus. This second leap is important because it infers a long plan. Not only did Jesus’ death create new life, he also is part of a plan from the beginning of creation.

This perfect sacrifice was the intent from the beginning. Even before Adam this perfect sacrifice was a plan. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* there is a striking scene where Jesus is surrounded by the angels who have not joined Satan. They watch Satan and his minions fly toward the new creation certain of the fall of Adam and Eve. Not knowing what to do or say, there is a clamor. From the clamor Jesus steps forward with the solution, “me for them.” What they lose, I will restore. As they die in loss, I will die in gain. Milton captured the gospel of Paul perfectly. Creation will be restored because Jesus said, “my life for theirs.”

Paul’s leap here is not fully explored. You can walk the stacks of the library at Princeton Seminary and never have enough time to read every book written trying to describe and explain this leap. There is an ocean of words and claims and ideas and arguments and essays. Here though we are trying only to value the leap. We need to understand the leap of thousands of

years so to appreciate the gospel of Paul. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a plan from the beginning. This plan would allow us sinners to be seen as a beloved for eternity without merit, without worth.

## A Life of an emptied God

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 —  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also 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.  
Philippians 2

Paul's gospel convinces the unknowing, unsuspecting person on the street that they are free and forgiven in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one before whom all should bow; he is God emptied for us. Christ Jesus was emptied so we may be full. He took shame so we may find glory.

We have hymn after hymn that proclaims this truth. We have creeds from century after century crafting this claim. This is the legacy of the Apostle Paul. He was the apostle to the gentiles. He was converted on the road to Damascus. Paul spent a decade in seclusion. Another decade he spent wandering the near east telling all about the crucified, resurrected God. Paul was arrested, crucified, he died for this gospel.

A decade or so later, Mark wrote a "gospel." It is hard to hear and see the Jesus of Paul's gospel in Mark's. Our first impulse may be to say one must be right and one must wrong. Yet, the challenge here is to avoid judgement. Paul's gospel is beautiful and elegant and powerful. Mark's gospel is gritty and harsh and powerful. Paul's gospel is based upon a leap. Mark's is based upon a long meandering walk around Galilee. The basis of Paul's gospel would not be abandoned in Mark, as it would not be in Matthew and Luke. But they paused where Paul leaped. Next, we will ask, what is to be found in this pause of Mark's gospel?