

Cork Scripture Group



Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.

Psalm 119:105

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St Paul: New Beginnings Personified

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Introduction:

In his Acts of the Apostles (Acts 7:58), Luke introduces Paul as the “**young man**” who held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen. Later he tells us that Paul was, over a period of time, going “from house to house, [dragging] out believers ... and throwing them into prison” (Acts 8:3). Acts 9:1f. tells us that he “kept up his violent threats of murder” against the Christians. “**Still breathing threats and murder**” (Acts 9:1f.) he set his sights on Damascus. He “received from the High Priests letters written to fellow-Jews in Damascus, so I went there to arrest these people [the followers of Jesus] and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem to be punished” (Acts 22:1-5).

He then details the **conversion or change** Paul experienced after meeting Christ near Damascus. Thereafter, he presents Paul as **preaching the ‘New Beginning,’ or Christianity** from Jerusalem to Rome (maybe, even Spain), i.e. across the Roman Empire. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke is anxious to show how far and how quickly Christianity spread – thanks to Paul and others. **In this presentation I am discussing the journey Paul made in his own understanding of his new faith as shown in his Letters. I hope to detail Paul’s journey from persecuting Christians to promoting Christianity because it is relevant to us and our everyday lives.**

In summary, Paul, having met Christ on the Road to Damascus, experienced a seismic shift in his understanding of Judaism and its key tenets (for example: God, the Messiah, the Law). As a result of this ‘earthquake’ in his thinking and living he came to believe that he, and every believer, was thereafter experiencing a new beginning, 1) with a new Messiah, 2) a new People of God, 3) a new World Vision, 4) a new Power to help achieve that vision, and 5) a new Guarantee of success.

Paul:

Paul was born in Tarsus around 5 B.C., a contemporary of Christ. Tarsus, in present-day southern Turkey is one of the oldest continually inhabited urban centres in the world, and, in Paul’s time, had a famous Academy or Centre of Learning, second only to Rome and ahead even of Athens.

Paul, as he tells us in his Letter to the Philippians, ‘**was a Jew**, circumcised on the eighth day, he belonged to the people of Israel, was a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; **as far as keeping the Law was concerned, a Pharisee; as far as zeal was concerned, a persecutor of the church; regarding the righteousness specified by the law, blameless**’ (Phil. 3:5-6; Acts 23:6). He was also a Roman citizen, through his father.

Like the majority of Jews, Paul believed that **membership of the People of God was a God-given gift that could not be merited, and that, once one had accepted that gift, then one had to live accordingly – that is, one had to keep the Law.**

He grew up in Tarsus as a Pharisee, **zealous and committed to obeying the Mosaic Law.** He studied the Law of Moses at home, in Tarsus, and in Jerusalem (around 20 A.D.), where he studied under Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5:34, 38-39), also a Pharisee, and a highly respected and influential Jewish leader. The **Pharisees** studied and taught the Mosaic Law. What distinguished the Pharisees from other Jews was **their conservatism, and their zeal in keeping the Law.**¹ Paul was also a Roman citizen, through his father.

So, Paul was a Jew (a conservative Pharisee and a zealous persecutor of the followers of Christ). Having met Christ near Damascus he retained his belief in the core tenets of Judaism (e.g., God, the Messiah, the Mosaic Law), but experienced a seismic shift in his understanding of these – and other - beliefs. Thereafter, Paul came to believe in: 1) A New Messiah, 2) a new People of God, 3) a New World Vision, 4) a New Power to help achieve that vision, 5) and a New Guarantee of Success.

1. A New Messiah

The gospel account of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus is interesting. It gives us an insight into the thinking of at least some of the first Christians in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion. As they walked along the road, the two disciples were disappointed, dejected, and disillusioned (Luke 24:13-35). They had hoped that Jesus would lead them against, and free them from, the Roman occupier: "And we had hoped that he (Jesus) would have been the one who was going to set Israel free" (Luke 24:21). Many Jews of the time expected an all-conquering Warrior-Messiah, another King David who would, through military victories, rid Israel of the oppressive, all-conquering, colonising Romans. Pss. 2 and 110 give voice to this expectation and it seems to have been a common enough expectation of the time. This may have been Paul's expectation of the coming Messiah. Clearly, this Messiah had not yet come!

After the disappointment of Jesus' crucifixion, the early Jewish Christians turned to their (Hebrew/Old Testament) Scriptures for answers and found that the **Book of Isaiah** provided an answer – especially chapters 40-55. The Old Testament Book of Isaiah, written over a 200 year period from the 8th to the 6th centuries B.C., was an important book for the early church and for Paul. Paul quoted this Old Testament book 30 times and made literally 100's of references to it across his 7 undisputed Letters. In fact, he knew the Book of Isaiah so well that often his language, concepts, images, and storylines, are drawn, even unconsciously, from the Book of Isaiah. **It was central to his thinking and believing.**

The Book of Isaiah chapters 40-55 envisaged the coming of a new reconciliation between God and humanity, i.e. a new covenant. According to Isaiah, the New Covenant, the New Creation would come about through the 'Suffering Servant,' The Anointed One

¹ From their study of the O.T./Hebrew Scriptures over the centuries, the Pharisees had come to believe also in spirits, the resurrection of the dead and final judgement. These were denied by the Sadducees (the priestly aristocracy) and were the source of many struggles between them (as mentioned in the Gospels).

(Christos-Messiah). Having met Christ at Damascus Paul now believed that Christ was this long-promised Messiah, who had come to re-establish God's reconciliation.

There were three features of Christ's resurrection that were important for Paul:

1) He maintained that his meeting with the Risen Christ **was as real as all the other appearances of the Risen Jesus**. He wrote, in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:1-5) that [The Risen Jesus] "appeared to Cephas/Peter, to the Twelve .., the five hundred at once .. **most of whom are still living**, ... to James... and to all the apostles.... **last of all he appeared to me.**"

2) **But, Christ's resurrection was not a Lazarus-like resurrection. Lazarus was raised by Christ as a return to natural living. Christ was raised by God to a totally different, newly-created Spiritual form of living. Paul stated this in 1 Cor 15:42-44 - "It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown in humiliation; it is raised in glory. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."**

3) With Jesus' resurrection a new, Spiritual World came into existence: **for Paul, this Spiritual World was even more real than the natural world** (1 Cor 15:35-49). Christ's resurrection is **the 'first fruits' of the General Resurrection** (1 Cor 15:20-34), that is, the first instalment of the General Resurrection. **And, our resurrection began in Christ's resurrection.**

2. A New People of God

In 2 Cor 5:16 Paul says: "Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer." In other words the Risen Christ was now a Newly-created, Spiritual Body.

Now that The New Covenant has been established by Jesus (1 Cor 11:23-26), humanity has entered a New Spiritual World. Christ has been raised by the Father and the Kingdom of God has arrived on earth (the coming of the kingdom was mentioned in the gospels). **The re-creation of the world has begun.** Christ's resurrection was the 'first-instalment' or 'first-fruits' of the General Resurrection (1 Cor 15:42-49). God's Final Age, the Age of the New Creation, has moved to a Spiritual level. Humanity is now living in the 'Overlap Time.' The dominant pre-Christian view of the time was that this world would end and then a new world would begin: but what has in fact happened is that the new/spiritual world has broken into this/natural world: **both worlds are co-existing, overlapping, the natural and the spiritual.**

In the very next verse (2 Cor 5:17-18) Paul says: "So [that is, because of Christ's resurrection], whoever is **in Christ** is **a new creation**: the old things have passed away; behold! new things have come. And all this is from God." In other words, each believer is now a Newly-Created Spiritual Being, a New Spiritual-Being-in-Creation, begun but not completed, **a 'work in progress.'**

In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:4-6) Luke tells us that Christ appeared to Paul and questioned him "why do you persecute me? He [Paul] asked 'Who are you, Lord?' The answer he got was "I am Jesus, whom you persecute." At the moment of his conversion/commissioning Paul is presented with the belief that followers of Christ are united

with him, in union with Christ, 'in Christ.' Paul uses that phrase ('in Christ') over 150 times in his undisputed Letters.

Paul understood that believers were 'in Christ,' that they were in a real, spiritual, union with Christ and with one another (1 Cor 6:15, 17): "Do you not know that your bodies are parts/members of the [risen, spiritual] body of Christ? But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit/Spirit with him."

He stressed this thought of the union of the believers with Christ again in 1 Cor 10:16-17. Referring to the Lord's Supper/Eucharist he states: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

Paul further developed the 'Body of Christ' concept in 1 Cor 12:12-26. There he stressed the differences between the members and the interdependence of each member of the Body on the others: "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also in Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body [Christ's Risen Body], whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink the one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:12-13).

He continues saying: "Now the body is not a single part/member, but many. If a foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,' it does not for this reason belong any less to the body" (1 Cor 12:14-15). **The members are different but interdependent.**

He clarifies his argument saying: "But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part where would the body be? But, as it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand 'I do not need you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I do not need you.' (1 Cor 12:18-21).

Believers are now in union with Christ, integral members of the Risen Body of Christ. Moreover, they now share in the 'incorruptibility,' and 'glory' of Christ's resurrection. "It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown in humiliation, it is raised glorious. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:43-44). In Paul's eyes, we are in a sense already risen. 1 Cor 15 continues - "Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one [Adam], let us also [continue to] bear the image of the heavenly one [Christ]" (1 Cor 15:49).

Paul, in 2 Cor 5:16-19, sees the final age as having come with Christ; "hence he can affirm that those who are 'in Christ' **already participate** in the eschaton [end times, **the spiritual world**], albeit not fully" (Collins, 2nd Corinthians 120). **This is supported by Paul's statement in 1 Cor 6:15-17 that the person who is 'in Christ' is "One Spirit with the [Risen] Lord" (1 Cor 6:17), living in a Spiritual world.**

He then applies the argument to the Corinthian church members – and to all church members – saying: "**Now you are Christ's [Risen, Spiritual] body, and individually parts of it.** (1 Cor 12:27). **In Christ our resurrection has already begun. We are already in union with Christ and others; we are already risen, in a foundational or embryonic sense, but not completely, yet (Elizabeth Johnson).**

Paul is saying that all church members/all believers (without exception) are united with Christ and with one another in a spiritual union, closer than marriage (1 Cor 6:15-20). Each believer is now a new creation, a spiritual being. We are not just 'followers' of Christ, we are 'in Christ,' in union with Christ: in a very real sense, together we ARE Christ. And, therefore, Paul infers that we should act accordingly. We have been re-created, as people of love, as a people in Love (See also Galatians 1:16; 2:20; 4:19-20).

3. A New World Vision:

The Old Testament Book of Isaiah set out God's world-vision. It was to bring the Kingdom of God to all nations, to invite all humanity to be members of God's one, true, universal family. Through the O. T. centuries the Chosen People of God/the Israelites had forgotten this commission (Isaiah 49:6f.). They had forgotten why they had been chosen. They had turned IN and not OUT. But, Christ re-established God's World Vision and Paul personified this mission.

Rowan Williams, a former Archbishop of Westminster, says: **building "a single, universal human family" is not just one of the marks of the church's identity; it is the church's whole rationale**, the essential form of its life, and the substance of its message to the world." It is the Christian rationale, and the Christian's rationale. It will not be completed without you and me, without each one of us playing our part, without each one of us being our part!

Martin Luther King Jr. had that same dream. In his acceptance speech when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 he said: "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

I believe that what self-centred [selfish] men and women have torn down, other-centred [selfless] men and women can build up.

I still believe that one day humanity will bow before the altar of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and non-violent redemptive goodwill [or, love] will proclaim the rule of the land.....² I still believe that we shall overcome."

Paul would certainly share that vision of a united, peaceful, reconciled, loving world family (1 Cor 15:20-28...).

Paul places **the challenge of creating this world vision before his readers/us as ambassadors of Christ.** In 2 Cor 5:19-20 Paul states that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So, **we are ambassadors for Christ**, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

² A reference to Micah 4:4. See also 1 Kings 4:25; Zechariah 3:10.

4. A New Life-force:

Paul accepted that he and all believers were commissioned to be the ‘Ambassadors for Christ’ (Galatians 1:13-16; 2 Corinthians 5:16-20). **And, importantly, every Christian is gifted by the Spirit for that task** (1 Cor chapters 12—14). “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service, but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. **To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit**” (1 Cor 12:4-6), “**for the building up of the church**” (1 Cor 14:12), **the Body of Christ** (1 Cor 12:27).

To each and every individual the Spirit’s gifts are given. The Body of Christ is dependent on all parts/members playing their part. We are dependent on others and they on us: “Now you are the body of Christ, and **individually parts of it**” (1 Cor 12:27). **Each believer is different and interdependent. Together believers form the [Risen] Body of Christ.**

Archbishop Tutu (South Africa) has said that we ‘**can only be [fully] human together,**’ we can only be divine-love-incarnate together. **We cannot reach our full Spiritual development without others.** ‘No man (or woman) is an island.’ **My humanity is inextricably bound up with yours.**

In playing our part, love is important as it empowers all the gifts – and without it all else is a ‘clashing cymbal’ (1 Cor 13:1), in other words, worthless noise!” **“If I speak in human and angelic words but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.** And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge: if I have **all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.** If I give away all I own, and hand over by body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:1).

Paul, in 1 Cor 13:4-6, describes this ‘love.’ “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous; it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury; it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. Love never fails.” Elsewhere in 1 and 2 Corinthians he describes this love as **selfless, sacrificial service of others** (e.g. 1 Cor 9:24-27). **“Do everything in love”** (1 Cor 16:14).

But this is no ordinary ‘love.’ **This ‘love’ is actually “God’s love,”** i.e. **“divine love poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit”** (Rom 5:5). **This is God’s own love incarnate in us, God’s own life-force.**

Karl Rahner (1904-1984) a German Jesuit and one of the most important theologians at the Second Vatican Council (1963-65), in considering Paul’s statement, said that **God loved us, and gave us his transforming, re-creating love - his own life – as our life,** transforming and re-creating us. Addressing God he said: **“You took hold of me, ..., you transformed my being right down to its ultimate roots and origins, you made me a sharer in your being and life, you gave yourself to me - you yourself”** (K. Rahner, *Spiritual Writings*, page 43). [Note that all verbs in the quotation are past tense]

Also, 1 John 4:1, 16 assures us that **“God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them”**. Love is God’s own life- force incarnate in us, **at work in us, powering all the Spirit’s other gifts, reconciling us and the world with God**. This reconciliation is the main theme through 1 and 2 Corinthians (2 Cor 5:17-20).

“So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away: behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation..... **So, we are ambassadors of Christ, as if Christ were appealing through us”** (1 Cor 1:10-17; 2 Cor 5:17-20). In his Letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:16) Paul said: God “set me apart ... and **called me ... to reveal his Son in/through me.**” We are God’s ‘ambassadors of love,’ ‘ambassadors of reconciliation’ in the world.

5. A New Guarantee of Success:

Paul finished his first Letter to the Corinthians calling on his followers to be “firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the **work of the Lord**, knowing that in the [Risen] Lord your labour is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

This vision of the future is guaranteed success because it is God’s vision.

Paul refers to what awaits believers after the General Resurrection as follows: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). He emphasises the point by saying – “this God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:10).

Conclusion:

In conclusion one can say that Paul, having met Christ on the road to Damascus, believed that **Christ/Messiah had really risen; that believers were now an organic and integral part of the Risen Spiritual Body of Christ, with a personal commission to be Ambassadors for Christ in accordance with our Spiritual re-creation. This ambassadorial work, built on Love, God’s own Life-Force, is God’s own work and will ‘not be in vain.’**

Created by Love, in Love, as Love, to Love, for Love.

Books:

W. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster John Knox Press, (Kentucky), 1998.

R. J. Karris, *Galatians and Romans*, Liturgical Press (Collegeville), 2005.

D. J. O’Leary, *Treasured and Transformed*, Columba Press (Dublin), 2014.

M. Pascuzzi, *First and Second Corinthians*, Liturgical Press (Collegeville), 2005.

Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Writings*, Orbis Books (New York), 2004.

Ed. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, SCM Press (London), 1977.

I'd like to end this presentation by quoting Patrick Kavanagh's poem "Street Corner Christ:"
It challenges us to see in everyone the Risen Christ.

Street Corner Christ

I saw Christ to-day
At a street corner stand,
In the rags of a beggar he stood
He held ballads in his hand.

He was crying out: "Two for a penny
Will anyone buy
The finest ballads ever made
From the stuff of joy?"

But the blind and deaf went past
Knowing only there
An uncouth ballad-seller
With tail-matted hair.

And I whom men call 'fool'
His ballads bought,
Found him whom the pieties
Have vainly sought.

Patrick Kavanagh:

[This poem is published in: *'No Earthly Estate, God and Patrick Kavanagh: An Anthology,'*
Edited by Fr. Tom Stack, Dublin, Printed by Columba Press, Published in 2002, page 58.]