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Saint Paul’s Methods, Writings, and Theology
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St. Paul used a number of methods in his presentation of the Gospel. These methods included writing in the role of a poet, using paradox within his writings, and incorporating metaphors into his epistles. Paul’s writings are theologically rich, and some of the important theological topics within his writings include Christology, the Eucharist, and justification.

**Style and Methods of St. Paul’s Writings**

It can be argued that Paul used paradox “as a primary method” in his writing in order to examine “the Christ event” and explain it to his readers.¹ Following the Wisdom tradition,² the use of paradox enabled Paul to make persons the focus of his writing, rather than “events or arguments”.³ The different persons Paul focused on in his writings included “God, Christ, the body of Christ”, and “the individual Christian”, and the use of paradox allowed Paul to explore the mystery surrounding those persons and bring out their different aspects and angles.⁴ An example of the use of paradox by Paul is when he wrote: “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:5–6). Fischer has pointed out that this paradox “does not solve the problem logically” but rather “it gains an insight

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² Ibid., 218, 220.
³ cf. Ibid., 219, 222–223.
⁴ cf. Ibid., 222–223.
into the unity which comes in the person of God and Jesus.”

The paradox helps show that although there are myriad different and diverse Christians, Christians are nevertheless united and one through their membership in “the body of Christ.”

In addition to paradox, Paul also used metaphors to explore and elucidate the mysteries of the Christian Faith. In particular, in Second Corinthians 5:1–10, Paul likely used "shelter imagery" and "clothing imagery", in order to evoke the earthly or glorified body of Christ (i.e., depending on how the imagery was used). In addition, Paul likely used "geographical imagery" in order to evoke the notion of the Jews vis à vis Babylon (2 Cor 5:6–9). In using these metaphors (e.g., shelter imagery, clothing imagery, geographical imagery), it is likely Paul was using these metaphors for exploratory purposes, rather than for ornamental purposes. If employed for an ornamental purpose, then the metaphors should be simply translated from the "fancy" language of the metaphor into the 'plain' language of the underlying message. In contrast, if Paul was employing the metaphors for an explanatory purpose, then the metaphors "need to be explored" and examined, since Paul was using them in order to "illuminate mysteries [that are] beyond full human comprehension."

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5 Ibid., 220.
6 Ibid., 220–221.
8 Ibid.,163.
9 Ibid.,162.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
At times Paul can be understood as writing in the role of a poet. This method of writing provided a way through which Paul could establish the foundational story for the community and use himself as an example of the reception of that foundational story – rather than simply and authoritatively setting down doctrines and dogmas. This method of writing can be seen First Timothy. There, Paul pronounces a confession of faith: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). Then Paul wrote, “And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Tim 1:15–16). Ancient poets told “foundational stories”, and their role included serving as the leading “recipient of the story”, reflecting on the meaning and importance of the story, and demonstrating the import of the story. Here, Paul, serving as a prime example of someone espousing the confession of faith that he just announced, shows that he “himself is proof that his gospel is true.”

**Theological Aspects of St. Paul’s Writings**

**Paul’s Christological Teaching**

The language that Paul uses in relation to Christ indicates that he believed (and hence

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13 cf. Ibid., 694–699.
14 Ibid., 698.
15 Ibid., 705.
16 Ibid., 699–700.
17 Ibid., 706.
taught) that Jesus Christ was God. Before delving into examples, it should first be noted that Paul, as a Jew, would have been “an uncompromising monotheist”, and would have judiciously avoided ever coming close to suggesting that a creature was “on a par with Yahweh”, because that would have amounted to blasphemy. In other words, Paul believed that there was only one God, and furthermore it would be blasphemy to equate a created being with the Creator/God. However, in his writings Paul does place Jesus Christ on par with Yahweh, thus showing that Paul believed that Jesus Christ was God.

First, Paul directly calls Jesus Christ God. For example, Paul wrote in the Letter to the Romans, “They are Israelites . . . and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever” (Rom 9:4–5). Here, Paul clearly identified the human nature of Christ and the divine nature of Christ, thus articulating that Jesus Christ is both God and man.

Secondly, aside from directly calling Jesus Christ “God”, Paul also applied divine titles to Jesus Christ. For example, Paul referred to Jesus Christ as “Kyrios” (“Lord”). In the Greek Old Testament being used during Paul’s time (the Septuagint), Kyrios was used in place of “the Hebrew Yahweh”; and then Paul, who wrote his letters in Greek, applied the title Kyrios to Jesus Christ, thus identifying Christ as Yahweh. An example of Paul calling Christ “Lord” is in the

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19 Ibid., (emphasis in the original).
20 Ibid., 262–264 (With regard to changing the punctuation of the sentence in order to change the meaning of the sentence, Cotter states that such “proposed punctuation sins against the context, against Greek grammar, and against the invariable structure of doxologies.”).
21 Ibid., 272–273.
22 cf. Ibid.
First Corinthians epistle: “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you . . . ” (1 Cor 2–3) (emphasis added).  

Thirdly, Paul applies divine attributes to Jesus Christ. For example, Paul described Jesus as being “in the form of God” (Phil 2:5–6), which “means having the divine nature.” Moreover, Paul immediately subsequently observed that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:5–7) (emphasis added), which means that Jesus “freely relinquished that external glory and honor which was His due” because He is God. Paul taught that Jesus Christ was God by directly calling Jesus “God,” by applying divine titles to Jesus, and by applying divine attributes to Jesus.

**Paul’s Teaching on the Eucharist**

In addition to Christology, the writings of Paul also teach us about the Eucharist. First, a study of Paul’s writings indicates that he viewed the Eucharist as a thanksgiving sacrifice. Paul connected the Lord’s Supper with the Hebrew Old Testament *todah* sacrifices (thanksgiving sacrifices). Paul does so through describing Jesus as having “*eucharistésas*” (given thanks)
during the institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:24). Paul also highlighted the sacrificial aspect of the Lord’s supper when he compared the Lord’s Supper with the Israelite and pagan sacrifices (1 Cor 10:18–21). Furthermore, the words said by Christ during the institution of the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26) “evoke[] [a] covenant ratification ceremony” (especially that of Exodus 24:6–8), and such a covenant ratification ceremony entailed sacrifice.

Paul’s Eucharistic theology not only entailed the Eucharist as a sacrifice, but also held that the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Paul, in relating the institution of the Last Supper, wrote that Jesus said “Do this in anamnesis of me” (1 Cor 11:24). The word anamnesis means not just “memory”, but also connotates “calling a past event into the present.” It is also noteworthy that anamnesis, when used elsewhere in the Bible, always “appears in a sacrificial context.” In addition, Paul taught that “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 there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16–17). While “the body of Christ” certainly can be understood in certain contexts in a spiritual sense, that is, understood as

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29 Ibid., 118–124 (The todah sacrifices and the Lord’s Supper are further connected together with the fact that the todah sacrifices “were offered with wheat flour and wine (Num 15:1–10)”, just as the Lord’s Supper involved bread and wine. See Marshall, The Catholic Perspective on Paul, 120).
30 Ibid., 122–124.
“the church as a whole” (and hence, if here the phrase were to stand alone, arguably “the bread” could be understood in a spiritual sense), the addition of the phrase “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?” shows that Paul intended the bread and wine to be literally understood as the body and blood of Christ. 

This is because “nowhere in Paul’s letters does the apostle ever use the blood of Christ as an image for the church.”

Likewise, Paul taught that “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor 11:27–29). Similar to the previous reasoning regarding verses 16–17, the inclusion of the “blood of the Lord” indicates “that an offense against the elements of the meal themselves is his primary meaning.”

According to Paul, not only is the Eucharist a sacrificial meal, and the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ, but furthermore it also follows that partaking in the Eucharist is efficacious. That is, partaking in the Eucharist has a real effect on the recipient. For example, Paul wrote that “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 11:17). For Paul, the reception of the Eucharist (the body of Christ) brings about and actualizes the body of Christ. In other words, “through participating in the

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34 Ibid., 128.
36 cf. Ibid.
Lord’s Supper, then, the community becomes what is consumed – the body of Christ.”39 Or, to put it in a more colloquial way: we become what we eat.40

**Paul’s Teaching on Justification**

Another important feature of Paul’s theology is his teaching on justification. Paul taught that justification occurs through Jesus Christ and pursuant to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.41 For example, Paul wrote

> While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him 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.

(Romans 5:6–10).42 For Paul, justification entails a genuine internal re-creation and transformation of the heart. Paul further taught that this genuine internal re-creation and transformation of the heart is a gift, and that this gift can be subsequently rejected. In addition, Paul taught that justification entails faithfulness and is ultimately conformity to Christ.

**Justification as transformation of the heart**. Pauline justification entails both a judicial (external) element and a moral (internal) element.43 For example, Paul wrote that

> you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. . . . Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory . . ., how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of

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42 cf. Ibid.
justification abound in glory!

(2 Cor 3:3,7–9). Here, Paul highlights how the Old Law was external (written on stone tablets), whereas the New Covenant is internal (written on human hearts).\(^{44}\) Paul’s writings show that Paul understood the Torah (i.e., the Old Law of Moses) as good and a gift from God (cf. Rom 7:12; 7:14; 9:4; 11:29; 2 Cor 3:11).\(^{45}\) However, for Paul “the problem with the torah . . . was that it is incapable of bringing about obedience.”\(^{46}\) The Torah was ultimately deficient (in comparison with the New Covenant) because it was not accompanied by grace.\(^{47}\) The failure under the Old Law (St. Paul refers to that failure here as the “ministry of death” and “ministry of condemnation”) was a failure of the heart, as indicated in the books of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel.\(^{48}\) The juridical “condemnation” under the Old Law is due to the “actual disobedience” that had occurred.\(^{49}\) The Torah set out rules to be obeyed (i.e., the “works of the law”\(^{50}\)) but did not provide the means through which obedience to those rules could be realized,\(^{51}\) and its inability to bring about obedience resulted in failure and condemnation.\(^{52}\) The Old Law is essentially an external law. In contrast, Paul taught that the New Covenant established by Christ entails a genuine internal re-creation and transformation of the heart.\(^{53}\) In the passage from

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\(^{44}\) Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew*, 173.
\(^{46}\) Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew*, 166.
\(^{47}\) cf. Ibid., 43–44, 166.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 170–172.
\(^{49}\) cf. Ibid., 173.
\(^{50}\) Marshall, *The Catholic Perspective on Paul*, 50–51.
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) cf. Ibid., 172–186, 207–209 (This genuine internal re-creation and transformation of the heart is what Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid refer to as “cardiac righteousness”).
Second Corinthians (3:3,7–9) (quoted above), Paul is showing how the New Covenant is qualitatively different from the Old Law by highlighting the fact that “if the ministry of righteousness is only juridical [i.e., external] and not moral [i.e., internal], then it suffers from the very same problem . . ., namely, it is only extrinsic.”⁵⁴ Whereas the Old Law required “works of the law” (e.g., circumcision), the New Covenant is concerned with a circumcision of the heart (cf. Rom 2:29).⁵⁵

As another example, justification as actual transformation can also be seen in Paul’s words, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:17, 21).⁵⁶ Here, Paul depicts the believer as a new creation, and furthermore the believer is depicted as not just being declared righteous, but “becoming righteous.”⁵⁷ Moreover, for Paul, rather than being a single one-time event, justification is a past event (e.g., “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” 1 Cor 6:11), a present ongoing event (e.g., “our inner nature is being renewed day by day” 2 Cor 4:16), and a future event (“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified” Rom 2:13).⁵⁸

**Justification as gift.** For Paul, salvation is a gift from God, and cannot be earned or

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⁵⁴ Ibid., 173 (emphasis in the original).
⁵⁵ cf. Ibid., 178.
merited.⁵⁹ Paul wrote that “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph 2:8–10).⁶⁰ However, our saving justification can be lost, the gift subsequently rejected by the believer.⁶¹ For example, Paul referred to some Christians as having “fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:4).⁶² Paul also acknowledged the possibility of and the need to guard against his own self forfeiting the gift of salvation: “I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27).⁶³ This possible subsequent loss of salvation could occur through a Christian’s lack of faithfulness.

**Justification as faithfulness.** Pauline justification entails not just “faith” strictly circumscribed as “intellectual assent.”⁶⁴ Rather, for Paul justification entails “faithfulness.”⁶⁵ In Paul’s theology, “faith” “is a . . . all-encompassing virtue”, going beyond just simply an intellectual belief and connotating “embodied fidelity.”⁶⁶ For example, Paul uses the term *pistis* (“faith”) “to signify true faithfulness or fidelity” when he wrote “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal 5:6).⁶⁷

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⁶¹ Ibid., 88–98.
⁶² Ibid., 89.
⁶³ Ibid.
⁶⁷ Ibid.
Conformity to Christ. For Paul, justification is not only an ongoing gift that entails a righteous heart and faithfulness. Ultimately, justification is conformity to Christ. Paul taught that “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . . And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified” (Rom 8:29–30). This conformity to Christ is pursuant to and the manifestation of the life of Christ within the believer. This is shown in the words of Paul: “And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ . . . . and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Gal 2:16, 20). Pauline justification entails becoming like Christ, conforming our character to His character. This assertion is supported by Paul’s directive to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14), and his observation that “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27), because in the ancient world “being clothed with another person” meant that one was “putting on the person’s character.” In Pauline theology, through the life and Spirit of Christ within them, Christians are initially conformed and further enabled to mirror the character of Christ, given a share in His divine life.

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68 Ibid., 186.
70 cf. Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, Paul, a New Covenant Jew, 194 (This is not to say, however, that the Christian loses his individual agency or identity: “This does not mean Paul is no longer an acting subject. Christ has not canceled out the believer’s role.” “Rather, all acts are both fully the result of the gift of grace [i.e., “Christ’s indwelling in the believer”] and fully performed by believers.” Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, Paul, a New Covenant Jew, 167–169).
71 Ibid., 194.
73 Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, Paul, a New Covenant Jew, 200.
74 Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, Paul, a New Covenant Jew, 200.
and empowered “to participate in His redemptive work.”

Conclusion

Metaphor, paradox, and writing in the role of a poet were some of the writing methods used by Paul to share and teach the gospel. Paul’s writings explored many theological topics, including Christology, the Eucharist, and justification. In his Christology, Paul taught that Christ is God Incarnate. In this Eucharist theology, Paul taught that the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In his justification theology, Paul taught that justification entails an actual internal transformation of the heart, that justification is a gift and it is possible to reject that gift, and moreover that justification is ultimately conformity to Christ.

References


