

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 47 (1991)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Paul, Tradition and Freedom
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878150>

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Paul, Tradition and Freedom

The debate between “conservatives” and “liberals” within any religious tradition is a perennial one. The disputes between those who would assert the continuing validity of past tradition and those who would claim the right to innovate in relation to some aspect of the past can be documented from almost every period of the history of Judaism and Christianity (and doubtless other religions too). Of course no theologising within a religious tradition can break with that religion’s tradition entirely. Otherwise it would not be recognisable as part of the same religious tradition. But the extent to which change from the past is felt to be desirable or necessary is inevitably a matter of debate. Theology thus involves a continuous dialogue with earlier tradition.¹

For early Christians the problem of continuity with the past had its own peculiar features. The Christian movement started off as a group within Judaism and thus laid claim to Jewish tradition as its own. However, Christian claims about Jesus inevitably led to other claims involving some sort of innovation in relation to the Jewish past. Further, the social divisions between Christianity and Judaism gradually became so intense that the two came to be regarded as separate “movements”, or even in the course of time separate “religions”, with thus competing claims being made by socially distinct groups to the same religious tradition. In addition, the very passage of time inevitably led to Christianity itself developing its own body of tradition as earlier ideas and utterances became part of the past. The Christian movement in its early days thus had to grapple with problems of tradition and innovation at different levels. The whole topic is of course an enormous one, with many ramifications. What I wish to do here is to consider just a few aspects of how one Christian, Paul, tried to deal with some of these problems, bearing in mind too the enormous importance that is now attached to Paul insofar as he himself has now become a very important, or even “normative”, part of the Christian tradition in the canon of scripture of the Christian church.

¹ From the side of the Christian religion, see R. Morgan, *Expansion and Criticism in the Christian Tradition*, in: M. Pye & Robert Morgan (eds.), *The Cardinal Meaning*, The Hague 1973, 59–101.

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Paul uses a wide variety of traditions. Like any author, Paul does not write from a total cultural vacuum. He comes to the matters he discusses from various backgrounds. Further, he evidently believes that he shares various things in common with his readers, at least sufficient to enable a level of communication to take place.

Paul was a Jew. He had been a Jew prior to his becoming a Christian, and he evidently thought that, at one level at least, he remained a Jew all his life (cf. Rom 11. 1. Whether others agreed with him is another matter.²) Thus Paul uses many traditions from his Jewish background whilst writing as a Christian. He can cite the Jewish Law extensively. He regards (some of) the commands of Decalogue as applying without question to the Christian (Rom 13. 8–10). The verse in Deut 25. 4 about muzzling oxen is regarded by Paul as wholly relevant for the present provided that it is interpreted “properly” as applying to the financial support of Christian apostles (I Cor 9. 9 f.). And so Paul in Rom 15. 4 can make an almost complete “take-over bid” for the Old Testament: the Old Testament was written “for our sake”, and hence is applicable for the Gentile Christians in the present quite as much as for non-Christian Jews.

Paul’s debt to Judaism goes of course much deeper than this. Paul can make use of Jewish exegetical traditions. For example, many have argued that Paul’s language in I Cor 10. 4 about the wilderness rock, which he identifies as Christ himself, presupposes a Jewish exegetical tradition which spoke of a well actually following the Israelites in the desert;³ possibly too there is a reflection of the interpretation that the rock was to be equated with Wisdom, so that Paul’s claim that “the rock was Christ” is to be seen as part of his Wisdom Christology.⁴ And at more general level, one may note the way in which several facets of Jewish faith are presupposed by Paul without ever being discussed. Monotheism is assumed throughout almost all of Paul’s

² For a strong statement of the radical discontinuity between Paul’s Christianity and Judaism, see H. Räisänen, *Galatians 2. 16 and Paul’s Break with Judaism*, NTS 31 (1985) 543–553. At the social level too it is clear that Paul’s Christian communities must have separated from their Jewish neighbours: cf. M. Y. McDonald, *The Pauline Churches*, Cambridge 1988, 23 ff.

³ See E. E. Ellis, A note on I Cor. 10:4, JBL 70 (1957) 53–56, repr. in: *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, Tübingen 1978, 209–214.

⁴ Cf. Philo *Leg. All.* 2. 86. See H. Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, Göttingen 1969, 196; also J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, London 1980, 183 f., with further references.

letters.⁵ Paul also assumes without any question at all several of the basic presuppositions of a Jewish eschatological framework of thought.⁶ It is perhaps one of the more surprising features of Paul's letters that he assumes so much from his Jewish background, even when writing to a predominantly Gentile Christian community such as that at Thessalonica (cf. I Thess 1.9). How much Paul's readers in fact picked up from his letters we cannot tell, but Paul evidently expected quite a lot in this respect.

Paul can also at times take over elements from non-Jewish traditions. In I Cor 15.33 he quotes the Greek poet Menander with approval. His list of virtues in Phil 4.8 has been shown to correspond to lists of virtues praised in Stoic ethical writings.⁷ Further, such a process continued in the deutero-Pauline corpus with the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians.⁸

One must remember too that Paul was a Christian and, although probably the earliest Christian writer to whom we have direct access, his earliest letter (probably I Thessalonians) was written 20 years after Jesus' death and hence presupposes 20 years of the existence of Christian communities. M. Hengel has shown how explosive this era was in the development of Christian thought.⁹ It is clear that at times Paul is standing at the end of a very rich development in Christian thinking. He can thus cite earlier Christian formulations, as in Rom 1.3f., or Phil 2.5–11, or I Cor 15.3–5. So too Paul is evidently aware of some tradition of the sayings of Jesus which he cites occasionally (cf. I Cor 7.10; 9.14; 11.23–25).

Traditions, however, need interpretation. Indeed one can almost say that any use of a tradition involves interpretation. Words change their meanings when placed in different contexts so that even the repetition of the same words may produce a different meaning when transferred to another set-

⁵ The only exception is perhaps I Cor 8, though there Paul seems to be less of a monotheist than the Corinthians! The Corinthians evidently assume that the assertion that "an idol has no real existence" means that other gods simply do not exist; Paul appears to assume that the slogan means that they exist, but they are of no value in comparison with the one true God.

⁶ See B. Lindars, *The Sound of the Trumpet: Paul and Eschatology*, BJRL 67 (1985) 766–782, on p. 766f.

⁷ Cf. J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, Leiden 1961, 152–156; W. Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, Eng. Tr. Edinburgh 1988, 200.

⁸ Cf. D. Lührmann, *Neutestamentliche Haustafeln und antike Ökonomie*, NTS 27 (1980) 83–97; D. L. Balch, *Let Wives be Submissive. The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*, Chico 1981, Part 1.

⁹ See the collection of essays in his: *Between Jesus and Paul*, Eng. Tr. London 1983, especially the essay *Christology and New Testament Chronology. A Problem in the History of Early Christianity*, 30–47.

ting.¹⁰ At other times traditions are open to more than one interpretation and a writer may wish to modify or correct what is said in the tradition. Paul's use of tradition is no exception. For example, Paul is often regarded as having adapted the mini-"creed" in Rom 1. 3 f. to avoid any "adoptionist" ideas. The tradition may have implied that Jesus only became Son of God at the resurrection. Paul adds the words "concerning his Son" at the start to make the whole creed refer to Jesus qua Son; and he adds "in power" so that Jesus is Son of God "in power" by the resurrection – a claim which leaves open the possibility of Jesus' being Son of God in another mode (in weakness?) before the resurrection as well.¹¹

But if Paul is ready to interpret traditions positively, there is nothing very surprising about this. Judaism had always been ready and willing to interpret its traditions, to accept that older sayings and laws needed clarification or even adaptation in the light of changed circumstances. The whole concept of an "oral tradition", or an "oral law" (whether it was called this in Paul's day is immaterial) testifies to this. However, an interpretation of a tradition generally maintains the fundamental validity of the tradition in question, for example by saying what Deut 25. 4 "really" means. It would be quite another matter to say "You *shall* muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain". Now Paul does not say this! Nevertheless, it seems to be a pervasive element in Paul's use of his tradition that he is prepared not only to interpret his traditions positively, but also at times to criticize and even reject them. This can be seen in Paul's use of the Jewish Law and in his use of Jesus tradition.

Jewish Law

The issue of Paul and the Law is an enormous topic which cannot possibly be treated with any degree of adequacy here. The secondary literature on the subject has mushroomed in recent years. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown clearly that Paul can be extremely critical and negative about the Law, and this at times goes far beyond being negative simply about a wrong use of the Law.¹² Even though (part of) the Decalogue still applies to the Christian

¹⁰ For the importance of context for meaning, see A.C. Thiselton, *Semantics*, in I.H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation*, Exeter 1977, 75–104; also P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Biblical Interpretation*, London 1989.

¹¹ Cf. E. Schweizer, *Röm 1, 3f. und der Gegensatz von Fleisch und Geist vor und bei Paulus*, *EvTh* 15 (1955) 563–571, on p. 563f.; K. Wegenast, *Das Verständnis der Tradition bei Paulus und in der Deuteropaulinen*, Neukirchen 1962, 70f.

¹² See above all H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, Tübingen 1983; also S. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*, Grand Rapids 1988.

(Rom 13), the law about circumcision must not be obeyed by Gentile Christians (Galatians). An apparently more conciliatory, though fundamentally similar, attitude appears outside Galatians: the food laws are by implication also of no importance for the Christian; all foods are clean and, at one level at least (though cf. below), the Christian is allowed to eat whatever he/she likes (cf. I Cor 8, 10; Rom 14).¹³ Nor is this simply a matter of the Jewish Law being applicable for Jewish Christians but not for Gentile Christians. I Cor 9.21 makes it clear that Paul, although maintaining elsewhere that he is still a Jew (cf. Rom 11.1), regards the Law as no longer binding on himself. Paul also evidently expects others to follow suit in this respect: at Antioch Paul castigates the Jewish Christian Peter for not continuing to eat freely with Gentiles, and he calls Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship "hypocrisy" (Gal 2.13). In similar vein, A. Lindemann has shown how Paul's ethical injunctions in I Corinthians frequently cover issues discussed in the OT; but Paul hardly ever cites the OT and at times contradicts what the OT in fact says in such instances (e.g. on food laws, or meat sacrificed to idols).¹⁴

Explicit negative statements about the Law, and about the Mosaic covenant based on the Law, occur in Gal 3, II Cor 3 and Rom 7.1–6. These passages seem to show that Paul thinks that the Law as such is no longer binding on the Christian.¹⁵ Galatians could perhaps be written off as stemming from the heat of a bitter controversy and not representing Paul's considered view. But Paul's negative attitude to the Law comes to the surface more frequently than in Galatians alone. S. Westerholm has shown (to my mind convincingly) that the letter-spirit antithesis in II Cor 3 (and elsewhere) is a matter of Paul's ethics, not hermeneutics: the "letter" is not just a way of interpreting the OT, but it represents the demands of the OT dispensation itself.¹⁶ A similar picture emerges from Rom 7.1–6. The imagery is notoriously contorted, but the message is plain. The Law is binding on a

¹³ The question of whether the situation in I Cor 8, 10 concerns *Jewish* food laws is debated: cf. the survey of opinion in W. L. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth*, Chico 1985, 93 f.; but in Romans, Paul's use of explicitly Jewish terminology of "clean/unclean" in Rom 14.14 suggests strongly that Jewish food laws are in mind: see A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans*, Edinburgh 1988, 32 ff. In any case one can say that, even if the Jewish food laws are not of direct concern in the Corinthian debate, Paul's assertions about the rights of individual Christians to eat whatever they like clearly call into question the Jewish food laws by implication.

¹⁴ A. Lindemann, *Die biblischen Toragebote und die paulinische Ethik*, in *Studien zum Text und zur Ethik des Neuen Testaments*, FS H. Greeven, Berlin 1986, 242–265.

¹⁵ See especially Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 42 ff.

¹⁶ S. Westerholm, *Letter and Spirit: The Foundation of Pauline Ethics*, NTS 30 (1984) 229–248.

person only as long as a person lives; at death the Law ceases to apply. The Christian has died (in baptism?) – hence the Law no longer applies to the Christian.

It is thus hard to see Paul as thinking that the Law is still valid for the Christian and that the only thing rejected by Paul is a wrong *use* of the Law, a legalism.¹⁷ Rom 7.1–6 seems to imply more than this.¹⁸ Nor can one simply say that Paul distinguishes between “getting in” and “staying in”, and that he rejects the Law primarily in its capacity as an “entrance requirement”.¹⁹ Even Galatians itself speaks against this neat solution since the issue in Galatians is not how one “gets in”, but how one should be behaving once one is already “in”.²⁰ Nor can Paul’s critique of the Law easily be reduced to a critique of Jewish nationalistic attitudes to the Law which used the Law as a means to define and maintain national self-identity, with Paul then focussing primarily on the parts of the Law which distinguish Jews from Gentiles in popular estimation, i.e. the social “identity markers” of food laws, Sabbath observance and circumcision.²¹ Paul’s arguments in Rom 7 and II Cor 3 suggest that his critique of the Law goes far deeper than this.

¹⁷ The view above all of C. E. B. Cranfield; see his: *St. Paul and the Law*, SJTh17 (1964) 43–68, as well as his more recent ICC commentary on Romans; also H. Hübner, *Das Gesetz bei Paulus*, Göttingen 1978, at least for the Paul of Romans. Dunn (n. 21 below) is not dissimilar in arguing that it is *attitudes* to the Law which Paul rejects, rather than the Law itself.

¹⁸ See Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 42ff.; Westerholm, *Israel’s Law*, 130ff.

¹⁹ The view above all of E. P. Sanders; see his: *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, London 1977, and his: *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, Philadelphia 1983. Sanders does however clearly recognise that the behaviour which is required of the Christian and that required by the Mosaic Law, although similar in many respects, are not identical: cf. *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 104f.

²⁰ See R. H. Gundry, *Grace, Works and Staying Saved in Paul*, *Bibl* 66 (1985) 1–38, esp. p. 8f.; also J. D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Paul*, *BJRL* 65 (1983) 95–122, on p. 121.

²¹ See Dunn, *New Perspective*, and his: *Works of the Law and Curse of the Law*, *NTS* 31 (1985) 523–534. Both essays are reprinted in: *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, London 1990. In notes appended to each article in the reprinted version Dunn also responds to some critiques and clarifies his views (esp. 210, 238), explaining that he is not arguing that Paul simply deletes these parts of the Law, but that it is the social function of the Law and Jewish attitudes that are crucial. However, a weakness of Dunn’s approach is that he fails to explain how in concrete terms Paul regards the Law positively. Which commands are still to be obeyed, and why? Sanders’ views are not dissimilar to Dunn’s in claiming that the “works of the Law” rejected by Paul are simply the Jewish “identity markers”. See his: *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 104, 113f. For a critique see Westerholm, *Israel’s Law*, 117ff.

One must also say that Paul's attitude goes far beyond that of a Jewish teacher adapting the Law to a changed situation. Jewish teachers could happily countenance individual elements of the Law being altered, or even sometimes abrogated. (Even the Sabbath Law could be suspended in an emergency: cf. I Macc 2.39ff.). Yet such adaptation and interpretation works within the presupposition that the Law is fundamentally valid and binding. Paul's attitude at times questions this fundamental presupposition.

Jesus Tradition

The situation is similar in the case of Paul's use of Jesus traditions. There is not enough space here to enter into the question of the form of these traditions to which Paul had access, or how extensive Paul's knowledge was in this respect.²² What does seem clear is that Paul shows himself ready to interpret them at times highly critically. In I Cor 7 he cites Jesus tradition which asserts that divorce should not take place, but he applies it only to the case of Christian couples. Yet Paul seems not too concerned about the fact that cases of divorce may have occurred, only discouraging remarriage in such instances (v. 11a);²³ and in the case of a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian, Paul says that he has no ruling from Jesus and so gives his own opinion to the effect that in such cases the Christian partner should not stand in the way of a non-Christian partner who wishes to divorce. There seems to be little explicit justification for such a distinction in Jesus' teaching.²⁴

The situation in I Cor 7 is perhaps slightly ambiguous since we do not know for certain the exact form of Jesus tradition available to Paul, and so we cannot tell precisely how critical Paul is of his tradition. However, in I Cor 9 the situation may be clearer. In v. 14 Paul cites Jesus' "command" that those

²² See F. Neiryck, *Paul and the Sayings of Jesus*, in: A. Vanhoye (ed.), *L'Apôtre Paul*, BETL 73, Leuven 1986, 265–321, for a recent survey of some aspects of these problems.

²³ Unless, as argued by D. R. Catchpole, *The Synoptic Divorce Material as a Tradition-Historical Problem*, BJRL 57 (1974) 92–127, on p. 107, this is still to be regarded as part of the tradition cited by Paul, in which case it is Paul's Jesus who is unconcerned: hence the Jesus of Paul's tradition is much less hard-line than the Jesus of Mark's tradition.

²⁴ Though Catchpole (126) argues that Jesus' teaching is the ethic of the Kingdom, and for those who have not responded positively to Jesus' preaching the old order still pertains. This is however at most implicit, and Paul does *not* claim to be giving the teaching of Jesus at this point. It may be that Paul's "opinion" and Jesus' intention in fact coincide; but there seems to be no explicit awareness of this on the part of Paul.

who preach the gospel should live by the gospel, only to reject the validity of this command in his own case in the very next verse.²⁵ Some have argued that Paul is here seeking to reinterpret the saying of Jesus from a command into a privilege, perhaps trying to defend himself against the charge that he has evaded the requirements of an apostle to adopt a life of charismatic poverty.²⁶ Such an interpretation does however have to presuppose that I Cor 9 is something of a digression from Paul's arguments in chs. 8 and 10 about the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols.²⁷ Yet whilst Paul is quite capable of digressing, it is perhaps methodologically more appropriate to try, if possible, to interpret the chapter as an integral part of the whole argument in the wider context. Thus the older, traditional interpretation of the chapter seems preferable: Paul is not here defending his apostolic life-style against personal attacks, but is using it positively as an example to buttress his argument to the Corinthians that on occasions it is appropriate to give up one's rights for the sake of others.²⁸ As part of this argument, Paul builds up

²⁵ It is usually assumed that Paul is referring to, though not explicitly citing, the tradition of Jesus' saying recorded also in Mat 10.10/Lk 10.7. Paul's critical use of Jesus tradition here is rightly emphasized by D. L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul*, Oxford 1971, 3.

²⁶ See G. Theissen, *Legitimation und Lebensunterhalt: ein Beitrag zur Soziologie urchristlicher Missionare*, in: *Studien zur Soziologie des Urchristentums*, WUNT 19, Tübingen 1979, 201–230, on p. 216. However, even if Paul is seeking to reinterpret a command into a privilege, this still implies a radical attitude to the command itself: so rightly Dungan, *Sayings*, 20f.

²⁷ The view that I Cor 9 is something of a digression has also been defended recently by P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's relations with the Corinthians*, WUNT 2. Reh. 23, Tübingen 1987. Marshall claims that Paul is here defending himself against the charge of inconstancy brought against him by those in Corinth who had offered him a gift as a token of "friendship" which Paul had refused in order to preserve his own freedom and independence. (See especially ch. 6, also 282–92). However, Marshall's reconstruction of this part of the history of Paul's relationships with the Corinthians is not fully convincing. The rhetorical form of the question in 9.1 ("am I not free?") suggests that Paul's "freedom" is something that is common ground to himself and the Corinthians, and it is his *giving up* of (some aspects of) that freedom that is at issue; Paul is not trying to assert his freedom *de novo*. Further, Paul's references to his inconsistency in I Cor 9.19–22 are part of Paul's own positive arguments for his behaviour and do not appear to be defences against charges by others of inconsistency. (See the review of Marshall's book by D. B. Martin, *JBL* 108 (1989) 542–44.)

²⁸ See J. Jeremias, *Chiasmus in den Paulusbriefen*, *ZNW* 49 (1958) 145–156, on p. 156; H. Merklein, *Die Einheitlichkeit des ersten Korintherbriefes*, *ZNW* 75 (1984) 153–183, on p. 171f.; T. Engberg-Pedersen, *The Gospel and Social Practice according to 1 Corinthians*, *NTS* 33 (1987) 557–584, esp. n. 14 on p. 584.

an elaborate case for his right to claim material support for himself, including the reference to Jesus' "command" to this effect, and then says that he will not obey this command. However one judges the precise situation of the argument in the chapter, the attitude to the Jesus tradition is striking: Paul evidently claims the right to ignore the command at will.

Paul's use of Jesus tradition in I Cor 7 and I Cor 9 thus shows that Paul appears to feel free to interpret the Jesus tradition which he has in a radical fashion. There is moreover little evidence for the view that Paul contrasts the tradition of Jesus' teaching as one having supreme authority with his own (humble) opinion.²⁹ Such a view is often read out of the distinction Paul makes in I Cor 7.10, 12 between the command of Jesus which he does quote and the situation where he claims that he has no ruling from Jesus and so gives (only?) his own opinion. However, the other side of the coin is that Paul quite clearly has a very high view of his own opinion. In I Cor 7.40, Paul gives his own "opinion", which he immediately qualifies with the assertion "but I think that I too have the Spirit of God". Any distinction between the saying of Jesus and Paul's own opinion is thus not one of authority.³⁰ Thus despite the centrality of the crucified Christ for Paul's theology, Paul seems quite prepared to adapt, to change, and even at times to reject some of the teaching of Jesus which has come down to him.

The result of this brief survey is that Paul feels free not only to interpret traditions by adapting them; he also apparently feels free to reject some traditions altogether. Individual Jesus traditions, and at times even the OT Law, can be dispensed with by Paul in some circumstances. What then are the norms by which Paul decides that one tradition is dispensable? How can Paul decide that one part of the Jesus tradition which he assumes applies to himself (on support for missionaries) can in fact be ignored? How can he decide that one part of the OT heritage (half of the Decalogue) is absolutely binding on all Christian, one part (the food laws) is optional, and one part (circumcision) is absolutely forbidden for Gentile Christians?

It would be nice to be able to produce a neat answer which would solve all the problems concerned. This is probably not possible. It is hard to deny that, at one level at least, Paul is inconsistent.³¹ His attitude to the food laws,

²⁹ Cf. Schrage, *Ethics* 209; also his: *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in der paulinischen Paränese*, Gütersloh 1961, 238–249; Wegenast, *Tradition*, 106. Cf. too J. Drane, *Paul – Libertine or Legalist?*, London 1975, 135, who claims that in Romans especially Paul appeals to the teaching of Jesus over against his own subjective experience.

³⁰ See C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, London 1968, 163.

³¹ For the view that Paul's views about the Law are riddled with inconsistencies, see especially Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*.

implicit in I Corinthians and Romans, does not seem easy to reconcile with his attitude to circumcision in Galatians. If a Christian is encouraged by Paul to observe Jewish food laws in order to avoid giving offence to the scruples of others (as is arguably the case in Rom 14 and perhaps I Cor 8–10), why cannot a Christian accept circumcision to respect the scruples of others?³² Paul himself vehemently forbids the latter in Galatians. But why?

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Undoubtedly one category of fundamental importance for Paul is that of ἀγάπη, the attitude which regards the good of the other person as the one overriding principle in ethical behaviour.³³ Paul himself asserts that the love command is in some sense the “fulfilment” of the Old Testament law (Gal 5.14; Rom 13.9f.). Thus Paul can agree with the theories of the strong Corinthians at one level: “we all have knowledge” (I Cor 8.1a) and “there is no God but one” (I Cor 8.4), and so one may in theory eat what one likes; but knowledge is not as fundamental in the Christian life as ἀγάπη. Hence Paul immediately qualifies the Corinthians slogan: “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (I Cor 8.1b). Concern for the well-being of other Christians, concern to respect the consciences (albeit weak) of other members of the body of Christ, is more important for Paul in determining practical ethics than abstract theology. Systematic theology is subservient to ἀγάπη.

Why then does Paul apparently show so little love in writing Galatians? Why could Paul not have taken the same line in Galatians over the question of circumcision as he does over scruples about food in I Corinthians and Romans? Why could Paul not have allowed the Galatian Christians to accept circumcision to placate the consciences of the “weak” Judaisers in the same way as the strong Corinthians are exhorted by Paul to observe food regulations if necessary to avoid offending “weak” members of the Corinthian

³² The problem of Paul and the Law is often treated solely at the level of whether the Law (or part of it) is binding on the Christian or not. Perhaps just as problematic is the distinction Paul makes at times between some parts of the Law which *must* not be observed by (some) Christians and other parts which are optional.

³³ R. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives*, Cambridge 1984, 101: “The centrality of love (especially ἀγάπη) in Paul’s writings has been well established and is documented in virtually every major work on Pauline theology and ethics.” Cf. Schrage, *Ethics* 211ff.; J.T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament*, London 1975, 50ff.; V.P. Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament*, London 1973, 91ff.

community? Why too is Paul so hard-line with Peter in relation to food laws and table fellowship, but so easy going with the “weaker” Corinthians?³⁴

It is often said that Paul is so hard-line in Galatians because the action threatened or encouraged, i.e. circumcision, was an implicit denial of the full saving work of Christ. Thus, for example, C. K. Barrett writes: “The whole theological development of Galatians is a working out of the principle ‘Jesus only’ against the counter-principle of ‘Jesus and...’.”³⁵ This can however be taken at different levels. If the mutual exclusiveness of Christ and circumcision refers to these as “entrance requirements”, then this is effectively Sanders’ view, viz. that Paul’s negative statements about the Law refer primarily to the latter as a means of “getting in” for which the only Christian way is through faith in Christ. But against this Gundry’s critique of Sanders (cf. n. 20 above) still stands: the Galatians are already “in” and the question is how they should be behaving once they are “in”. On the other hand, if the principle of “Jesus only” is meant to apply to behaviour once one is already “in” (i.e. in relation to “staying in” rather than “getting in”), then it is not clear that this is really true to what Paul says elsewhere, even in Galatians. After all Paul clearly places other demands on his Christian converts, even from the OT (cf. Rom 13!).³⁶

At one level it would appear that Paul is being inconsistent, and, for example, Peter Richardson has argued persuasively that Peter’s behaviour at Antioch, about which Paul gets so irate in Gal 2, may well have been the result of Peter applying Paul’s principle of “accommodation”, or respecting the scruples of others (cf. I Cor 9.20f.), in a spirit of ἀγάπη.³⁷

³⁴ The contrast between the Paul of Galatians and the Paul of I Corinthians suggests that it is not really appropriate to label the former “libertine” and the latter “legalist”, as is done by Drane, *Paul: Libertine or Legalist?* In many ways the Paul of I Corinthians is far more libertine than the hard-line Paul of Galatians! There may well be differences between the various letters in the Pauline corpus, as Drane suggests, but its nature is perhaps not quite that which Drane argues.

³⁵ C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, London 1985, 17; cf. too G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Towards a New Understanding*, Atlanta 1985, 129: “Paul is not opposed to circumcision as such . . . But he is opposed to what its adoption by Gentile-Christians implies – the inadequacy of the death of Christ as the sole means of salvation”. Similarly, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Exeter 1982, 27.

³⁶ To argue as Westerholm does (*Israel’s Law*, 201 ff.) that Paul *never* places the Christian under the obligation to obey parts of the Law, and that texts like Rom 13 or Gal 5 are only instance of Paul describing, rather than prescribing, Christian behaviour seems unconvincing. Paul is surely implicitly prescribing in Rom 13, and moreover prescribing that Christians obey this part of the Law.

³⁷ P. Richardson, *Pauline Inconsistency: I Corinthians 9:19–23 and Galatians 2:11–14*, NTS 26 (1980) 347–362. Cf. too H. D. Betz, *Galatians*, Philadelphia 1979, 223.

However, at another level, it may be that Paul is being consistent. For what is at stake in Galatians (or so Paul asserts) is a denial of *freedom*. Paul argues that submitting to circumcision means submitting to being under the whole law and, according to Paul, the result is then slavery and a denial of freedom (cf. especially Gal 5.1–3). What Paul is so concerned about is not so much circumcision as such (which he concedes at one point is neither here nor there: cf. Gal 6.15) but the threat to the Galatians' freedom which the demand for circumcision is bringing. What I would like to suggest is that it may be the category of "freedom" which, in some sense at least, provides an element of consistency and coherence to Paul's apparently divergent attitudes to different groups within his communities in relation to different aspects of his tradition.

The theme of "freedom" has been the focus of a number of studies of Paul.³⁸ One must of course beware of the possible dangers of generalising too quickly on the basis of a single word, in Greek or in English, which may be covering a large number of very different ideas. For example, Jones has recently argued that Paul's language about "freedom" covers a wide variety of different ideas, of which "freedom from the law" is only rather peripheral.³⁹ However, one should not make Paul's own talk about freedom *too* diverse either. Paul himself seems capable of generalising from one kind of freedom to another: for example, he regards it as appropriate to bolster his own exhortation to the Corinthians to give up their "right" to eat meat freely by referring to his own (rather different) "freedom" as an apostle to claim financial support from his communities (I Cor 8–9).⁴⁰ Similarly the "freedom" of the Galatians from the law is illustrated by Paul in Gal 4.21–31 by the quite different "freedom" of Sarah in her status as a free woman by contrast with the slavery of Hagar.⁴¹

³⁸ Cf. in recent years R. Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, London 1964; H. Schürmann, *Die Freiheitsbotschaft des Paulus – Mitte des Evangeliums?*, *Cath (M)* 25 (1971) 22–62; F. Mussner, *Theologie der Freiheit nach Paulus*, Freiburg 1976; P. Richardson, *Paul's Ethic of Freedom*, Philadelphia 1979; B. Gerhardsson, *The Ethos of the Bible*, London 1982, 63–92, and his *Eleutheria* ("Freedom") in the Bible, in: B.P. Thompson (ed.), *Scripture: Meaning and Method*, FS A.T. Hanson, Hull 1987, 3–23; also the recent monographs of F.S. Jones, «Freiheit» in den Briefen des Apostels Paulus, *GTA* 34, Göttingen 1987, and S. Vollenweider, *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung*, *FRLANT* 147, Göttingen 1989.

³⁹ Jones, *Freiheit*, *passim*.

⁴⁰ For this as the basic thrust of I Cor 9, see above. I am also assuming that ἐξουσία and ἐλευθερία are virtually synonymous: Cf. Willis, *Idol Meat*, 113, 248, *pace* Merklein, *Einheitlichkeit*, 172, Vollenweider, *Freiheit*, 226. Cf. n. 42 below.

⁴¹ Cf. Vollenweider, *Freiheit*, 213, 286. For Jones' attempt to regard these various "freedoms" as separate, cf. the detailed critique of J.D.G. Dunn, *Bibl* 70 (1989) 428–432.

On the other hand, one must note the possibility that the idea I am proposing may not always be referred to by Paul as ἐλευθερία. Paul's use of ἐλεύθερος language may at times be varied, so that there are various levels of "freedom" at stake; and at other times, what we might think of as "freedom" may be referred to by Paul using other vocabulary. For example, in I Cor 8 Paul never speaks of the "freedom" to eat meat, but only of ἐξουσία. However, in I Cor 9 there seems to be a varied use of the "freedom" vocabulary. In v.1, being "free" appears to refer most naturally to Paul's right to claim support: the rhetorical questions of vv.1–6 all appear to be parallel to each other and hence are most naturally interpreted as a reference to Paul's right to receive support. But this freedom is something which Paul, by exercising a different "freedom" and at another level perhaps, gives up (v.19).⁴²

The underlying importance of freedom can now perhaps reconcile Paul's differing attitudes in I Corinthians and Galatians. As we have seen, what Paul is pleading for in I Cor 8–10 is an exercise of freedom (at least in one sense, even if Paul himself does not use the word explicitly in ch. 8). He is advocating that the strong Corinthians should *in their freedom* respect the scruples of the weak and if necessary observe food regulations. And this is not necessarily contradictory to the line he adopts in Galatians since the situations at Corinth and in Galatia are not quite the same. In I Corinthians Paul is addressing those who claim authority and freedom for themselves to decide how to behave in relation to other regulations; in Galatians Paul is addressing those whose freedom is being threatened (or so Paul claims) by demands from others, so that the decision about how to behave is being imposed from outside and is not being undertaken freely. What Paul is vehemently opposed to is one set of traditions being forced upon other

⁴² Vollenweider, following Merklein (cf. n. 40 above), interprets the freedom of v.1 as already referring to the giving up of (apostolic) rights. The parallel structure of the opening rhetorical questions in the chapter however suggest otherwise. Vollenweider's general word-study approach is perhaps pressing Paul's vocabulary into too uniform a mould. Vollenweider cites the claim of R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen 1948, 338: «Es bedeutet, dass die grundsätzliche Freiheit in jedem Augenblick die Gestalt des *Verzichtes* annehmen kann – des *Verzichtes* scheinbar auf die Freiheit selbst, aber vielmehr eine paradoxe Betätigung der Freiheit selbst ist.» I fully agree with this for Paul's fundamental thinking (cf. below) – my point is simply that this seems to apply to I Cor 9.19 (the text Bultmann himself refers to here) but not necessarily to the use of ἐλεύθερος in I Cor 9.1.

people.⁴³ If however other people freely decide to accept the obligations inherent in such traditions (as in I Corinthians), then Paul is happy to accept such a decision, provided it promotes the well-being of the wider community.

Whether this solves all the problems of the differences between Galatians and the other Pauline letters is not certain. It may have been that the Galatians were quite willing to accept the demands of the outsiders that they be circumcised.⁴⁴ And perhaps Paul is so concerned and angry precisely because the congregations were ready to accept these demands. On the other hand, some of Paul's vocabulary in Galatians may suggest that the circumcision campaign was not welcomed immediately (cf. Paul's reference to the outsiders "compelling" the Galatians to be circumcised in Gal 6.12).⁴⁵ This would in any case be a priori quite likely given the painful nature of the operation itself and also the negative view of circumcision held by non-Jews generally in the ancient world.⁴⁶ Further, the very fact that Paul writes at all and in such passionate terms suggests that the Galatians had not yet actually been circumcised (or if some of them had, some had not): Paul's reason for writing is precisely to dissuade them from doing so.⁴⁷ Paul does not seem to be faced with a complete *fait accompli*. Rather, he is warning his readers of what will/may happen if they carry out their proposed course of action; but the one-off nature of the event itself suggests that they have not yet put their "threat" into practice. All this may indicate therefore that the Galatians themselves were not wildly enthusiastic about circumcision. They were in the process of being persuaded by others of the necessity (or desirability) of the operation but had not yet all taken the step completely. Thus there may

⁴³ Thus when Bruce writes: "What disturbed him [Paul] was the enforcement or acceptance of circumcision as a legal obligation..." (Galatians, 27), I wonder whether the "enforcement" is rather more important for Paul than the "acceptance".

⁴⁴ This is assumed as almost axiomatic by many commentators, who then try to find reasons for the Galatians' willingness: cf. Betz, *Galatians*, 7f. and *passim*; J. M. G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, Edinburgh 1988, ch. 2, stressing possible social factors as well.

⁴⁵ Cf. A.E. Harvey, *Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy*, in Harvey (ed.), *Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study*, London 1985, 79–96, on p. 86 (though I am unpersuaded that the Galatians had previously been members of the Jewish synagogue, as Harvey argues).

⁴⁶ See Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.137; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.1; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5; see further, Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 46.

⁴⁷ Hence Galatians may be similar in many respects to Hebrews, where the "genre", and setting, of the whole must be borne in mind to come to a proper assessment of its message: cf. my: *Reading the New Testament*, London 1987, 72f.

be a real sense in which the demand for circumcision represented a demand *on* the Galatians to take a step which they may have been unwilling to take. The strong Corinthians can abstain from food freely. The Galatians, in accepting circumcision, would not be acting in freedom but would be accepting a severe curtailment of their freedom by others.

This same concern for freedom may also underlie Paul's argument with Peter at Antioch. At one level, one could well say that Paul is showing scant respect for Peter's freedom: why should not Peter have the same rights as the weak Corinthians to observe regulations regarding meals? On the other hand, Paul himself says that Peter's action cannot be seen in isolation.⁴⁸ For what Peter is effectively doing is denying the freedom of others: by his action Peter is "compelling" (Gal 2.14) the Gentiles to "judaize". Thus once again behavioural patterns are being imposed on others and it is this which Paul opposes as vigorously as he can.

If all this is on the right track, then concern for freedom can be seen simply as another aspect of the basic principle of ἀγάπη. In some circumstances, freedom (for oneself) can be constrained by ἀγάπη (for the other person): such is the situation in I Cor 8–10.⁴⁹ But in relation to the other person, Christian ἀγάπη must always maintain and respect the other person's freedom and integrity. Hence a denial of the other person's freedom (as in Galatians) is a denial of ἀγάπη and is to be opposed strenuously. But equally, Christian ἀγάπη must preserve the freedom of the strong as well. Thus Engberg-Pedersen argues that this is the reason why Paul appears at first sight rather compromising in his injunctions about the strong and the weak, giving rise to G. Theissen's interpretation of Paul's attitude as one of "love patriarchy".⁵⁰ However, rather than compromising, Paul is consistently maintaining his principle of ἀγάπη, but applying it to the strong as well as to the weak, so that the integrity of the strong is also respected and their behaviour is motivated on the basis of their own free choice. Rather than

⁴⁸ Cf. more generally G. Friedrich, *Freiheit und Liebe im ersten Korintherbrief*, ThZ 26 (1970) 81–98, on p. 93: «Freiheit ist keine Privatsache, sondern ob man frei ist, zeigt sich vielmehr an dem Verhältnis zum anderen» (though Friedrich is concerned primarily with the differences between Paul and the Corinthians in their understandings of "freedom"); also Vollenweider, *Freiheit*, 229f.

⁴⁹ There is debate amongst some about the precise relationship between freedom and love for Paul: is freedom curtailed and limited by love? Or is true freedom precisely the freedom to love? (Cf. Willis, *Idol Meat*, 293f. for a survey). I suspect that the question is perhaps a rather unreal one for Paul in that both answers are correct in their own way. Total license is curtailed by love; but equally the freedom which the Christian enjoys from God is the freedom to be able to love fully.

⁵⁰ Engberg-Pedersen, *Social Practice*, passim. Cf. Theissen, *Studien*, 268–271, 288f.

authoritatively imposing ethical decisions on the strong, Paul appeals to them so that they will make the decisions Paul is urging for themselves.⁵¹

The same principle of freedom and love may underlie Paul's critical use of Jesus tradition about apostolic support. Much here must remain speculative since we know so little of Paul's reasons in this area. We do know that, at first sight, Paul seems to have been inconsistent. He apparently refused to accept financial support from the Thessalonians (cf. I Thess 2.9) and from the Corinthians (cf. I Cor 9.15); yet whilst at Thessalonica he appears to have accepted money from the Philippians on more than one occasion (cf. Phil 4.16). We know too that Paul's behaviour in this respect landed him in great trouble later with the Corinthians who took his refusal as a sign of lack of love for them, if not of baser motives (cf. II Cor 11.7–11; 12.15–18).

It may be simply that Paul was inconsistent. Certainly Paul never explains his principles in full in any of his extant letters. However, it may be again that a principle of freedom, similar to that already discussed, was operative. If support were freely offered by others Paul would accept it. But if support were given with any suggestion of compulsion on the part of the giver, as might be the case if Paul were regarded as having an apostolic "right" to support, then Paul refused to accept money in this way: hence his refusal to accept money from the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. An offer of financial support from these groups, in the circumstances they were in, may have been regarded by Paul as the result of an obligation which would have been imposed on them from without and, as such, a threat to their freedom.⁵²

This suggestion differs from the proposal of, for example, Dungan, who suggests that one of the reasons for Paul's refusal was purely economic: the Corinthians and the Thessalonians may simply have been felt by Paul to be too poor to be asked to support him.⁵³ Against this, however, is the fact that Paul feels free to ask for financial contributions from the Corinthians to his

⁵¹ Cf. too J.-N. Aletti, *L'autorité apostolique de Paul. Théorie et pratique*, in A. Vanhoye (ed.), *L'Apôtre Paul*, BETL 73, Leuven 1986, 229–246, on p. 242. However, I remain unconvinced by some of the detailed argumentation of Engberg-Pedersen. For example, he argues that Paul in I Cor 6–7 would really like to persuade the Corinthians to be celibate and give up sex altogether, even within marriage; thus Paul lays down a rule for sexual relationships with a prostitute in ch. 6, and seeks to persuade the Corinthians to be equally ascetic within marriage in ch. 7. I find such an interpretation of I Cor 7 unpersuasive: cf. Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 153 ff.

⁵² In support of the suggestion made above, one may note that *Philippians* is one of the few letters in which Paul does not call himself an "apostle". Hence the *Philippians* may not have been giving to him to satisfy any "apostolic" "rights".

⁵³ Dungan, *Sayings*, 30f.

great collection.⁵⁴ My suggestion also differs somewhat from the recent theory of Marshall: Marshall argues that Paul's refusal to accept Corinthian money stemmed from his insistence on his own freedom and his refusal to be under the obligations of friendship which acceptance of the Corinthian money would have entailed.⁵⁵ However, as I argued above, I would not interpret I Cor 9 as a polemical assertion by Paul of his own freedom, but rather as a claim to give up one kind of freedom by exercising freedom at another level. Further, Marshall's theories still do not fully explain Paul's own inconsistency in accepting money from Philippi whilst refusing it from Corinth, even if his analysis of the conventions of friendship throw much light on the hurt which Paul's action evidently caused for the Corinthians.⁵⁶

The suggestions given here cannot solve all the problems of Paul's ethics and Paul's use of tradition. As already noted, Paul did not have to apply the principle of freedom in Galatians in the way he did. Nor does he seem to have had much respect for the freedom of Peter as an individual. Further, freedom for Paul is not total license.⁵⁷ In general terms one may say that "freedom" is always freedom from something and any mode of existence involves some kind of obligation, and perhaps denial of freedom, to someone or something.⁵⁸ Paul's talk of freedom is no exception. Freedom for the other is what Christian ἀγάπη works to establish. But freedom for oneself is limited by Christian ἀγάπη for others. Similarly, Christian freedom is limited by attachment to Christ.⁵⁹ Thus a sexual relationship with a prostitute, even if undertaken in freedom by both parties, is forbidden by Paul as incompatible with being in Christ and united with him in his body (I Cor 6.12ff., though Paul's argument comes dangerously close to excluding sexual relationships *in toto*.) At other times Paul can lay down ethical principles as self-evident with no argument. "Incest" (cf. I Cor 5.1) is wrong, however

⁵⁴ Other views are surveyed in Marshall, *Enmity*, 233 ff.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 243 f. On pp. 247 ff., he also suggests that Paul may have regarded the relationship between himself and the Corinthians as one of parent to children; hence he would not burden them and they should not be under obligation to provide for him.

⁵⁶ Presumably Paul saw himself as a parent to all the communities he had founded, including Philippi, and also valued his independence and freedom there. Paul's inconsistency is thus still unexplained. Marshall himself discusses Paul's "variance" (251 ff.), but does not seem to explain it satisfactorily.

⁵⁷ This point is made by several writers on Pauline ethics: cf. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, 62; Schrage, *Ethics*, 176, and many others.

⁵⁸ Cf. Friedrich, *Freiheit*, 91, 93; Aletti, *Autorité apostolique*, 241. More generally, cf. F.G. Downing, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom*, London 1987.

⁵⁹ Cf. D. Lührmann, *Der Brief an die Galater*, Zürich 1978, 80, and the discussion in Bultmann, *Theologie*, 336 ff.

much freedom or ἀγάπη there may be. Freedom for Paul is the paradoxical freedom to be a slave (cf. Gal 5.13), and moreover a slave of Christ.⁶⁰ Further, freedom in relation to ethics and behaviour has to be distinguished sharply from freedom in relation to doctrinal and soteriological matters for Paul: ethical freedom is not allowed to prejudice in any way belief in the full saving work of Christ and the implications of this (cf. Gal 2.20).⁶¹ Nevertheless it may be that this principle of ἀγάπη for others, which works to establish the freedom of the other whilst if necessary curtailing the freedom of oneself, is of fundamental importance for Paul and enables him at times to be highly critical of his traditions to the point of rejecting them altogether.

By way of conclusion, I offer a few observations on the possible significance of Paul's ideas for the present. At one level of course, Paul's theology can be left where it is: Paul is part of the first century and belongs there with nothing necessarily to say to the present. Yet in one way we can only fully grasp what Paul is on about precisely insofar as we ourselves are involved in not dissimilar debates about our traditions, about our behaviour and how we ourselves might do our theology.⁶² And for those who are Christians, Paul's letters themselves are now firmly established as part of the Christian tradition, enshrined in Christian scripture.

One basic principle of Paul's is clearly the fundamental importance of maintaining freedom in a spirit of love. Further, in doing so, it may be that some past traditions have to be jettisoned. Christian theology and praxis, according to Paul, must therefore be prepared to be *critical* of its traditions. Christian theology must maintain the freedom *not* to be bound to the past in a totally inflexible way. A truly Pauline Christianity must therefore always be ready to say that what was said or done in the past may no longer be sustainable in the present, however venerable the person or institution involved may be. Perhaps it may not be too bold to claim that, as with time Paul himself becomes a figure of the past, a truly Pauline Christianity must be prepared to say that even Paul himself may no longer be accepted without modification. A truly Pauline theology may perhaps have to be prepared to criticize, and even to reject, part of Paul's own writings. Thus R. Bultmann

⁶⁰ The paradox of Paul's language in Gal 5.13 is rightly stressed by Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 109.

⁶¹ I own this observation to my colleague, Dr. M. C. De Boer, who kindly commented on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁶² See N. Lash, *What Might Martyrdom Mean?*, in W. Horbury and B. McNeil (eds.), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, Cambridge, 1981, 183–198, for a trenchant criticism of attempts to try to drive a wedge between “what a text meant in the past” and “what a text means today”.

may in the end have been truer to Paul in his disagreement with K. Barth than Barth was, precisely because Bultmann was prepared to be critical of Paul.⁶³ Bultmann's claim to know Paul better than Paul knew himself,⁶⁴ and hence implicitly to be more Pauline than Paul, is not necessarily a piece of hybris but an insight of one who has reached to a, if not the, central feature of Pauline theology.⁶⁵ A theology which is true to Paul must thus always be a critical theology, ready to change and to adapt, ready to maintain the principle of freedom in love, if necessary in spite of its traditions, however venerable.

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⁶³ Cf. R. Bultmann, Karl Barth, «Die Auferstehung der Toten», in: *Glauben und Verstehen I*, Tübingen 1954, 38–64; also: *Das Problem der Hermeneutik*, *Glauben und Verstehen II*, Tübingen 1952, 211–235, on pp. 233–5. For the whole question of Bultmann's *Sachkritik*, see R. Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, London 1973, 42 ff.

⁶⁴ Cf. Bultmann, Karl Barth, 63.

⁶⁵ Cf. Morgan's wry comment: "As an experienced theologian, Paul can appreciate Bultmann's interest in *Sachkritik*." (*Nature*, 50).