

Pauline Polarities

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The study of Paul can be organized around polarities of arguments. Scholars position themselves along a continuum circulating around these polarities. Ten defining polarities can summarize the bulk of argumentation about Pauline thought. These ten polarities reveal four major concentrations: (1) methodology, (2) worldview, (3) hermeneutic, and (4) theology.

(1) Methodological Polarities

One issue is methodology. Two sets of polarities can be observed among scholars, one circulating around the issue of the extent of the Pauline corpus, the other circulating around the establishment of a chronology of Paul, particularly the use of Acts as a source for Pauline chronology.

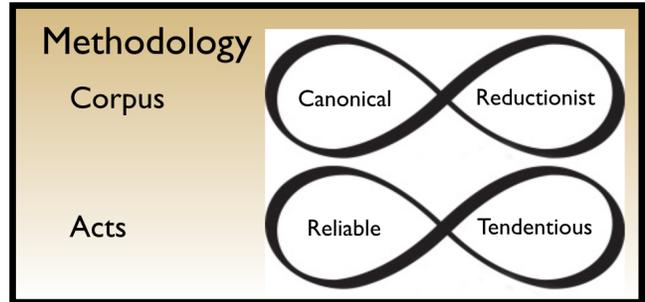


FIGURE 1. Methodological Polarities

(a) *Corpus*. Consider the question of the epistle corpus. Which letters are Paul's? Opinions circulate around the two foci of canonical or reductionist, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If canonical in full (Carson), how are the Pastorals in particular to be fitted into the matrix for explaining "Pauline thought"? If reductionist (Baur), how reductionist? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, "Will the real writing Paul please stand up?"

(b) *Acts*. Consider the question of chronology. How does one establish a chronology of Paul's life upon which to hang the sequence of his letters? This question quickly devolves into the question of the use of Acts. Opinions circulate around the two foci of Acts as historically reliable (Keener) or so tendentious as to be unusable (Smith and Tyson), or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. Establishing some type of Pauline chronology is crucial because any discussion concerning the apostle's theological development also needs to address a proposed historical outline of his life and ministry. Therefore, the question of whether to use Acts and to what extent Luke's narrative can be trusted as historically reliable necessarily factors into any discussion of Pauline chronology. The methodological conundrum is, if we eliminate Acts altogether, we have practically no historical foundation for Pauline chronology, leaving proposed chronologies with minimal results and almost no consensus. These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, "Will the real historical Paul please stand up?"

(2) Worldview Polarities

A second issue is worldview. Two sets of polarities can be observed among scholars. One circulates around the issue of the fundamental foundation of Paul’s religious worldview, with questions about the word “religion.” The other circulates around Paul’s social worldview.

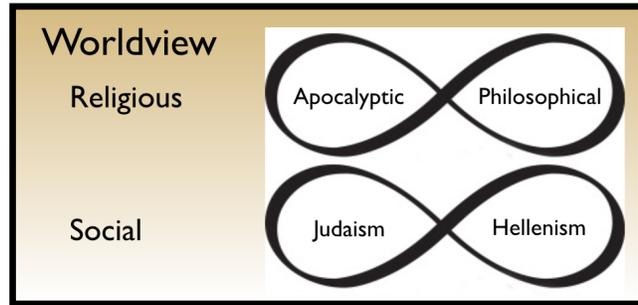


FIGURE 2. Worldview Polarities

(a) *Religious*. Consider the question of Paul’s religious worldview, where even the concept of “religion” itself is argued as a thoroughly post-enlightenment concept completely foreign to the first-century mind. Opinions circulate around the two foci of apocalyptic or philosophical, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If the religious frame of Paul’s thought issues from an apocalyptic ground (Schweitzer, Käsemann, Beker, Martyn, Wright), how apocalyptic, and in what way exactly? Simply, imminent expectation (Käsemann) or historically disrupting inbreaking (Martyn)? Is Paul framing his thought loosely on an existing, Jewish, two-age eschatological structure allowing for continuity between past and present ages (Wright), or is Paul in a truly radical frame of mind such that the apocalyptic inbreaking of Christ has so shattered all realities as to create total discontinuity between past and present (de Boer, Martyn)? If the religious frame of Paul’s thought issues from a philosophical ground (Campbell), what are the contours of Paul’s philosophical reflections, Jewish, Greco-Roman, or a mix? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real foundational Paul please stand up?”

(b) *Social*. Consider the question of Paul’s social worldview. Opinions circulate around the two foci of Judaism or Hellenism, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If Paul is Hellenistic (Baur, Bousset, Bultmann), his so-called “Jewishness” is the husk, and “Judaism” becomes just another example of “self-effort” pagan religion and the Jew a proto-typical “religious human.” If Paul writes exclusively to pagans (Gager, Gaston, Fredriksen), are Jewish categories then only rhetorical devices to persuade a Gentile audience? Paul evokes little that is Jewish and quickly and easily adapts to Greco-Roman values generated within Greco-Roman philosophy (Stowers, Campbell). On the other hand, if Paul is Jewish (Schweitzer, Stendahl, Davies, Sanders, Dunn, Wright, Watson, Meeks), how Jewish, and in what way exactly (apocalyptic, rabbinic, social)? If Jewish, what about Israel? Does Paul’s Jewish frame involve an inherent worldview encapsulated in a metanarrative, the story of Israel (Hayes, Wright)? Does Paul conceive continuity with Israel’s story (Calvin) or discontinuity (Luther, Stuhlmacher, Martyn, Campbell)? Or, is the Jewish Paul best interpreted in sociological categories that eschew theological constructs (Judge, Theissen, Malina, Neyrey, Elliott, Esler, Meeks, Jewett)? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real sociological Paul please stand up?”

(3) Hermeneutical Polarities

A third issue is hermeneutic. Two sets of polarities can be observed among scholars. One circulates around the issue of Paul’s logic. The other circulates around Paul’s use of Scripture.

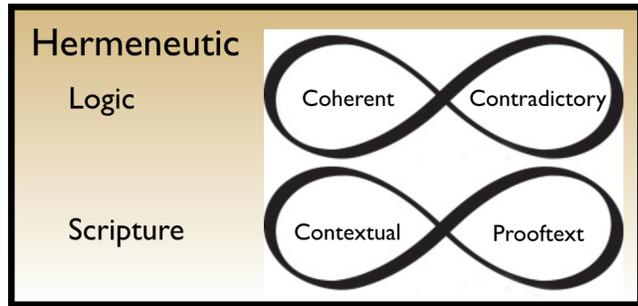


FIGURE 3. Hermeneutical Polarities

(a) *Logic*. Consider the question of Paul’s logic. Opinions circulate around the two foci of coherent or contradictory, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If coherent (Beker), what is the organizing center? Is this center justification by faith (Reformers), or “in Christ” mysticism (Schweitzer), apocalyptic crisis (Martyn), or some other idea? If contradictory (Räsänen), at what level? Pragmatic inconsistencies or philosophical impossibilities? Was Paul aware of tensions in his thought, and if so, did he successfully or unsuccessfully deal with them, or did he just ignore them? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real logical Paul please stand up?”

(b) *Scripture*. Consider the question of Paul’s use of Scripture. Opinions circulate around the two foci of contextual or proof-texting, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If contextual (Ellis), what text and what context? Further, was he faithful to the original context? If proof-texting (Campbell), was this process purely pragmatic, or was some thought applied that was analogical or even historical? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real intertextual Paul please stand up?”

(4) Theological Polarities

A final issue is theology. This is the mother lode category, engaging four sets of polarities that can be observed among scholars. The first polarity circulates around the issue of Paul’s atonement theory. The second is Paul’s Christology. The third is Paul’s anthropology. The fourth is Paul’s theological process over the course of his ministry.

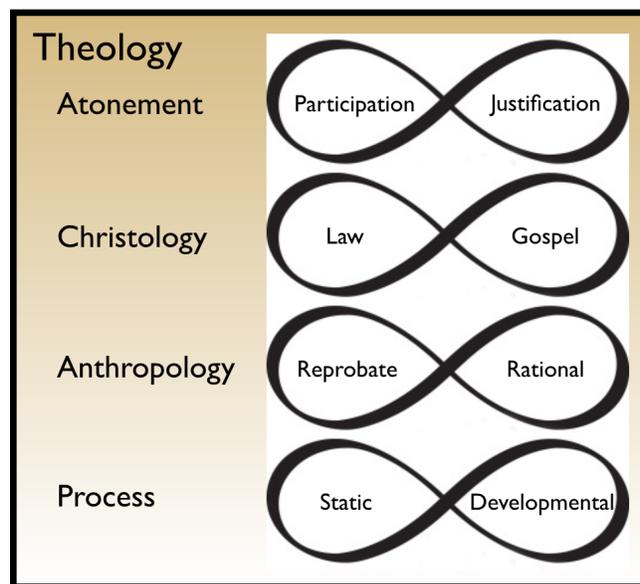


FIGURE 4. Theological Polarities

(a) *Atonement*. Consider the question of atonement theory and its fraternal twin, the center of Paul’s theology. Opinions circulate around

the two foci of participation or justification, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If justification is the center of Paul’s thought (Luther), is this forensic declaration (Augustine) or dynamic mediation (Käsemann)? If participation (Schweitzer, Sanders, Campbell), is this rhetorical only (Reformers) or existential (Schweitzer, etc.)? Does Paul speak sociologically in terms of fictive kinship (Malina), or personally in terms of the essence of being (Schweitzer)? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real soteriological Paul please stand up?”

(b) *Christology*. Consider the question of Paul’s Christology. Opinions circulate around the two foci of law or gospel, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. The problem exposes the exegetical difficulty of synthesizing Galatians into Romans for a coherent picture. Difficulty finding middle ground between the two epistles inevitably inclines the exegete to emphasize one over the other. Emphasis on Galatians puts more negative opinion on law and tends to generate an “either/or” logic on the question, that is, either law or gospel, but not both, so gospel displaces law (Luther, Carson, Gathercole, Das, Westerholm, Longenecker). The Achilles heel of the view is the question of Israel as the people of God. Is gospel to be understood as continuous with the story of Israel (Longenecker) or discontinuous (Bock)? Emphasis on Romans puts more positive opinion on the law and tends to generate a “both/and” logic on the question, that is, both law and gospel integrated together (Calvin, Cranfield, Ridderbos, Wright, Watson). Even if law is viewed as positive, is this law to be understood as corporate covenant (Wright) or individual performance (Dunn)? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real messianic Paul please stand up?”

(c) *Anthropology*. Consider the question of Paul’s anthropology. Opinions circulate around the two foci of reprobate or rational, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. If reprobate (Calvin, Barth), then why appeal to human will? How does this make sense logically? If rational (Fitzmyer), what role does reason play within the process of human and divine communications and relations? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real anthropological Paul please stand up?”

(d) *Process*. Consider the question of Paul’s process, or theological development. Opinions circulate around the two foci of static or developmental, or somewhere in between leaning one way or the other. Was Paul’s theology stable from its inception (Kim) or in flux and developing (Becker)? If static, the idea is that as a trained Pharisee, Paul’s theological reflection already was highly developed and mature. He basically had all the theological components of his reflection on Christ in place from the beginning. If developmental, Paul’s theological reflection changed and adapted in parallel to mission experiences (Becker’s election, cross, justification scheme). The question would be what mission experiences in particular, and what theological reflection was provoked by those particular experiences? These polarities of thought have huge implications on even trying to answer the question, “Will the real developing Paul please stand up?”

Scholarly Continuum

Pauline scholars can be “typed” on a scholarly continuum circulating around these polarities. Scholars can be positioned relatively along the axis of the two foci controlling each polarity. Their guiding thoughts and controlling presuppositions thereby can be grasped quickly and understood. Only sample scholars have been used simply to be illustrative, not to be exhaustive. Observing this polarity principle brings order to the chaos of proposals and theories swirling around Pauline scholars and their publications. See the summary of these polarities in figure 5.

FIGURE 5. Summary of Pauline Polarities.

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