Encounter, Dissonance, and Reflection in the Dialectical Development of Paul's Theology (Chaper in Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond)

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CHAPTER 24

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Since the publication of Gerd Theissen's *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, Pauline scholars have taken renewed interest in experiential factors in the formation of Paul's theology, but few have approached the issue in terms of Paul's own faith development in cognitive-critical perspective.[1] Just when Pauline scholarship had been "liberated" from "psychologizing the text" by Krister Stendahl's analysis of Paul and the "introspective conscience of the west,"[2] Theissen's monograph might have been seen to be threatening the "New Perspective on Paul," signaled by James Dunn in his essay by that name.[3] However, a sustained consideration of the sociological dynamics of Paul's audiences and interests, which "New Perspective" developments have illumined so helpfully, does not preclude the relevance of psychological factors in Paul's own experience and theological development. If anything, these two disciplinary approaches inform each other remarkably if their findings are explored dialogically, and cognitive-critical approaches to other texts and gospel traditions might point the way forward in Pauline studies, as well.

1　Theissen's book was first published in German in 1983; the first publication of the English translation (by John P. Galvin) was in 1987 (Minneapolis: Fortress). Building on Theissen's work in an Eriksonian way, Terrance Callan notes distinctive phases within Paul's pre-Christian and Christian developments, including competition, zeal, boasting, and humility: *Psychological Perspectives on the Life of Paul: An Application of the Methodology of Gerd Theissen* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 16–39. Note also Henry Cadbury's identification of six themes (or phases) that remained concurrent within Paul's concerns, reflecting something of a "prismatic" personality; Paul demonstrates ongoing concerns regarding apocalyptic, dispensations, status, cosmic conflict, ethics, and mysticism, "Concurrent Phases of Paul's Religion," *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed., Shirley Jackson Case (New York & London: The Century Co.) 369–89. Thus, both development *and* continuity within Paul's theological concerns and understandings are apparent.

2　Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1976).

3　James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *Jesus, Paul and the Law; Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990). See also the important treatment of Paul's own development, N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018).

Along these lines, Alan Culpepper has made considerable contributions toward helping us understand cognitive realities *in front of* biblical texts—how the literary design of a work engages, provokes, and informs audiences and readers. This essay seeks to complement that approach by considering cognitive factors *behind* the texts of Paul's writings, just as they played formative roles in the origin, development, and crafting of gospel narratives.[4] It is with great appreciation for the privilege of working with Alan over fifteen years on the John, Jesus, and History Project (2001–2016), following him as NT editor of Brill's Biblical Interpretation Series, and now co-editing the Johannine Monograph Series (Wipf & Stock) together, that this essay is offered in celebrating his many contributions to understanding the anatomies of biblical texts within and beyond the canonical Gospels.

While "psychologizing the text" can pose an exegetical vulnerability, even more flawed is forgetting that biblical authors were humans, failing to note the reflective dialectic behind and in front of the text regarding perception, experience, feeling, and interpretation—cognitive factors in the development and the conveyance of content.[5] Making use of Cognitive-Dissonance Theory (Leon Festinger), Transformation Analysis (James Loder), Stages-of-Faith Theory (James Fowler), and Existential Logotherapy (Victor Frankl), this essay will consider the relation between experience and content in the theology of Paul of Tarsus regarding three central subjects: his epiphanic encounter on the Damascus road, his personal sense of mission to Jews and Gentiles, and at least two personal struggles in the light of perceived divine assistance—or lack thereof. First, however, allow me to say a bit about what I mean by Cognitive-Critical Biblical Analysis.

What is Cognitive-Critical Biblical Analysis?

As the Psychology and Biblical Studies Section of the national Society of Biblical Literature meetings has featured robust disciplinary sessions since

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4 Engaging issues in front of the text is the essay by R. Alan Culpepper, "Cognition in John: The Johannine Signs as Recognition Scenes," *NTS* 35.3 (2008): 251–60; engaging issues behind the text is the essay by Paul N. Anderson, "The Cognitive Origins of John's Christological Unity and Disunity," *HBT* 17 (1995): 1–24 (republished in *Psychology and the Bible: A New Way to Read the Scriptures*, ed. J. Harold Ellens, Volume 4 [Westport/London: Praeger Publishers, 2004], 127–49).

5 Albert Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus; and Exposition and Criticism*, trans. Charles R. Joy (1913, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1948). Walter Wink, The Bible in Human *Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

1991, my own approach within that field has sought to engage factors of episte-mological origins, traditional development, existential engagement, rhetorical presentation, and audience reception with relation to biblical studies. What I call Cognitive-Critical Biblical Analysis works with several assumptions, chal-lenging some prevalent approaches within the field.[6]

- First, biblical material is written by *subjects* (persons), not objects. Therefore, applying grids of objectivism, uniformity, and consistency over a text or its author's work is not only unscientific; it tends to be distortive. Further, despite the laudable values of consistency and coherence embraced within the modern era, expecting such of ancient writers in the Mediterranean world, especially over a diversity of genres, forms, situations, epochs, and intentions (especially the case among the Pauline writings) produces flawed inferences of "impossibilities," requiring sometimes even more problematic literary solutions.[7]
- Second, source, form, and redaction analyses, while at times being help-ful in ascertaining the relation between earlier and later materials where evidence of disparate texts or forms is clear, too often diminish the voice of an author—whoever that person might have been. All too easily, text-oriented scholars project their fascination with texts onto the work of their subjects, when biblical writers may have been working with oral traditions, secondary orality, their own recollections and impressions, and echoes of free-floating themes within their situational contexts. Thus, the facile assumption that similarities involved literary borrowing from other sources, or that influence happened in only one direction (instead of allowing for dialogical "interfluence" between traditions) readily distorts

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6   Paul N. Anderson, J. Harold Ellens, and James W. Fowler, "A Way Forward in the Scientific Investigation of Gospel Traditions: Cognitive-Critical Analysis," in *Psychology and the Bible:: A New Way to Read the Scriptures*, ed. J. Harold Ellens (4 Volumes, Westport/London: Praeger Publishers, 2004), Vol. 4, 247–76, which includes an overview of Cognitive-Critical Biblical Analysis (Anderson) and a review (Ellens) of and a response (Fowler) to Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, WUNT 2/78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996; printed in America by Trinity Press International, 1997; third printing including a new introduction, outlines, and epilogue, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

7   Thus, Stendahl commits an error of inferred consistency in his treatment of Paul's experi-ence and thought, similar to Bultmann's application of *Tendenz*-critical assumptions to an otherwise unitive Johannine text. If Paul was a dialectical thinker, as was John, one's analysis might be different: with C. K. Barrett, "The Dialectical Theology of St John," *New Testament Essays* (London: SPCK, 1972), 49–69.

our understandings of how authors worked. Sometimes variance may imply familiarity; one might even disagree with oneself, in putting a point alternatively, or distinctively in a different setting.

• Third, History-of-Religions approaches, while sometimes helpful in setting a backdrop for a biblical passage, often fail when they are used in hyperextended ways. Again, a parallel with a mythic or folkloric theme or feature may inform the context or the rhetorical target of a text, but such might not imply direct derivation. Too easily it is assumed that biblical writers simply took over contemporary religious themes, non-thinkingly, allowing interpreters to characterize meanings of a text in a particular way, often contrary to the point the author was making. Therefore, if there *are* religious parallels to biblical texts—Jewish, Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, or otherwise—asking *how* and *why* a motif is being engaged or employed relates centrally to considering the motive and meaning of the author.[8]

The results of diachronic biblical analysis over the last century or more thus function to truncate otherwise unitive texts and to try to assign differing subjects or features to different authors, editors, or sources. While some borrowing from texts did occur (especially among the Synoptic Gospels and among the Jewish historical traditions), not all of these inferences are critically solid. Indeed, tensions and perplexities within the Pauline corpus abound, but some of these may have been due to other factors involving human experience, insight, development, and reflection—let alone literary and rhetorical factors.[9] Therefore, in seeking to pose a cognitive-critical way forward for Pauline studies, the following questions deserve consideration.

• First, what is the relation between Paul's own experience and perception with relation to the development of his own theological understandings?

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8   See Cadbury's approaches to cognitive factors underlying biblical texts: Henry J. Cadbury, "Concurrent Phases of Paul's Religion," *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed., Shirley Jackson Case (New York & London: The Century Company, 1920), 369–89; "Mixed Motives in the Gospels," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 95 (1951): 117–24; "Varieties of Religion in the New Testament," *Friends Journal* 8 (1962): 120–22.

9   In any critical analysis of a classic text, its polyvalence—including theological, historical, and literary riddles and perplexities—must be considered if interpretation is to be at its interdisciplinary finest. See this additional essay honoring Alan Culpepper's good work: Paul N. Anderson, "From One Dialogue to Another—Johannine Polyvalence from Origins to Receptions," in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Future of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*, Resources in Biblical Studies 55, ed. Stephen Moore and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008), 93–119.

Saul of Tarsus reports to have had an understanding of covenantal Judaism to which the Jesus movement was a perceived threat; thus, what might have caused his own change of heart (and mind!) regarding Jesus' redemptive mission and the movement of his followers? And, what sorts of experiences might Paul have had among fellow Jewish leaders and among Gentiles, whose reception of the gospel message was variable and uneven? Might Paul also have struggled existentially, even as a grounded believer, when his expectations and hopes failed or were frustrated amidst his personal struggles and sufferings?

- Second, what tools for cognitive-critical interpretation will be most serviceable within the task of seeking to understand Paul as a human being? Are there research-established disciplines that help analysts appreciate more clearly how understandings change and perceptions are challenged by contravening experiences? As cognition often seeks to reconcile differences between one's beliefs and experiences, and dialectically so, how might this have been true for Paul? Did his understandings—even post-calling (or post-conversion)—develop, and if so, how might this have happened? Might Paul's developing theological understanding not simply have related to the content of his faith, but might it also have involved developments in the structures of his understanding, helping us understand better the content of his theology? As Paul discovered new insights and meanings reflectively—not only through his sufferings, but sometimes *because* of them—how might Paul's theological reflection be understood existentially, involving the discerning of meaning and thereby transcending the limitations of suffering and death?

- Third, in taking these experiential and cognitive factors in Paul's theological development seriously, several distortions are alleviated, challenging notions of: the converted Paul, the supercessionist Paul, the perfected Paul, and even the docetic Paul. It may also be the case that more than one interpretive approach may be worthily applied to a text, and several factors may contribute to understanding its meaning and implications. Therefore, as an interdisciplinary approach to the Pauline writings, Cognitive-Critical Analysis is best employed alongside other fitting methodologies rather than displacing them.

My approach to Cognitive-Critical Biblical Analysis thus employs any respectable disciplinary approach that both provides an understanding of some aspect of human cognition—including perception, experience, reflection, articulation, presentation—and serves effectively in elucidating an understanding of a thought behind a biblical text. Any strong disciplinary approach can be applied to biblical texts, but following are four useful models.

1) Cognitive dissonance theory

Since the publication of Leon Festinger's classic study on cognitive dissonance in 1957, cognitive-critical analysts have noted several features characteristic of human perception and behavior (reducing six points to three, here).[10] First, when faced with dissonance and contradictions between one's values, under-standings, actions, and feelings, subjects will seek to alleviate incongruities, either by correcting perspectives or by modifying behaviors as a means of maintaining cognitive equilibrium. Second, the intensity of the drive to mod-erate the dissonance is in direct proportion to the importance of the issues at stake to the subject, often leading to siding with the more highly valued ele-ment; resistance to change will also be a factor of the perceived importance of the feature being challenged. Third, the drive to alleviate cognitive disso-nance leads to changes in both behavior and attitude but also finds its way into expression, as the subject reflects upon his or her dialect between earlier perceptions, contravening experiences, and subsequent understandings.[11]

Carl Rogers described the work of the therapist in a similar way. Human anxiety, according to Rogers, is often a factor of incongruity between the per-ceived self and the experienced self.[12] Where there is a great deal of distance between these two realities, the subject will feel a correlative sense of anxious discomfort, sometimes on the unconscious level. What the therapist contrib-utes is a cognitive understanding of the disparity, allowing the subject first to acknowledge the incongruity and then to decide whether to modify the per-ceived self, the experienced self, or both. In that sense, truth is liberating, and one is enabled to make existential choices with greater self-understanding and authenticity.

2) Transformative experience theory

According to James E. Loder, knowing is primarily an event, and any such event will involve at least five stages.[13] 1) a sense of *conflict* is felt when a surpris-ing experience requires interpretation; 2) this leads us into an *interlude for*

10   Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957); *Perspectives on Cognitive Dissonance*, ed. Robert A. Wicklund and Jack W. Brehm (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Elrbaum Associates, 1976); Jean-Leon Beauvois and Robert-Vincent Joule, *A Radical Dissonance Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

11   These points summarize six principles outlined by Festinger in introducing his overall theory (1957, 11–18).

12   Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications, and Theory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951).

13   James Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981); *The Logic of the Spirit;: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

scanning, whereby one seeks to interpret the event within one's frame of refer-
ence; 3) a working "hypothesis" emerges as a *constructive* act of the imagination;
4) as this hypothesis is tested, a sense of *release and opening* emerges;
5) *interpretation* follows, seeking to reflect on the meaning of the event and
its implications for other aspects of a person's life. According to Loder, these
elements of any knowing event also connect with four facets of human
existence, including the lived world, the self, the void, and the holy. The know-
ing event also is a factor in the transition from one developmental stage to
another, as facing the conflict of one's inability to deal adequately with one's
experience on a particular stage of faith development facilitates transition to
the next stage.

3) Faith development theory
Among the developmental theorists most relevant to biblical studies is the
research-based paradigm of James Fowler,[14] analyzing faith in terms of its
structures and developmental movement. Of course, a great advantage of
Fowler's model is that it infers the basis and character of one's faith regard-
less of the theological content. In that sense, while it applies to Jewish and
Christian faiths, it also extends beyond them in terms of applicability. Building
on the work of his Harvard mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg, but improving on it
by conducting hundreds of interviews with female subjects, Fowler also posits
six stages of faith development moving from embryonic child-like faith to vari-
ous levels of adult faith. Relevant for our study are especially Stages 3–5. In his
response to *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel* in 1999, Fowler describes his
theory as follows:[15]

> We start with the **Synthetic-Conventional** stage [Stage 3 Faith]. This
> stage depends upon the emergence of formal operational thinking—the
> capacity for "thinking about our thinking," and the ability to use abstract
> concepts to capture and convey narrative and other meanings. It involves
> mutual interpersonal perspective-taking, where one begins to construct
> others' perspective upon the self, and to make an effort to understand
> their reactions and interpretations of our behavior. Religiously, it involves
> the ability to appreciate symbols as rich representations of clusters of
> meaning. The synthetic-conventional stage locates authority external

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14   James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for*
      Meaning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult*
      Development and the Christian Faith (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).
15   Anderson, Ellens, and Fowler, "A Way Forward," 268–70.

to the self, or in internalized versions of established authority. It does not yet have a well-developed capacity for third-person perspective-taking, in which the self sees itself and those with whom it is in relations from an independent angle. It therefore lacks the ability to analyze and achieve some measure of objectivity regarding the meanings at stake in the interchanges between self and others. Religious communities principally composed of persons best described by Synthetic-Conventional faith tend to form around authoritative leadership and to rely upon their authorizing interpretations of religious traditions.

The **Individuative-Reflective** stage [Stage 4] grows out of two decisive cognitive and emotional steps. These steps may come in either sequence, or simultaneously. First, developing the capacities for third-person perspective-taking, the person becomes capable of constructing an inquiring and evaluative approach to interactions with significant others. The relationship itself (whether with a person or a group) becomes an object of inquiry and evaluations. Ethically, this means being able to reason about just and unjust, fair and unfair relations with a new kind of "objectivity." Second, the symbols and narratives of a religious tradition, and one's relation to (or through) them[,] can be objectified and critically analyzed. With the exercise of these new capacities, the locus of authority shifts from external to internal.... The Individuative-Reflective stage, with its new analytical capacities and its confidence in conscious analysis, has less capacity for and attentiveness to the not-conscious sources of insight and distortions in personal or group knowing. It tends to disvalue symbol, myth, ritual, and non-cognitive sources of faith-knowing. This stage looks for intellectual formulations regarding faith and living that have the qualities of ideological clarity, apparent comprehensiveness, and affirmation of the possibilities of individual mastery and control.

The **Conjunctive** stage can arise from one or more sources. Central among these may be fatigue of the ego and of the conscious self from the processes of trying to manage a complex world without ways to comprehend factors that elude the cognitive structures with which they operate. For many men (and some women) the transition to the Conjunctive stage begins with an "ego leak"—an experience of failure, of fatigue or of ennui, that signals that a persistent blindsiding is going on. Vaguely one realizes that the meaning-making ego requires richer resources and ways of making sense of the self's connection to larger and deeper powers and resources. For women, it may come with the growing confidence that the spiritual limits of inherited institutionalized traditions are not adequate to sustain the affective and moral lives they are evolving. Conjunctive

faith requires coming to terms with the unconscious dimensions of behavior and of meaning-making. It involves the embrace of paradox and polarities: It means acknowledging that we are both: old and young; masculine and feminine; weak and strong; conscious and unconscious; good and evil. Paul bespeaks this awareness in Romans 7 where he says, "The good I would do, I do not do; the evil I would not do, I do. Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

4) Logotherapy and meaning-inference theory

The psychological theory of Victor Frankl argues that the primary human drive is neither toward sex nor for power, but toward meaning.[16] And, rather than emphasize the introspective searching of depth psychology, Frankl advocates the transcendent reflection of height (rather than depth) psychology. Based upon three pillars, the freedom of the will, the will to meaning, and the meaning of life, Frankl helps his clients transform suffering by finding meaning in and through it. As love is the ultimate of human values, when the subject is enabled to choose a loving response to givens in life and to identify loving possibilities even in one's loss and disappointments, tragedy is transformed by the discerning of meaning. Thus, even a negative experience or loss can be redeemed by finding meaning in one's suffering, so meaning inference is the key to Logotherapy.

Experience and Content in the Development of Pauline Theology

While Paul had reportedly received training "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3, NRSV here and throughout) and perhaps a bit of schooling from Peter, John, and James (Gal 1:17), much of his theology appears to have developed from his understanding of the gospel in relation to his experiences. Intrinsic to such developments were his Damascus road experience, his identifying his mission as being the apostle to the Gentiles, and reflections upon his own existential

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16   Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (translated 1959; revised, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962); *The Doctor and the Soul: An introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. R. and C. Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); *Psychotherapy and Existentialism: Selected Papers on Logotherapy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967); *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (expanded ed.; New York: Meridian, 1988).

struggles and suffering. These central aspects of his theology involved cognitive aspects of development.

1) The Damascus-road christophany

As reported by Luke, Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus was the pivotal change in his life. Pre-transformation Saul, according to Luke, was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," bringing "any who belonged to the Way, men or women ... bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1–2). As he traveled to Damascus, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do'" (Acts 9:3–6). The story is familiar; Saul, blinded, was led into the city of Damascus, where he was ministered to by Ananias and baptized, and whence he discovered his mission to the Gentiles as a herald of Christ as the Son of God (Acts 9:15, 20).

Interestingly, Luke presents Paul's narration of his transformative experience twice more: in Acts 22 and 26,[17] but what is impressive, with Stendhal, is that here we have a transformative encounter—more akin to the callings of the Hebrew prophets, and even to the calling of John the Apocalyptist in Revelation 1—than a "conversion" from irreligion to religion. One could even argue that Paul's transformation involved a conversion *from* religion *to* revelation—from religious merit to unmerited grace ... but that's beginning to sound like the gospel ... well, exactly my point! Paul's unimagined, unexpected, unbidden, transformative encounter sealed his understanding of God's grace-imbued work though Christ Jesus precisely because he had encountered such himself—and personally so. Paul did not lose an argument; nor did he get swayed by superior reasoning or exegetical mastery. His becoming convinced was a factor of encounter, emerging from transformative experience, which led to a sense of calling (to use Stendahl's language) involving both a sense of mission and a message.

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17   There are problematic differences in narration, such as the companions of Paul not seeing the light in ch. 9 but seeing the light in ch. 22, and not mentioned as falling to the ground in ch. 9 but all falling to the ground in ch. 26, but we'll leave those matters unresolved for now.

With the callings of the prophets (Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, John),[18] the four components of a calling event are likewise here present, showing evidence of James Loder's paradigm:

a)   A theophanic encounter (in this case and in John's, a Christophanic one)

b)   An immediate sense of humbled unworthiness (falling to the ground, being blinded, fasting for three days)

c)   God's restorative work (in this case, sending Ananias to minister to Paul)

d)   Receiving a mission and a message (that Jesus is the Son of God— the Jewish Messiah)

So, here we have, in Loder's terms, a transformative event of knowing, wherein Paul realizes he was wrong about the Jesus movement, and upon experiencing a life-changing encounter, he completely switches sides within reported religious debates. The greatest persecutor of "the Way" now becomes its greatest champion, within Luke's presentation. Something of Fowler's model also comes into play here; Paul's understanding of the Jewish vocation itself also undergoes a paradigmatic shift. Whereas Paul had been operating on a Stage 3 level of faith—Synthetic-Conventional ("true believer") faith, seeking to get the Jesus-adherents to toe the line of orthodox Judaism—he moves to a Stage 4 level of faith: Individuative-Reflective (autonomous) faith, whereby he comes to understand the Jewish promise completely differently as being fulfilled through the work of Christ, not threatened by it. This, then, grows into Paul's own understanding of salvation by grace alone, through faith, which he then supports with Jewish Scripture and other forms of rhetoric and argumentation. Thus, Paul's profound understanding of the life-changing gift of grace bears with it an intrinsically autobiographical element if there is any correlation between his experiences, mission, and message as reported by his companion Luke and in his own writings.[19]

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18   For a fuller treatment see Paul N. Anderson, *Receiving Holy Callings, and Being Wholly Responsive* (The Quaker Lecture, Western Yearly Meeting, Plainfield, IN, 1985).

19   One is aware of the critical difficulties of taking the writings of Luke and Paul at face value and seeking to make connections between them; however, operating within the scope of "Second Criticality," to question a traditional inference is not to overturn it. See Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), x–xii.

Before we leave the scene, though, one further feature of the narrative is worth considering—the fleeting mention of Saul's witnessing (and approving of) the martyrdom of Stephen. If something like Paul's epiphany really happened, did Christ simply appear to Paul, out of the midday blue, or might there have been predisposing factors contributing to an experiential opening? While the Lukan text is silent on the matter, one wonders if the stoning and exemplary death of Stephen, who prayed as a Christ-figure that his killers be extended grace—despite their lack of deservedness—might have piqued the conscience of the Synthetic-Conventional "doctrinally correct" and zealous Paul. Luke mentions briefly that Saul looked on approvingly with the stoners' coats laid at his feet (Acts 7:58). This undoubtedly would have created a great deal of cognitive dissonance for all onlookers, but the fact is that Paul brings it up again in his own narration in Acts 22, which raises the question as to whether Paul linked the two events within his own reflection, introspectively or otherwise. In that account, Paul expresses his own sense of guilt over persecuting Christians as piqued by his witnessing of Stephen's innocent blood being shed (Acts 22:19–21):

> And I said, "Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him." Then he said to me, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

About this encounter, Paul writes in Galatians (1:11–16):

> For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles....

Thus, both in Luke's narration and in Paul's reflection, cognitive factors are apparent, even centrally, in the transformative "opening" that changed Paul's life, however it may have transpired. Might such experience and reflection have

impacted Paul's depth of understanding regarding the character and meaning of grace? The possibility cannot be denied.

2) Paul's sense of mission to the Gentiles

Another central feature of Paul's theology regards his sense of mission to the Gentiles, but how did that develop? Did he always feel a concern to reach the world beyond the household of Israel, or did his consigning Peter's and his ministries as being apostles to the Jews and the Gentiles, respectively, result from experiential and reflective factors? Of course, the reader is drawn into the omniscient word of the narrator, who cites the Lord as saying to Ananias, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15), and yet the Gentiles' receiving the Holy Spirit is described as something of an unexpected gift, as Cornelius and his entourage experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit as Peter preached the gospel in Acts 10:44–45. So, initially, it appears that Peter has been granted the mission to the Gentiles, and to some degree, such is true.

From there, the Church at Antioch felt the Spirit's leading to set aside Paul and Barnabas, sending them off on their first missionary journey in Acts 13. On Crete and in southern Anatolia they preached in local synagogues, where some Jews believed, and so did some Gentiles. At Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, Paul's preaching was successful, but some Jews were threatened, and they stirred up the crowd against them. In Lystra, oppositional Jews came and won the crowd over, leading to the stoning of Paul and leaving him for dead (Acts 14:19). Returning to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas reported the great success among the Gentiles, despite their uneven reception among the Jews in Asia Minor. So, did Paul feel called to a Gentile mission originally, or did the relative failure of his mission to Jews in the synagogues in Asia Minor, followed by the surprising success of his somewhat default mission among local Gentiles, lead him to say to the Jews in Pisidia (Acts 13:46–47):

> It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

From this angle, it appears that cognitive dissonance forced Paul to look for an alternative meaning regarding his calling—re-envisioning it as a mission to the Gentiles as a direct factor of its uneven success. Indeed, the successes of the ministries of Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles were narrated at the

Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, but so was that of Peter. On his second missionary journey, Paul continues to visit first the Synagogues in the region, expanding now to Greece and Asia Minor (including Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus), but upon a negative reception in Corinth, Paul reports in Acts 18:6 that from then on he would go to the Gentiles—apparently an additional reaction to cognitive dissonance.

Paul even puts it in his own words in both Galatians and Romans, clarifying in Galatians 2:7–9 that the distinction of Peter's and Paul's ministries as being to the circumcised and the uncircumcised, accordingly, was a factor of the relative success (and lack thereof) of their missions. It also suggests the carving out of evangelistic turf between these two leaders as a factor of dissonance between their kerygmatic emphases.

> When they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

In Romans 11:13–14 Paul even asserts that his mission to the Gentiles is an indirect means of achieving his erstwhile mission to the Jews—perhaps making them jealous over their own inheritance, as a cut-off branch might envy the grafted branch (see also 1 Tim 2:7) and thereby seek to be rejoined. "Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them." Thus, concerning Stendahl's noting of Romans 9–11 as the socioreligious interest of Paul's concerns regarding salvation by grace through faith, this too may have been a factor of Paul's reflection and cognitive dissonance.

Extending the cognitive-critical analysis here, we also see aspects of Paul's faith development as a formative factor in his emerging sense of mission. In Fowler's terms, we see here a movement from Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective Faith—believing that God had called Paul to witness to Christ as the Jewish Messiah, to a Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith—seeing that mission as not only including the Gentiles, but indirectly and potentially reaching the Jews as a factor of having extended the gospel beyond them to the Gentiles. An additional paradoxical discovery, perhaps, involves the fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 12:1–3 not simply to create a great nation, but also to bless the world

through the Seed of Abraham, as grace availed through Christ to the nations is extended as a covenant of promise (Gal 3:6–18).

Therefore, while Luke presents a reflective inference of Paul's initial divine commissioning as being an apostle to the Gentiles, the narrative of Acts and even Paul's own reflections suggest that such a mission was both a default and a serendipity—even dividing up the missionary turf between his mission and that of Peter, and finally coming 'round full-circle to reach the object of his earlier mission to his fellow Jewish nation by means of extending the gospel to the Gentiles. Viktor Frankl might even describe this final element as "paradoxical intention"—by aiming at one thing, an alternative discovery is facilitated—although such a feature is clearer in Paul's experience with suffering.

3) Paul, existential struggle, and suffering

Regarding Paul's existential struggles, it seems odd that the same person who wrote "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13) would also say, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom 7:15). Likewise, how could one who claims, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more ... as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil 3:4–6), also say, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (Rom 7:18)?

Kümmel, Stowers, Jewett, and others, of course, have argued that Romans 7 involved the rhetorical I—a "speech-in-character" form of Greco-Roman dia-tribe, suggesting that Paul was not referring to himself but to struggles that others might have had, despite his first-person references.[20] After all, Paul uses this trop elsewhere, and Gerd Theissen points out the rhetorical features of the questions, "What then shall we say?" and "What then" in Romans 6:1, 15; 7:7 regarding the law and sin.[21] Indeed, Paul is addressing members of his audience, who either preferred antinomian grace, or who in bondage to the

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20   See W. G. Kummel, *Romer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus*, UNT 1 7 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1929); Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBLDS 57 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1981); Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, 2nd Edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

21   Theissen, *Psychological Aspects*, 177–265. Arguing for Romans 7 as autobiographical are James D. G. Dunn, "Romans 7, 14–25 in the Theology of Paul," *TZ* 31 (1975): 257–73; Michael Paul Middendorf, *The "I" of the Storm: A Study of Romans 7* (Saint Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 1997); Will N. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity: A Study of the "I" in its Literary Context*, SNTSMS 170 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

law might have forfeited grace, but it cannot be ruled out that his first-person references might also have been to his own dialectical experience, even in post-conversion maturity. While many have argued that the sense of inadequacy of humankind under the law in Romans 7 references a pre-conversion state, it is doubtful that any mature Christian should be struggle-free in terms of fleshly existence. Such a view reflects a docetic view of the sanctified life, which Paul also claims to have experienced. Rather, what we more realistically have in Romans 7:7–24 is an experiential dialectic.

a)   On one hand, Paul believes that the Spirit will deliver believers from the power of sin, not just its consequences. Paul can testify to being "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37), and that having learned to be content with much or little, God has indeed supplied his needs according to his riches in glory (Phil 4:11, 19). Paul believes in and has experienced divine empowerment and provision, and he holds that this should be the sanctified Christian baseline.

b)   On the other hand, Paul knows from experience that fleshly battles with sin are never entirely over, despite the larger war having been won. While valuing the Law as a gift leading to liberating conviction, it may also be considered a source of bondage, leading to dismal feelings of existential failure. With the Jesus of the Markan Passion narrative, Paul would doubtless have agreed that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:38).

c)   Despite his struggles, however, Paul apparently also received divine assistance and empowerment through the Holy Spirit—a theme continuing, then, with ascendency in Romans 8. With Käsemann over against Bultmann, I affirm that, while receiving the Righteousness of God is indeed a factor of being regarded as righteous—rightwised—because of grace, receiving God's Righteousness is also substantive: the believer also receives the power of the Holy Spirit to deliver the individual from the grip of carnality and sin.

Such, however, is never a matter of perfected status; rather, it allows multiple victories precisely because the believer—even post-conversion—faces multiple existential struggles. Even a transformed heart and mind still face fleshly contingencies of human existence. Therefore, Paul must have sensed cognitive dissonance over believing that being in Christ meant victory if he indeed experienced struggles, temptations, and even occasional "failures" (at least by his own measures), leading to dialectical reflection and consternation. Nonetheless, he can also say—about himself, and not just a rhetorical

other—that "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Rom 8:2).

4) Paul, physical pain, and existential transcendence

A second existential struggle for Paul, however apparently involved an unsuccessful bout with suffering, whereby he requested three times that God would remove his "thorn in the flesh," yet to no avail. Here Paul's prayers did not lead to the liberating response he desired, yet his petition did not go unanswered. Rather, the word of the Lord was that "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Here, Paul's cognitive dissonance went unresolved. Rather than give up on his faith in God, Paul, in Frankl's terms, transcended suffering by finding meaning in it. Within Fowler's model, we again have a movement from a Stage 4 autonomous conviction to a Stage 5 dialectical appraisal of disappointment, suffering, and loss. If God's power can be shown in human weakness, the affliction ceases to be for naught. Rather, it may yet further Paul's larger purpose as an ambassador of Christ and a herald of his grace, not despite experiential challenges, but precisely because of them.

Elsewhere Paul describes his being "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8–9). Perhaps Paul's anguish with unanswered prayer in chapter 12, followed by the promise that God's power is perfected in weakness provides the key to his being able to say at the beginning of his second letter: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2 Cor 1:3–4). Again, with Frankl, when pain is accompanied by the inference of meaning, suffering is transformed into sacrifice, and redemptively so.

Conclusion

While many challenges abound in seeking to comprehend the existential Paul and the dialectic between his perceptions, experiences, and emerging understanding, the venture is not only worthwhile, it is essential for understanding the origin and character of his theological content. Within a Cognitive-Critical approach to Paul, his transformation, mission, and teachings are better comprehended, and thus better applied. In so doing, this essay attempts to take up the mantle laid down by Jim Fowler some 20 years ago:

I would like to see Anderson's approach carried over into the interpreta-
tion of Pauline theology as well. It seems to me that Paul cries out for in-
terpretation via conjunctive epistemology. Holding together the witness
of Jews and Christians (Romans 9–11), affirming the duality and tension
at the heart of human beings and in himself (Romans 7), and affirming
both that there is a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ ("If any-
one is in Christ, that person is a new creation") and a gradual process of
maturation in faith ("When I was a child, I spoke like a child ...") suggests
that Paul Anderson could faithfully spend a scholarly life-time continu-
ing his fruitful work.[22]

In the light of this cursory analysis, Professor Stendahl makes a good point;
right. Paul was not a Lutheran.[23] Nor did his "conversion" involve leaving a life
of debauchery and sin behind, after which he "found religion." Indeed, Paul's
transformation was along the lines of the callings of the prophets in Hebrew
Scripture; and yet, those developments from encounter to a sense of mission
were by no means devoid of introspection or conscientious reflection.

In the light of Cognitive-Critical Biblical Analysis, Paul the robust apostle
also reports having experienced disappointment, frustration, discouragement,
disillusionment, and at times even failure. As Stendahl himself notes, Paul was
faced with "weakness," and he struggled to maintain integrity. Nonetheless, it is
precisely through those experiences of crisis, cognitive dissonance, empower-
ment, and reflection that meaning was discerned, and a sense of mission and
message emerged. Perhaps those developments were also factors of grace in
the experience and reflection of Paul, and such may have influenced his sense
of the gospel message from the beginning of his ministry to the end.

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22   Anderson, Ellens, and Fowler, "The Way Forward," 2004, 272.
23   Such is the case made by Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the
      New Perspective* (1986, revised, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); likewise, John was not
      a Quaker. Paul N. Anderson, "Was the Fourth Evangelist a Quaker?" *Quaker Religious
      Thought* 76 (October, 1991): 27–43, although the issues faced by Johannine Christianity
      were formative in virtually all egalitarian and spirit-based Christian traditions.