

## HERMAN RIDDERBOS' PAUL: A REVIEW ARTICLE

William L. Lane\*

Herman Ridderbos is professor emeritus of NT at the Theological School of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands at Kampen. His recent retirement as professor of NT studies at Kampen, a position he had held since 1943, provides an appropriate occasion for a brief review of some aspects of his contribution to his field. His published work suggests that his academic career was marked by two successive phases. The first phase was dominated by concern with the synoptic gospels, and more particularly with the gospel of Matthew. In 1936 Ridderbos had qualified for the doctorate at the Free University at Amsterdam with a distinguished dissertation on the sermon on the mount (*De Strekking van der Bergrede naar Mattheüs* [The Tendency of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew]). He subsequently published an investigation of the tension between self-disclosure and self-concealment in the teaching of Jesus (*Zelfopenbaring en Zelfverbergung* [Kampen, 1946]), a monumental work on the kingdom of God (*De Komst van het Koninkrijk* [Kampen, 1950]; English translation *The Coming of the Kingdom* [Philadelphia, 1962]), and a two-volume commentary on Matthew in the *Korte Verklaring* series (Kampen, 1952). In all of these studies Ridderbos demonstrated an ability to interact responsibly with the text of the gospels in the light of the discussion it had prompted, especially in the twentieth century.

The second phase of Ridderbos' distinguished career has been marked by a sustained concern with the letters of Paul. In the year prior to the appearance of his commentary on Matthew there was published a *Festschrift* honoring F. W. Grosheide, who had served as Ridderbos' major professor at the Free University. The essay contributed by Ridderbos concerned the relationship between freedom and law in Paul's letter to the Galatians ("Vrijheid en Wet volgens Paulus' Brief aan de Galaten," *Arcana Revelata* [Kampen, 1951] 89-104). The subject of that essay signaled a transition of interest from the earlier concentration on the gospels and served to introduce a second period of concentrated research. The following year a brief introduction to the study of Paul appeared (*Paulus en Jezus* [Kampen, 1952]; English translation *Paul and Jesus* [Grand Rapids, 1958]), and then one year later the commentary on Galatians in the NICNT series (Grand Rapids, 1953). Over the course of the next fourteen years a series of major publications provided abundant evidence of the fruitfulness of Ridderbos' patient interaction with the thought of the apostle Paul. These included commentaries on Romans (*Aan de Romeinen* [Kampen, 1959]), Colossians (*Aan de Kolossenzen* [Kampen, 1960]), and the pastoral letters (*De Pastoralen Brieven* [Kampen, 1967]) in the *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament* series, and his magnum opus, *Paulus: Ontwerp van zijn theologie* (Kampen, 1966); English translation

\*William Lane is professor of religious studies at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.

*Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1975).<sup>1</sup> My remarks will be limited to this second phase of research and publication and will focus almost exclusively on the comprehensive, synthetic presentation of the main tenets of the Pauline letters in the major volume, *Paul*. In that work, which represented "a new and unprecedented pinnacle of achievement,"<sup>2</sup> perspectives and insights gained through disciplined and patient interaction with the text receive their mature expression.

In *Paul* Ridderbos assumes the awesome task of providing an outline or sketch of Pauline theology. His conception of the task lends to his volume a magnitude and architectonic quality that surpasses the level achieved in his magisterial study of the kingdom of God. Any attempt to synthesize the teaching of Paul poses the problem of how to order the matter. In the initial chapter of his book Ridderbos addresses this question as it has surfaced in the course of the history of Pauline interpretation. He correctly perceives that a comprehensive understanding of Paul cannot be separated from a serious interaction with his interpreters. Anyone who has experienced a sense of bewilderment at the confusing welter of interpretations of the center of Paul's theology can only marvel at the ease and clarity with which Ridderbos surveys the history of this interpretation and sets forth its prominent features.

The historical survey begins with the Reformation, which found the main entrance to Paul's preaching in justification by faith and the forensic notes of his teaching. With the post-enlightenment period, however, the location of the nuclear center shifted from the forensic to the pneumatic, mystical, ethical and eschatological aspects of Paul's statement. In a penetrating and thorough manner Ridderbos traces the main lines of development during the past century in terms of four successive conceptions. The Tübingen school, represented by F. C. Baur and his pupils, saw the focus of Paul's preaching in his emphasis on the Spirit and the antithesis with the flesh that this implied. The liberal school, which found an eloquent spokesman in H. J. Holtzmann, presented Paul as one who christianized Greek anthropology and reduced his theology to a general, ethical-rational religiosity without dependence on redemptive facts. The history-of-religions school, championed by R. Reitzenstein and W. Bousset, interpreted Paul's gospel in conceptual terms borrowed from the mystery cults that flourished in the first and second centuries of the Christian era. The eschatological school, represented by Albert Schweitzer and others, called attention to the elements of eschatology and anticipation as the dominant feature of Paul's teaching.

<sup>1</sup>The wider scope of Ridderbos' studies of Paul's thought is indicated by the articles that appeared during this period: "De apostoliciteit der kerk in het Nieuwe Testament" [The Apostolicity of the Church in the New Testament] in *De Apostolische Kerk* (Kampen, 1954) 39-97; "Nieuwere beschouwingen over Phil. 2:6-11" [More Recent Considerations of Phil. 2:6-11] in *Eeuwfeest-Almanak F. Q. I.* (1963) 133 ff.; "Het Avondmaal bij Paulus" [The Lord's Supper in Paul], *Homiletica en Biblica* 23 (1964) 153-157, 177-181, 201-205; "Kerkelijke orde en kerkelijk recht in de brieven van Paulus" [Ecclesiastical Order and Ecclesiastical Law in the Letters of Paul] in *Ex auditu verbi, Festschrift G. C. Berkouwer* (Kampen, 1965) 194-215. Mention should also be made of two smaller books: *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1957) and *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>So R. B. Gaffin, Jr., "Paul as Theologian, A Review Article," *WTJ* 30 (1967-68) 205, who was able to speak of "a consensus" in reviewing the overwhelmingly positive response to the publication of the original Dutch version, *Paulus*, in 1966.

In the ongoing search toward a proper understanding of Paul's thought Ridderbos identifies himself with a growing consensus that the point of departure from which the whole of Paul's thought can be adequately approached is to be located in the "redemptive-historical" character of his proclamation. He writes:

The governing motif of Paul's preaching is the saving activity of God in the advent and work, particularly in the death and resurrection, of Christ. This activity is on the one hand the fulfillment of the work of God in the history of the nation Israel, the fulfillment therefore also of the Scripture; on the other hand it reaches out to the ultimate consummation of the parousia of Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God. It is this great redemptive-historical framework within which the whole of Paul's preaching must be understood and all of its subordinate parts receive their place and organically cohere (p. 39).

The manner in which Ridderbos formulates this statement is important, for he is aware that widely diverse points of view have been included under the designation "eschatological interpretation." He seeks to carefully distinguish his approach from that of Albert Schweitzer, C. H. Dodd and Rudolf Bultmann. He insists that the basis of Paul's eschatological thought is historical occurrence. He also attempts to do justice both to the "realized" and the "future" aspects of this eschatology without removing the tension between the two by way of idealist or existentialist interpretation. It is to preserve this tension that he stressed the importance both of the resurrection of the parousia of Christ for Paul. Ridderbos had already insisted that this polarity between fulfillment and expectation was the key to the teaching of Jesus in *The Coming of the Kingdom* (pp. 104-174). He now extends that insight to the content of Paul's teaching. It is with a redemptive-historical method of interpretation understood in this sense that Ridderbos proposes to analyze the fundamental structure and content of Paul's preaching and teaching.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion there can be no question respecting the propriety of this approach. It is to Ridderbos' credit that he has demonstrated this convincingly throughout the whole of his study.

The second chapter, devoted to the recovery of the "fundamental structures" of Paul's thought, provides the indispensable prelude to the remainder of the volume. It is concerned almost exclusively with Christology. One indication of the validity of Ridderbos' approach is that his redemptive-historical perspective brings him necessarily and directly to the person and work of Christ as that which provides the essential core and structure of Paul's preaching and teaching. Paul's Christology, Ridderbos emphasizes, is concerned with redemptive accomplishment. The great central redemptive event is the resurrection of Christ. That event means that the powers of the new age have already broken into the structure of the present age. Consequently, Christology and eschatology belong together. Paul's teaching is clearly eschatological in character, but the apostle refuses to force the work of Christ into a traditional eschatological pattern of expectation. On the contrary, it is Christology that determines the distinctive coloration and nuance of Paul's eschatology. To express this insight pointedly, Ridderbos adopts

<sup>3</sup>Ridderbos had indicated as early as 1957 that this was the direction he would pursue in a seminal essay on "The Redemptive-Historical Character of Paul's Preaching," which appeared in a brief but important collection of studies, *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Grand Rapids, 1957) 44-60. Cf. R. B. Gaffin, "Paul," p. 206 n. 6, who comments: "It would not be entirely inaccurate to say . . . that in a sense *Paulus* is simply an expansion and development (653 pp.!) of this little essay."

an expression coined by H. D. Wendland: Paul's eschatology is "Christ-eschatology."<sup>4</sup> This means that the fundamental structures of Paul's preaching are to be approached only from the perspective of his Christology (p. 49).

Paul's preaching, then, is the proclamation and exposition of the eschatological time of redemption, ushered in by Christ's coming, death and resurrection. Ridderbos' conclusion is consistent with the emphasis that these core events receive in Paul's letters. It is from the perspective of Christ's death and resurrection that the proper light falls on all of the redemptive activity of God. This is true whether one reflects backward on the incarnation or pre-existence of Christ or forward to his exaltation and parousia. For this reason, Ridderbos' stress on the functional element in his discussion of Paul's Christology is proper. He observes, for example, that when Paul speaks of Christ's pre-existence he does so only in connection with its bearing on the revelation of his person in redemptive history (p. 69).

This correct observation, however, does not lead Ridderbos to stress function to the exclusion of all reflection on Christ's essential nature. Here he parts company with Oscar Cullmann, whose major treatment of the Christology of the NT had tended to attribute to Paul a purely functional Christology.<sup>5</sup> Ridderbos affirms that basic to Paul's preaching is the confession of Jesus as the Son of God in the supra- and pre-historical sense of the expression. Christ *is* Son prior to his disclosure as Son. Ridderbos writes, "God sent his Son (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4), and this sending does not create the Sonship, but presupposes it" (p. 69). What he finds of special interest in Paul's exposition of Jesus as God's Son, however, is the emphasis that before the foundation of the world and for all eternity the Son is God-for-us. Ridderbos asserts: "It is not the Godhead of Christ in itself, but that he is God and God's Son for us which is the content and foundation even of the most profound of his christological pronouncements" (p. 77). This means that Paul never abstracts his preaching of Jesus as God's Son from his existence as the Redeemer appointed by God for the rescue of mankind.

In this second chapter Ridderbos provides a concise theological wordbook of such significant Pauline concepts as the fullness of time, the revelation of the mystery, the firstborn from the dead, the last Adam, being in Christ, being with Christ, the old and the new man, and flesh and spirit. In the course of the discussion a pattern is established that is maintained throughout the volume. Ridderbos presents a fine summation and evaluation of the major monographs that have been published on Paul's thought during the last century and a half. His own positions are developed in dialogue especially with modern scholarship. The chapter abounds with insights. Most surprising and provocative is the proposal that the understanding of Christ as the "second Adam" or the "last Adam" was, for Paul, the fundamental Christological conception. Although the use of this type of expression is strictly limited (1 Cor 15:45, cf. v 22; Rom 5:14), Ridderbos seeks to demonstrate exegetically that all of the other designations, including "Son of God," image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; cf. Phil 2:6),<sup>6</sup> and "firstborn of

<sup>4</sup>Cited from H. D. Wendland, *Geschichtsanschauung und Geschichtsbewusstsein im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen, 1938) 26.

<sup>5</sup>O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1959; rev. ed. 1963).

<sup>6</sup>Ridderbos takes *morphē* in Phil 2:6 to be synonymous to *eikōn* (pp. 73-74).

all creation" derive their meaning from the significance of Christ as "second Adam" (pp. 68-86).

The implications of this conclusion are far-reaching and difficult to assess. One observation may be pertinent. Ridderbos has treated the conceptual background of Paul's thought only incidentally, as particular passages are discussed throughout the work. This sometimes means that an interpretation is developed without a proper concern for conceptual background or is developed piecemeal. The interpretation of Col 1:15 ff. in terms of an Adam typology, for example, is a prominent feature of the argument developed in chap. 2 (pp. 78-82). Yet Ridderbos does not direct his attention to the head imagery in Paul's letters until chap. 9, which concerns the Church as the body of Christ. Only in that context does he address himself to the question of conceptual background, as he reviews and rejects the "so-called gnostic interpretation" of the expression. That critical judgment, of course, has bearing on the interpretation of Col 1:15 ff. as a whole, since the headship of Christ is an integral element in the confession developed there. A comprehensive sketch of Paul's background early in the volume would have promoted a greater degree of clarity in the discussion and would have established a context within which particular exegetical judgments could be evaluated with greater precision.

The identification of the redemptive-historical character of Paul's preaching and of the Christological character of the fundamental structures of Paul's thought is basic to the outline of Paul's theology that Ridderbos now details. The first major segment of the outline consists of five chapters and follows in general the pattern established in the letter to the Romans.<sup>7</sup> Ridderbos discusses in turn the life in sin, the revelation of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, God's reconciling activity in Christ, and the new life in Christ achieved through the Holy Spirit, which finds expression in the radically new quality of obedience to the will of God that affects every area of life.

A second segment of the outline consists of four chapters and is concerned with the character and life of the Church. In detailing Paul's treatment of the character of the Church, Ridderbos devotes separate chapters to the expressions "people of God" and "body of Christ." He argues that the designation "people of God" represents the tradition, familiar from the OT, to which Paul was an heir. The concept of the Church as the "body of Christ" is Paul's distinctive contribution. The harmony of these two conceptions is amply demonstrated and supports Ridderbos' conclusion: "'Body of Christ' is the christological concentration of 'people of God,' just as it is implied in the Headship of Christ that the redemptive-historical and pneumatic unity of the people of God is grounded in Christ and is effectuated in communion with him" (p. 395). In addressing the issue of the life of the Church, Ridderbos devotes a chapter to the sacraments and still another to the upbuilding of the Church through Church order and discipline, charisma and office, and corporate worship.

A final chapter, entitled "The Future of the Lord," concludes the outline with a consideration of Paul's reflection on the life of expectation that characterizes the believer as he waits for the parousia and the concomitant events that herald its occurrence. Here as well Ridderbos situates the discussion within the redemp-

<sup>7</sup>Ridderbos clearly recognizes this in remarks found on p. 161.

tive-historical perspective of Pauline thought as he addresses the tension between the motifs of fulfillment and anticipation in the apostle's preaching.

The development of this outline of Paul's thought demonstrates the validity of the redemptive-historical approach. Ridderbos' conclusions are clearly and ably presented, not in the abstract but in the arena of opposing points of view that are set forth with the same clarity that adorns the presentation of his own positions. He is thoroughly aware of the critical issues in Pauline investigation. His usual approach is to sketch in summary fashion the divergent theses defended in contemporary proposals before bringing to bear on them his own critical rejoinder or the incisive critique of others. Basic to Ridderbos' work is the assumption of the authority of Scripture and the authenticity of the correspondence attributed to Paul within the canon of the NT (p. 43, n. 110). Although he is prepared to recognize a degree of development in Paul's thought, his treatment of the several aspects of Pauline theology reflects the conviction that an underlying unity characterizes the apostle's reflection on the revelation in Christ. He does not hesitate to affirm that the pastoral epistles, with their stress on "sound doctrine," are fundamentally compatible with Paul's earlier preaching and teaching (p. 241), and he appeals frequently to statements in Colossians and Ephesians.

Ridderbos fully recognizes the complexity of the issues that surface in an investigation of Pauline thought. For example, in discussing Paul, Judaism and the OT on the treatment of the law (pp. 153-158) he rightly insists on the necessity of ascertaining the different perspectives that must be distinguished. He is prepared to acknowledge a differentiation in emphasis within Paul's teaching on a single topic (e. g., pp. 123-124 on sin). He appreciates the importance of philological and exegetical considerations to Biblical-theological reflection. One has the impression of careful, patient exegesis in the service of a theological commentary on the letters of Paul. Ridderbos listens to the text of the epistles and seeks to elucidate the apostle's intention by means of in-depth exposition (e. g., pp. 176-178 on Rom 4:3-5; pp. 95-100 on 5:12-21; pp. 124-130 on 7:7 ff.). He correctly specifies that Paul's primary concern in his teaching on sin, salvation, and the new life in Christ is with the corporate and collective aspects of redemption rather than with the individual and personal (e. g., pp. 206, 221). Fine summary statements occur throughout the book (e. g., pp. 178, 272, 360-361), where Ridderbos distills the results of an extended discussion for his reader.

The picture of Paul drawn by Ridderbos is of a man whose background reflects commitment to the OT and Judaism but who found in the great eschatological action of God in Jesus Christ his consuming motivation both as a witness to revelation appointed by Christ himself and as a theologian who in his correspondence with the several churches sought to unpack the implications of Christ's death and resurrection for the believing community.

These are simply impressions that are reinforced by exposure in depth to any portion of the volume. It is necessary, therefore, to become more specific and critical in the interest of posing the issue of a proper methodology for the study of Paul as theologian. Of special interest in chap. 3, devoted to the apostle's teaching on sin, is an extensive treatment of the anthropological concepts used by Paul. Anyone familiar with the history of the investigation of Paul's anthropological terms is aware of the intensity of the debate that has continued over the interpretation of these terms. This has been due in part to their variable use and

definition within the Pauline letters. The same term is frequently used with differing connotations in different letters, and sometimes even within the same letter. Ridderbos takes as his point of departure for the discussion Paul's distinction between the "outer" and the "inner" man (Rom 7:22; 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 3:16), which in a formal and general way denote the external, visible, physical, and the inward, invisible, spiritual aspects of human existence (p. 115). Paul's point, Ridderbos states, is not that man possesses an outward and an inward side to his nature but rather that he *is* both outward and inward. The major anthropological terms are then considered in terms of this basic distinction. *Sōma* (body), *sarx* (flesh) and *melē* (member) more closely define the external man, while *nous* (mind), *kardia* (heart) and *psychē* (soul) expose the inward man (pp. 115-121). By structuring the material in this unusual way Ridderbos succeeds in bringing a semblance of clarity to a difficult and complex subject.

The analysis supports a theological understanding of the anthropological terms but fails to take into consideration the argumentative and polemical setting in which the key terms so frequently occur. The result is an analysis that is not fully contextual. In the past two decades it has been increasingly recognized that Paul's anthropological terms ought to be analyzed in relation to the historical situation that is being addressed.<sup>8</sup> This necessitates an investigation into the character of Paul's conversation partners, their assumptions, and the nature of the problems that had arisen within a particular congregation. Only after this has been done can the relevance of particular arguments and of terminological distinctions and fluctuations be assessed properly. In the absence of such a quest, a truly historical exegesis (in contradistinction to theological exegesis) of the anthropological terms cannot be achieved. There is convincing evidence that in many instances Paul's use of particular anthropological terms was conditioned by the necessity of responding to conversation partners who had contributed *their* anthropological terms to the discussion.<sup>9</sup> Helmut Köster has gone so far as to propose that "Paul's theological vocabulary is not that of his own theology but is intimately related to the controversies with his opponents."<sup>10</sup> Although this judgment overstates the evidence, it contains a measure of truth. It does much, for example, to explain how a single term like *sarx* can exhibit such a broad range of meanings, not only within the compass of the Pauline corpus but within the context of a single letter.<sup>11</sup> A greater awareness of the character of Paul's statements as response to specific challenges to the integrity of the gospel message would have added a dimension of depth to the discussion, which it now lacks, by situat-

<sup>8</sup>Cf. J. M. Robinson, "Kerygma and History in the New Testament," in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (ed. J. P. Hyatt; New York, 1965) 149-150: "Only the most penetrating analysis of the specific historical situation in which the source was written is able to make possible a penetration *through* the conceptualizations and traditions used *to* the point being scored, which is really what should be referred to as the theology of the text."

<sup>9</sup>Cf. R. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms. A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings* (Leiden, 1971); J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background* (Leiden, 1973).

<sup>10</sup>H. Köster, "Paul and Hellenism," in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (ed. J. P. Hyatt; New York, 1965) 193.

<sup>11</sup>For specific examples see R. Jewett, *Terms*, 1-2.

ing Paul's use of particular anthropological terms in their actual missionary setting.

This failure to develop a contextual approach to Paul's anthropological conceptions is surprising precisely because Ridderbos does seek to situate the apostle's discussion of the law and of the righteousness of God within an appropriate historical context. He insists that Paul, in addressing the issue of righteousness on the basis of possession of the law, starts from a completely different conception of sin and of the law from that current in Judaism (p. 135). Ridderbos speaks pointedly of "the antithesis with Judaism" in Paul's doctrine of sin and the law (pp. 130-135) and calls attention to the teaching of "the old synagogue" (pp. 131-132; cf. pp. 164-165; 170-171). The supporting documentation for the convictions held by "the old synagogue" is indicated only generally by an appeal to the collection of rabbinic texts gathered by Paul Billerbeck<sup>12</sup> or by the several contributors to *TDNT*. Greater precision could have been given to the discussion of the concept of righteousness held by the Pharisaic community contemporary with Paul by reference to the Psalms of Solomon, a pre-Christian Pharisaic collection of hymns in which there is maintained a dialectic of trust in God and self-confidence based on one's performance.<sup>13</sup> The significant fact, however, is that Ridderbos recognized in his presentation of sin and righteousness the importance of contextual analysis. He sought to ground his exposition of Paul's teaching in an authentically historical exegesis. If he had rigorously pursued this methodological insight throughout the remainder of the volume he would have achieved a more accurate and suggestive synthesis of Paul's teaching and a more sensitive understanding of the dynamic character of Paul's theology as response to both challenge and confusion.

Herman Ridderbos' contribution to Pauline studies, however, actually extends beyond the particular statement of the positions he champions in *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. His work serves to pose certain fundamental issues that must be addressed by anyone who intends to investigate the letters of Paul. We may express these issues by a series of questions.

(1) Where is the main entrance to Paul's preaching and teaching to be located? Is Ridderbos correct in focusing on the redemptive-historical and eschatological character of Paul's proclamation as the point of departure from which the whole of his thought can be most adequately approached?

(2) What are the fundamental structures of Paul's thought? Is the unifying element to be located in some particular soteriological aspect such as justification by faith or the victory of the Spirit over the flesh, or in the proclamation and explication of the eschatological time of salvation ushered in by Christ's coming, death and resurrection?

(3) In the attempt to achieve a synthesis of Paul's thought, how is the matter to be ordered? How is Paul's proclamation to be structured so as to display both its particularity and its essential unity? Is the core of Paul's theology Christology or anthropology?

(4) What is a proper methodology for determining the content of Paul's

<sup>12</sup>Str-B, 4 vols.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. H. Braun, "Von Erbarmen Gottes über der Gerechten—zur Theologie der Psalmen Salomos," *ZNW* 43 (1950) 1-54.



thought? Can Paul's teaching be grasped through a theological analysis of particular terms and statements within the literary context of a letter, or is it necessary to pursue a contextual analysis that seeks to reconstruct the character and assumptions of Paul's conversation partners? Does Paul's theological vocabulary represent his own theology or is it intimately related to the controversies in which he was engaged?

By posing these issues sharply Herman Ridderbos has left to the present and future generations of NT students both an enduring legacy and a challenge to mature the insights that lend such stature to his *Paul*.