

Thomas Merton and St. Paul

By Bonnie Thurston

It may seem an unlikely thing to assert, but Thomas Merton's Christian thought is startlingly Pauline in its assumptions.¹ In this "Year of St. Paul,"² it is worth remembering that from his first days as a Roman Catholic and certainly throughout his monastic life, Merton heard readings from St. Paul nearly every day in the Mass texts and often in the Offices. A brief summary of Merton's writing reveals many explicit references to the often disliked and frequently misunderstood Apostle. What follows is a far from comprehensive overview, in roughly chronological order, of a few of Merton's more important references to Paul and a note on two of his important insights which are based on Pauline thinking.

Writing in *The Seven Storey Mountain* of the decisive days of February, 1937 when he bought Étienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* in Scribner's Bookstore, Merton reflected on his notion of God and says that he had "taken the dead letter of Scripture at its very deadeast, and it had killed me, according to the saying of St. Paul: 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.'"³ Reflecting back on the period of his conversion from the vantage point of the mid-1940s, Merton used a Pauline category to make sense of his earlier life. The quotation from Paul appears in 2 Corinthians 3:6 in the context of what makes ministers "competent," and of Paul's understanding that all competence "is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5), not a result of the abilities or moral perfection of the minister (compare Gal. 3:10-11). Throughout his ministry, St. Paul continually sought to reconcile the realities of Law (Torah) and grace in his life. That struggle is the touchstone of Merton's ongoing interest in Paul.

Early in his monastic life, when he was still in the novitiate, on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (January 25, 1942), Merton copied into his journal the Latin text of 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, the passage in which Paul speaks of his mysterious affliction which he asked God to remove, to which God replied, not with healing, but with the promise "My grace is sufficient for thee."⁴ A poem, entitled "St. Paul: Acts IX 1-22" follows in the journal (*ES* 6-7). It appears in slightly altered form in Merton's 1946 collection *A Man in the Divided Sea* and in *The Collected Poems*. The final version of the poem, which plays on the tension between "Saul," whose "road was quiet as a trap" before his Damascus Road experience, and "Paul," who prays for the visitation from Ananias, closes as follows:



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Oh Christ! Give back my life, go, cross Damascus,
 Find out my Ananias in that other room:
 Command him, as you do, in this my dream;
 He knows my locks, and owns my ransom,
 Waits for Your word to take his keys and come.⁵

One can only speculate how Merton might have identified with the pre- and post-“conversion” apostle in the tensions between the two “periods” of his life.⁶ Had Merton, too, prayed for a guide to the dramatic (and bewildering?) experiences surrounding his own conversion?

Merton often found guidance in the Cistercian Fathers, and the Cistercian Fathers were steeped in St. Paul. For example, in 1952 Merton wrote an essay on “The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard.”⁷ In nine sections of varying lengths Merton discusses the Advent sermons and homilies of St. Bernard, giving special attention to the importance of Paul’s thought on Bernard’s theology of Advent. Drawing heavily on quotations from Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, section four is devoted to the “basically Pauline” idea that God “is within us” (*SCel* 68).

Writing to Dom Hubert Van Zeller on January 30, 1954, while he was Master of Scholastics, Merton says, “I am busy with St. Paul. The course is very beneficial to the professor. I do not know about the students. I am teaching it in a room which was painted (through my own misjudgment) in a wild flamingo pink, and I think that is the only reason why they are almost always awake.”⁸ Again writing to Dom Hubert on November 4, 1954, Merton remarks, “the students and St. Paul keep me busy” (*SC* 80). As Merton was giving the scholastics at Gethsemani a course on Paul, he himself was studying the apostle and his thought in detail.

The fruits of that and further study appear in many of Merton’s later works, in particular those in which he discusses the nature of person and of human identity. More on that momentarily, but to give but one example now, three of the chapter titles in the 1961 volume *The New Man*⁹ – “Image and Likeness,” “The Second Adam,” and “Life in Christ” – are clearly allusions to Paul (respectively, 1 Corinthians 11:7, 1 Corinthians 15:45-49, and many references, in Ephesians, Philippians and especially Colossians, to life “in Christ,” which New Testament scholars sometimes call Paul’s “Christ mysticism”). Indeed, as Patrick O’Connell’s entry “Redemption” in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* indicates, the whole of *The New Man* rests on Pauline assumptions about the regeneration of the human person in Christ.¹⁰ An index of Pauline texts appearing in that volume would be extensive.

Merton’s serious study of Paul continued. In December, 1963 Merton was reading the work of then contemporary German New Testament scholar, Werner Georg Kümmel (whose introduction to the New Testament was for many years the standard work in German and many American universities) on New Testament anthropology. Merton’s December 15 and 16, 1963 journal entries are a “conversation” with Kümmel and Rudolf Bultmann. Merton disagrees with Kümmel that humans have nothing “to dispose [them] for grace and life with God.”¹¹ There follow several quotations from Kümmel on *sarx* (“flesh”) in relationship to Galatians 1:4 and Romans 7:14-8:7. This is a crucial bit of reflection because *sarx* is often mistakenly equated with “bodily life,” for which in St. Paul’s writing the correct term is *soma*, the whole person. Merton accurately notes

that in St. Paul “bodily life” does not equal “sinful life.” Merton writes, “the whole man either accepts or rejects God” (*DWL* 46). Thus he demolishes the very un-Christian notion of body-soul dualism.

In December, 1966 Rabbi Abraham Heschel contacted Merton at Gethsemani, asking him to write an introductory essay for an edition of the Bible to be published by Time-Life Books. Although the Bible project didn’t materialize, Merton did write a draft of an introduction which was simultaneously published posthumously by Liturgical Press and Fortress Press as *Opening the Bible*.¹² The essay is a fascinating study in Merton’s hermeneutical principles¹³ and not surprisingly frequently alludes to Paul. Near the beginning of the essay Merton contrasts “the dry, academic and official learning *about* religion and the living power of the word” in terms of Paul’s distinction of the “deadening study of the ‘letter’ with the living power of the spirit” (*OB* 10). This moves into a discussion of the Spirit of liberty and life in the Spirit.¹⁴ As the essay draws to a close, Merton returns to Paul and his discussion of those who have “died with Christ” and therefore been liberated from tribalism. He quotes a long passage from Colossians (2:8,16-22) and concludes with love as depicted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 as the “essential thing” (*OB* 79-80).

Similarly, *Faith and Violence* (1968), a collection of Merton’s essays subtitled “Christian Teaching and Christian Practice,” is replete with references to Paul. Merton speaks of “the basic truth of Christian faith and Christian experience, St. Paul’s realization of the paradox of man’s helplessness and God’s grace, not as somehow opposed, . . . but as a single existential unity.”¹⁵ Merton refers to Paul’s cosmology (*FV* 149-50), Paul’s analysis of the human condition as it appears in the early chapters of the Roman letter, concluding “we fulfill all the . . . requirements of those who are under God’s wrath” (*FV* 153), and, in writing of contemplation, to Paul’s view of the union of the human and God (*FV* 222-24). Merton explains that contemplative wisdom is “a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become, according to the expression of St. Paul, ‘one spirit’” (*FV* 222). Following a conflation of two different verses from two of Paul’s letters (which, incidentally, is how “New Testament” writers often used Hebrew scripture; see, for example, Mark 1:2-3): “For me to live . . . is Christ. I live, now not I, but Christ in lives in me” (Phil. 1:21; Gal. 2:20); Merton says, “This is a summary outline of the meaning of Christian contemplation” (*FV* 223).

Merton’s continuing engagement with Paul and Pauline concepts is evident in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), in which Merton speaks yet again of Paul and the law, in connection with the growth of anti-Semitism in Medieval Germanic Christendom, and continues to ponder what he calls “Paul’s ‘anger’ with ‘the Law’ and with ‘the elements of this world.’”¹⁶ In reflecting on what seems the inevitability of war between 1962 and 1966, Merton quotes Ephesians 6:12, the Pauline assertion that human struggle is not against “flesh and blood” but “powers” in the heavens, then launches into a discussion of the importance of individual choice in the face of possible nuclear war (*CGB* 199).

During the two weeks he spent in Alaska in 1968 prior to his trip to Asia, Merton gave many talks and conferences. In the talk “Building Community on God’s Love,” which focuses on the thought of Eberhard Arnold, one of the founders of the Bruderhof, Merton quotes extensively from 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. In that passage Paul reflects on the fact that God chooses “what is

foolish by human reckoning.” Merton’s point is that the gift of vocation comes to “just ordinary people with ordinary weaknesses.”¹⁷ Similarly, in the talk “Prayer and the Priestly Tradition,” Merton takes as his point of departure 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, which opens: “It is not ourselves we preach but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for Jesus’s sake.” Merton says, “Here St. Paul is saying that not only must we announce Jesus Christ but we must know and experience this Glory of God which has been communicated to us in Christ in an ineffable way” (*TMA* 157). Unfortunately, according to Merton, Christ is more often apologized for than announced.

Merton’s quotations of and allusions to St. Paul could be greatly multiplied. I hope I have provided enough material to indicate that he sustained a lively interest in Pauline thought throughout his life. It is noteworthy that Paul is a constant in Merton’s thought. One might have assumed that the early and “conventionally pious Christian” Merton would quote the Apostle and then his influence would fade as Merton’s interests ranged more widely, but this is not the case. In closing, I suggest that Paul has influenced his thought most directly in two critical areas – in Merton’s understanding of the self and in the theological grounding of his social ethics.

One of Merton’s most practical contributions to human spiritual understanding is his clear articulation, particularly in chapters 6-10 of *New Seeds of Contemplation*¹⁸ and in *The New Man*, of the nature of the true and false self.¹⁹ His point is not that we are schizophrenic, but that in Christ we are a deeper and more authentic person than we might imagine from the societal messages and models in which we are raised and by which we are often molded. Of course life “in Christ” is a central Pauline concern, particularly in the later letters. The concept of the true and false self, so fundamental in Merton’s spiritual anthropology, is based on a Pauline understanding of person as “first and second Adam,” that is, of person as “fallen” or “unregenerate” before Christ and “saved” or “transformed” (the latter probably the better term anthropologically) in Christ. Merton says “that for the Christian to be ‘on the way’ is to be ‘in Christ’” (*FV* 223), as succinct an indication as possible that Merton’s understanding of the human person was basically Pauline.

Second, Merton’s social ethics are clearly rooted in the Christian concepts of mutual responsibility and of love, both most vividly demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ and articulated by St. Paul. That Christians are mutually responsible for and to each other is directly articulated by Paul through the frequently used metaphor of the Church as a Body (for example in 1 Cor. 12:12-27 and Rom. 12:3-8 as well as in 1 Cor. 8 [especially vv. 9-13] and Rom. 14:1-15:6). Both for Paul and for Merton the foundation of Christian ethics was love, precisely because love was the fulfillment of the Torah which, as a Pharisee, Paul both understood and loved. Over and over in reading Merton on social issues like racial equality, the arms race, war, and economic justice one finds him quoting St. Paul to make his most important points.

Finally, it strikes me that many of the images Merton used in his early poem, “St. Paul,” to characterize the Apostle, also described his own journey. Merton, too, had seen “no sight of heaven” (lived a completely secular life), had made “my brain my tomb” (had developed intellectually but not at the “heart level”), with “boulders rolled across my reason” (lived instinctively and reactively). Merton, too, “saw the Voice that struck me dead” (an allusion to Paul’s conversion or call story, told three times by Luke in Acts and by Paul in Galatians 1-2). In Merton’s poem, as in the account of Paul’s Damascus Road experience in the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 9), it is Ananias who comes to return sight to Paul (*MDS* 60; *CP* 95-96). In

a way, it was the life and thought of the was-blind-but-now-I-see Apostle Paul which provided sight and insight to Thomas Merton.

1. This is an idea that I first explored at a retreat weekend in Denver, CO, sponsored by the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange. I am grateful to the group for our lively discussion of the topic.
2. On June 28, 2007, the eve of the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Pope Benedict XVI announced the celebration of a “Pauline Year” that would run from June 28, 2008, to June 29, 2009, to mark the approximately 2,000th anniversary of the saint’s birth.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 174.
4. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 6; subsequent references will be cited as “ES” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946) 60 (subsequent references will be cited as “MDS” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 95-96 (subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text).
6. Many New Testament scholars, myself among them, resist the term “conversion” to describe Saul/Paul’s Damascus Road experience; see, for example, J. G. Gager, “Some Notes on Paul’s Conversion,” *NTS* 27 (1980-81) 697-704; B. Thurston, “Paul on the Damascus Road . . .,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 38 (2003) 227-40; H. G. Wood, “The Conversion of St. Paul . . .,” *NTS* 1 (1954-55) 276-82.
7. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965) 61-87 (dated 1952); subsequent references will be cited as “SCel” parenthetically in the text. The essay was originally published as “Le Sacrement de l’Avent dans la Spiritualité de Saint Bernard,” *Dieu Vivant* 23 (1953) 23-43.
8. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 72; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text. The conferences have been published as “Sanctity in the Epistles of St. Paul,” ed. Chrysogonus Waddell, *OCSO, Liturgy OCSO*, 30.1 (1996), 3-27; 30.2 (1996), 3-23; 30.3 (1996), 15-33; 31.1 (1997), 7-26; 31.2-3 (1997), 3-20.
9. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961).
10. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 381-84.
11. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 45; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970) (subsequent references will be cited as “OB” parenthetically in the text); see the entries by Patrick F. O’Connell on “Bible” and “Opening the Bible” in *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* 28-30, 341-42.
13. For more on this subject see the excellent recent article by Ryan Scruggs, “Encountering the Word: A Dialogue between Merton and Barth on the Bible,” *The Merton Seasonal* 33.3 (Fall 2008) 18-33.
14. Informed modern interpreters of Paul avoid the oft heard, erroneous Law vs. Grace dichotomy. An observant Jew, an educated Pharisee, Saul/Paul (like most Jews) understood the Law/Torah as a great *gift* from God to humanity. If there is a problem, it does not *ipso facto* reside with the Torah itself.
15. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 62; subsequent references will be cited as “FV” parenthetically in the text.
16. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 119-20, 138; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.
17. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 94-95; subsequent references will be cited as “TMA” parenthetically in the text. Two of Merton’s talks, “Building Community on God’s Love” and “Community, Politics, and Contemplation,” are reprinted in Eberhard Arnold’s small book, *Why We Live in Community* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1995).

18. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 37-79.
19. Professor Anne E. Carr wrote an excellent work on the subject, unfortunately often neglected by Merton scholars, entitled *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), the fifth chapter of which takes its title from Paul: "I Live Now Not I . . ." (96-120); see also the entry "Self" by William H. Shannon in *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* 417-20.