Trajectories and future avenues in Pauline Studies and Jewish–Christian relations: the relevance of William S. Campbell’s approach to Paul

Kathy Ehrensperger

To cite this article: Kathy Ehrensperger (2017) Trajectories and future avenues in Pauline Studies and Jewish–Christian relations: the relevance of William S. Campbell’s approach to Paul, Journal of Beliefs & Values, 38:2, 153-158, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2017.1314988

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2017.1314988

Published online: 20 Jun 2017.
ABSTRACT
William S. Campbell’s research on the apostle Paul has been at the forefront of overcoming anti-Jewish interpretations. His career has been characterised by academic rigour and social and interfaith engagement. His interpretive approach is committed to formulating Christian identity in positive relation to others and thus contributes to provide a vital basis for Jewish-Christian and interfaith relations in general for the future.

KEYWORDS
Pauline studies; Christian identity; diversity; anti-Judaism; Jewish-Christian relations; interfaith relations

The assertion that Jesus was a Jew is almost a tautology in contemporary New Testament research. This has not always been so, but there is hardly any serious challenge to this insight in current scholarship. The implications of this acknowledgement, however, are a different matter. To acknowledge a historical fact is not the same as considering the implications for Christian theology if Jesus’ Jewishness is taken seriously. But the acknowledgement of Jesus’ Jewishness is often seen as providing a solid bridge for Jewish–Christian relations since there seems to be common ground on which the conversation could progress. Although this perception is not without problems, the issue is entirely different when it comes to the perception of the Apostle Paul. He is seen as the great separatist, in Jewish as well as Christian perspectives. In many Christian interpretations he is the one who through his proclamation distanced the Christ movement from Judaism, and who had distanced himself since his encounter with Christ from the traditions of his ancestors. He is being credited with setting up a sharp dichotomy between law and gospel, particularly in Protestant interpretations. Christian and particularly Protestant self-understanding is closely tied to the interpretation of the letters of Paul. Whilst Jesus has been embraced to some extent by Jews as one of their own, as a rich reception history demonstrates (Homolka 2016), the issue with Paul is rather different. In tune with significant strands of Christian interpretation he is attributed the role of the architect of the big divide. This should not come as a surprise if we consider the fact that Pauline interpretation played a decisive role at significant moments of Church history, not least during the Reformation when, for Luther, the dichotomy between Law and Gospel was identified as the dichotomy of the Roman-Catholic works righteousness.
versus the unconditional grace of God he had discovered through his reading of Romans. After Luther’s initial hopes that Jews would convert to the form of Christian faith he saw as the true faith had been disappointed, the Jews for Luther became identified with the refusal of the truth and thus the rejection God’s will. This led him to call for the eradication of Jews thereby fuelling waves of anti-Judaism. Until the later eighteenth century these waves, although atrocious, were sporadic. In the course of emerging historical-critical scholarship this theological anti-Judaism was historicised and became part and parcel of the historical scenarios depicted for emergent Christianity in the earliest centuries CE. Aspects of this theological and historicised anti-Judaism provided nurturing ground for the rise of political and racist anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century. The interpretation of the letters of Paul played a significant role in all of these theological and historical approaches. It does not come as a surprise to find that Paul, even when Jewish-Christian relations began in earnest after the Shoah, was not among the prominent topics in the conversation. He was rather considered a hindrance, problematic, and rather omitted from the round-table so as not to stir up trouble.

This was not Bill Campbell’s way of dealing with challenges and problems. Firmly rooted in the traditions of his ancestors, that is, his Irish Presbyterian tradition, his academic rigour led him to study through the challenging doctrine of predestination, in John Calvin’s and Karl Barth’s interpretation in particular. These in-depth studies in Systematic Theology eventually brought him to the source text from which the doctrine of predestination emerged, Paul’s letter to the Romans. His own research left him unconvinced by the great theologians’ conclusions, and particularly their interpretation of the New Testament texts. During the studies for his MA thesis he became aware of the abstract and decontextualised discussion of Romans and the continuous denigration of Jews and Judaism in many of the commentaries. His Ulster background had rendered him sensitive to prejudice against any particular group of people and he was shocked to find such uncritical prejudice in contemporary New Testament scholarship. He thus decided to embark on the journey of finding answers to these unresolved questions. He was made aware through reading a small book by Reginald H. Fuller (1963) that Romans 9–11 was not really taken into account in the interpretation of the letter at the time as the focus was on Romans 1–8 and, if anything else, the ethical admonitions in chapters 14–15. It was his first encounter with scholarship in Lampeter in west Wales, where Fuller, prior to moving to the US, had been teaching between 1950 and 1955, and which later would become a fruitful academic playing field for Bill himself (1998–2016). In personal correspondence, F.F. Bruce encouraged him to pursue this trajectory and particularly to read Johannes Munck’s (1967) Christ and Israel which at the time was available only in Danish and German. Although a not very supportive colleague who had asked the young doctoral student about his research topic gave him the discouraging answer that there was not much point in doing this research as the Germans had already said all that could possibly be said about the topic, Bill pursued his doctoral research with rigour and completed it successfully in 1972 earning his PhD from Edinburgh University. His findings were groundbreaking at the time and are evidence of his true and independent scholarship. Despite the then dominant consensus he found through his careful analysis of the structure of the letter, that there was no anti-Judaism in Romans 9–11, nor to the contrary anywhere in Romans. The letter did not advocate a dichotomy between Judaism and being in Christ. For contemporary Pauline scholarship this sounds very familiar. It has now become almost a mainstream consensus that Paul was and remained a Jew. But in the
early 1970s this was an insight that was not easily communicated in scholarly conversations. The significance of re-thinking Christian theology, including Pauline interpretation after the Shoah had not yet dawned widely and only in the late 1970s and early 1980s did a self-critical reflection in theological terms seriously begin (Metz 1980, 1984). Bill Campbell had gained his insights by academic rigour. Rather than being discouraged by the above-mentioned comments concerning German New Testament scholarship, during his PhD studies at Edinburgh University he also spent two semesters studying with Ernst Käsemann in Tübingen. It was Bill's theological and exegetical thoroughness that led him to his conclusions. It is important to note this, as some of his critics tend to discredit his approach as being driven by a guilt-burdened consciousness. Although it would be surprising if the Shoah did not lead Christian theology to reconsider its teachings in light of these horrific events: this is not where Bill's research began. They were initially driven by inner-Christian questions. But through these he came to recognise that Christian self-understanding and identity are intrinsically intertwined with Judaism. This was so in the first century as well as in the twenty-first century. Without continuous conversation and theologising in the face of the other, that is, the Jews, Christianity can only arrive at a truncated and thus distorted self-understanding. This dimension of his work came to Bill rather than the other way round. And the insights had not come to him easily, but when he saw them, he did not hesitate to pursue them although this was not the trajectory of research that was prominent at the time, and certainly had an impact on his professional academic career. But these led him not only to further research, but also to committing himself to Jewish-Christian dialogue in Birmingham, as Chair of the Birmingham Council of Christians and Jews (1984–98). In addition, he, together with Professor John Ferguson, then President of the Selly Oak Colleges, was instrumental in founding the Selly Oak Centre for the Study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations, as a parallel to the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations.

His interpretative insights informed his teaching in the classroom and beyond, by taking his classes to trips to Hungary and Poland, where they not only visited concentration camps but also got actively involved by for instance helping to restore a Jewish graveyard in Kecskemét in Hungary. Research, academic rigour and active involvement were never isolated activities for Bill, they went hand in hand and mutually informed each other.

It took a long time for Bill's research in Paul to be recognised as one of the groundbreaking contributions in Pauline scholarship committed to find interpretive ways to overcome anti-Jewish interpretations. His contribution began to be recognised as a decisive voice contributing to an understanding of Paul as a first century Jew. His doctoral thesis was never published, but the insights would probably have had difficulties in being heard at the time. Only when, in the wake of E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977, the so-called 'New Perspective' also began to consider Paul from a different perspective did a scholarly debate emerge in which Bill played an important role. Although not fully embracing the 'New Perspective' (as identified with James D.G. Dunn, E.P. Sanders and others), Bill's work found further allies in colleagues who saw in Paul a first century Jew who remained a Jew also after his calling experience. Encouragement and support came particularly from Lloyd Gaston (Vancouver), Markus Barth (Basel), Anthony Hanson (Hull), and Charles Cranfield (Durham) in the late 1970s and early 1980s as colleagues who did research in a direction similar to Bill's. The proposal of his friend Lloyd Gaston (1987) of a two-covenant theory, however, did not convince Bill. So he continued to pursue his own differentiated research...
into Paul, between ‘New Perspective’ and ‘two covenant’ approaches. The problem with the New Perspective in his view is that despite its recognition of Paul as a Jew, this recognition is qualified by differentiating Judaism into aspects which cohere with Paul and aspects which Paul supposedly rejected, the latter being a so-called Jewish ethnocentrism evidenced in the identity affirming boundary markers, circumcision and food laws in particular. Thus the image of Paul, and the theology he advocates still is bound to a negative image of aspects of Judaism, and the aspects that happen to be viewed negatively in the New Perspective, are, significantly, those that are central to Jewish identity. Thus, similar to previous approaches, the New Perspective needs Judaism as a negative foil, now not in terms of the dichotomy of law and gospel, but of ethnocentrism over against a posited Pauline universalism. In the perception of the New Perspective, Judaism in its identity affirming aspect as a different and differentiated people of God is thus interpreted in an exclusivist way, leaving no room for an affirmed Jewish identity in its own right. Judaism remains the negative foil in this view of Christian identity, as Bill and other colleagues have demonstrated (Campbell 2006). This is not what is found in the Pauline letters, and it is not a perception of Christian identity which helps to negotiate respectful conversations and interactions between people who are and remain different in the contemporary world.

The other path Bill did not pursue was that of the two-covenant theory. Although certainly overcoming the trap of reformulating Christian identity in contrast and opposition to Judaism, the two-covenant approaches lead, somewhat anachronistically, to a separation between early Christ-followers and Judaism that at this period is not evidenced. Whilst this might be helpful for the mutual recognition of Judaism and Christianity as two separate religious traditions in the contemporary world, Bill does not find evidence for such a separation in Paul’s theologising of the first century with its corresponding relevance for today. The two aspects, academic research and its relevance for today are intrinsically interrelated in Bill’s academic work, in that he is committed to what his friend Daniel Patte has called ‘the ethical responsibility of the exegete’ (Patte 1995) being highly aware that New Testament research has an impact beyond the academy for faith communities and society.

As noted, Bill navigated his approach beyond the New Perspective inspired by issues raised by representatives of the Scandinavian school, and questions emerging in the debates between existentialist and ‘Heilsgeschichtliche’ approaches. He was unconvinced by the individualisation of existentialist theology, and the discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity advocated by it. He emphasised the community/group aspect of the Christ-movement and the element of continuity between Israel and the church in the vein of the Heilsgeschichtliche Schule, without falling into the trap of the dangers of a Geschichtstheologie (Campbell 2013). The Christ-movement is not seen as emerging in opposition to Judaism but as part of it, with Paul being commissioned with the task of reaching out to non-Jews. His letters are thus not general letters addressed to humankind, but particular letters addressed to non-Jews in Christ. In Paul’s eschatological vision through Christ, God, at the beginning of the dawn of the change of the ages, is now also their God. These non-Jews now join (not replace) Israel in glorifying God. Whatever Paul says he says to non-Jews. Thus, Bill emphasises that the relationship between Jews and gentiles in the letter to the Romans for instance, needs to be seen in the context of Paul’s theologising concerning the faithfulness of God. At the heart of this is God’s faithfulness to his call of Israel, and to the promises. For God’s faithfulness to be true faithfulness, it has to remain dedicated to the people Israel. The identity of Israel is intrinsically linked to the faithfulness
of God and cannot be transferred as a label to anyone else. But in as much as Israel remains the beloved people of God, so should gentiles now, in the beginning of the dawning of the age to come initiated by the Christ-event, remain as they were when called, that is representatives of the non-Jewish nations. The gentle followers of Christ, however, do not have a calling and promise separate or apart from the Jewish people, but only together with them. Bill maintains that ‘… the “church” in Paul’s perspective is inseparably related to Israel … but however related to Israel, the church is not Israel; Israel’s identity is unique and cannot be taken over by gentle Christ-followers …’ (Campbell 2006, 170). He continues ‘Israel remains a given in Paul’s theologizing’ (Campbell 2006, 171). Judaism is not a problem for Paul, that needs to be overcome, whether in Christ or without. Nor is diversity of Jews and non-Jews in Christ a problem that needs to be overcome. Respect for diversity is inherent in Paul’s theologising as it reflects the faithfulness of the God of Israel who is confessed as the One who created the world in its diversity. Although Paul is concerned about his fellow Jews who do not share his conviction that the Christ-event marked the beginning of the dawning of the age to come, this does not lead to a negative perception, but rather to being bewildered about God’s plans. In Romans 9–11, a core passage in Bill’s research, Paul attributes that which he has difficulties to understand, the non-response of fellow Jews, to God’s providence, including the sorting out of all of this via his conviction that all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26). Irrespective of the timing and the means by which this might occur, what is significant in Romans 9–11 is that the Jews are not displaced by the advent of the Christ-movement but have an irreplaceable future in God’s purpose. This is what the faithfulness of God entails and thus constitutes a challenge to all Christian triumphalism.

By establishing that Paul remained firmly rooted in Judaism, that he understood his call as commissioning him to a task in relation to non-Jews, and hence reading Paul’s letters consistently as addressing Christ-followers from the non-Jewish nations, Bill Campbell’s research demonstrates that anti-Judaism is not intrinsic to the apostle’s theologising. To the contrary, his message and activities can be shown as highly concerned with the Jewish people whether sharing his convictions concerning the Christ-event or not. Bill also demonstrates that the affirmation of Jewish identity is theologically vital in relation to the faithfulness of God as the God of creation, and as such, rather than being perceived as in conflict, is intrinsically interwoven with Christian identity, past and present. Diversity within and beyond Christ is not a failure that needs to be overcome, but intrinsic to God’s creation. The problem is not diversity but how people in their diversity relate to each other. Bill’s approach to Paul and the wider implications this has for theology opens up new and promising avenues for Jewish–Christian relations. These have matured over the decades since the Shoah and are entering a period where, based on some common ground of mutual trust, deeper theological questions can and should be raised. Mainline Churches, Catholic and Protestant have publicly renounced their centuries long policies of a mission to the Jews. This is a promising indication that it is being recognised that respect for and retention of difference and diversity are the basis of any true conversation between different faith traditions. Bill Campbell’s research demonstrates that the apostle Paul, rather than being a hindrance to such respectful encounters can actually contribute to the overcoming of theologically and socially problematic perceptions of the other and be a facilitating partner in conversations between Jews and Christians. Jewish–Christian relations are peculiar in that, if Christians are unable or unwilling to relate positively to those closest to them, who are and remain different, they will correspondingly be unable to relate in a constructive way to any other
faith traditions. Christianity’s relation to Judaism is the paradigmatic ground for Christians to relate to all other faiths, a template and a test for the integrity of their own faith.

Bill’s research is thus not only ground-breaking for Pauline Studies but demonstrates the challenge and relevance this offers for the self-understanding and practice of contemporary Christianity and for interfaith relations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor


References