Carter, Christopher L.

The Great Sermon Tradition as a Fiscal Framework in 1 Corinthians: Towards a Pauline Theology of Material Possessions

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The thesis of this volume (a revised version of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Aberdeen and supervised by Andrew Clarke) is that in 1 Corinthians Paul expresses a particular view on material possessions because he has learned to do so from the Jesus tradition, in particular the oral tradition that lies behind the great sermons of Matthew and Luke. In so arguing, Carter sides with those who provide a positive answer to the long-running question of whether Paul knew about the dominical tradition. This debate was inaugurated in 1808 by Hermann Cludius, who had expressed skepticism of Paul’s knowledge of Jesus. Carter offers numerous epithets for “relating to material possessions,” of which the most common is “fiscal” (as in the book’s title). While one sympathizes with the problem, “fiscal” relates more to the finances and taxation of the state and sounds odd in this context. In addition, the locus for what the historical Jesus said about possessions was a peasant economy where barter was more common than monetary transactions.

It would have been to Carter’s advantage in handling this subject if he had drawn on the literature from that area of social psychology known as social identity theory, part of which concerns how groups embed distinctive behavioral norms among their members so that group identity is maintained, especially in new and ambiguous situations. Why
would this help? Let us grant (as I believe) that Paul did not invent the morality of the Christ-movement and that the words of Jesus provided the stimulus for a new and very distinctive new moral vision in the first century C.E. (with the precious fragment of Paul’s oral proclamation on the subject of the love that characterizes the Christ-movement in Rom 12:9–21 providing a good example of that vision). The issue that remains is whether the new ethical norms became so embedded in group identity that Christ-followers would have acted on them whether in any particular case they could link them to a particular logion of Jesus or not. The more one thinks about this the more it tends to erode the significance of the question Carter and the scholars before him have set for themselves. Did Paul speak as he did in Rom 12:9–21 because he “knew” similar logia directly attributed to Jesus of Nazareth or because these were just the norms/identity-descriptors of the new movement he had joined and that he probably just accepted in some general way went back to Jesus? Or does it really matter which is closer to the truth? Is the whole debate about whether Paul “knew” the words of Jesus that began with Cludius in 1808 simply a survival of ways of thinking about the data that look far less interesting when more sophisticated ways of understanding group formation, maintenance, and identity drawn from the social sciences are introduced?

Furthermore, along with the vast majority of New Testament scholars at present (hopefully the position will soon change), Carter also commits a fundamental category error in understanding key first-century data. This is to assume that we are dealing with two “religions,” “Judaism” and “Christianity,” two entities of the same broad type, whose adherents were “Jews” and “Christians,” respectively. This view is expressed regularly in New Testament studies in the misleading metaphor of the “parting of the ways,” with its picture of the sorrowful divergence of two similar entities. It is in the interests of historical truth to recognize that first-century Ioudaioi were an ethnic group, like the fifty or so other such groups existing around the Mediterranean mentioned by Josephus in the Contra Apionem. Although geography is just one part of ethnicity, all of them were known by the territory from which they sprang (whether they lived there or in diaspora), so we should call them “Judeans” to avoid exceptionalism, and all of them had an ethnic identity that included a religious dimension but was far larger than it. The Christ-movement had a completely different type of identity. There is no one epithet that captures it: it was certainly not ethnic, and its locus in strongly God-oriented house gatherings where members of Judean and other ethnic groups ate from the one loaf and drank from the one cup in memory of the Lord made it highly distinctive and, to some Judeans at least, threatening—not because such practices were “heresy” (51) but because they were more akin to treason. This was the ekklesia tou Theou that Paul tried to destroy (Gal 1:13).
Carter’s first chapter (1–16) summarizes the debate about Paul’s knowledge of Jesus traditions (1–7), before moving on to a good coverage of writings on the attitude of the Bible (Paul in particular) to material possessions (7–14). Here Carter has some appropriately sharp comments to make on capitalist and prosperity approaches for the crudity of their exegesis, but he is unjustifiably harsh on liberation theology. Given that a driving force for liberation theology was the desire to discourage the Catholic poor of Latin America from fatalistically ignoring the injustices of this life on the basis they would receive their reward in heaven, it is rather surprising to see him taxing liberation theologians for “de-emphasizing the major biblical themes of eternal salvation and eschatology.” Even more remarkable is his claim that liberation theologies “sometimes catalysed bloody revolutions” (10), an assertion for which he provides no evidence whatever. Does he think everyone just shares that view? On the other hand, blood was certainly shed in the cause of liberation theology, as when El Salvadorean Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot dead while saying Mass in a hospital chapel on 24 March 1980.

One issue not addressed in chapter 1 is just what aspects of the great sermons Carter has in mind as covering “material possessions.” We have a clue when he favorably acknowledges a recent remark of Bruce Longenecker that a comparison of the attitudes of Jesus and Paul toward the poor is long overdue (14). Yet although one’s view on material possessions and attitude to the poor are related, they are not the same, and it would have been helpful for Carter to explain more clearly the precise subject of his interest and what aspects of the great sermon tradition related to it. At times we find him arguing for links between Paul and the great sermon tradition in areas that are not necessarily related to material possessions or the treatment of the poor (e.g., his use of Michael Thompson’s work on Rom 12–15 at pp. 69–70). His case really requires some modeling of “material possessions” that he does not provide.

In chapter 2 Carter argues for the dominical origins of the great sermon tradition (17–41). This gives him an opportunity for a detailed coverage of the vibrant recent debate, which updates or rejects form criticism, on how Jesus traditions could have survived in the first century in a culture that was largely oral and mnemonic, but with some literacy. He ranges across important contributions by Roli de la Cruz, David Parker, Birger Gerhardsson, Werner Kelber, Samuel Byrskog, Richard Bauckham, and Alan Kirk, to mention only a few. His conclusion is that the theology of Jesus has been preserved in this tradition and transmitted, even if his words have not. While this is perfectly reasonable, some eyebrows may be raised at his failure to offer any detailed discussion of the texts of the Matthean or Lukan sermons in this chapter. In addition, as noted above, it would have been desirable for Carter to assess how ethical norms become embedded in groups and members socialized to accept them as an expression of group identity. On reflection, the question of how norms functioned in the early Christ-movement in relation to its...
identity is just as important as that of the mechanisms by which they were transmitted, although at present the latter dominates scholarly attention.

Carter argues in chapter 3 (42–72) that Paul probably knew the great sermon tradition. First he seeks to answer the case against his position by covering topics such as the apparent indifference of Paul to the Jesus traditions (42–47) and the express statements by Paul (2 Cor 5:16; Gal 1:12; 1 Cor 15:3) that seem to point to his ignorance of the historical Jesus (47–50). Then Carter moves on to positive arguments for his position: the knowledge Paul may have derived concerning Jesus while persecuting the church (47–51) or that was expressed in preaching initially to unconverted people that can be deduced largely from Acts (51–58). Yet his confidence in Acts does not always acknowledge negative data, such as the impossibility of reconciling Paul’s statement of his inaugural preaching in Thessalonica—how he preached to ex-idolaters (1 Thess 1:9)—with the Lukan version in Acts 17:1–4. The next area Carter covers is the body of Pauline texts suggesting knowledge of the dominical tradition (58–67).

While Paul was aware of Jesus-material (especially in 1 Cor 7:10–11; 9:14 and probably also in various places in Rom 12–15, especially 12:14, which reflects what we now have in Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:27), it is a long stretch to say that he was aware of the “great sermon” tradition as such, to the extent that he can be presumed to know other aspects of it now found in Matt 5 and Luke 6. If one looks at what Paul says about love in Rom 12:9–21, the issue of material possessions appears only once, in the injunction at verse 13 to contribute to the needs of the holy ones and to practice hospitality, or twice if we include the direction at verse 20 to give food and drink to one’s enemy. But none of these precise injunctions is found in Matt 5 or Luke 6. In other words, Paul was able to urge Christ-followers to bless those who persecuted them without mentioning other aspects of the great sermon tradition. It could well be the case, as already noted, that what we find in Rom 12:9–21 may represent an original idea or outlook of Jesus that has been elaborately developed in a whole range of situations by Paul or, far more likely, the Christ-movement before him to generate norms for members that would reflect its distinctive identity.

With chapter 4 (73–105), we finally arrive at Carter’s analysis of the material on poverty and possessions in Matt 5–7 and Luke 6. In my view, the organization of the book would have been improved if this had been the first substantive chapter. Carter begins with an account of “eschatology” as the hermeneutical framework for the material (scare quotes for “eschatology” here because this word has now probably passed its sell-by date in New Testament studies, as a word that substitutes for fresh thinking about the phenomena in view). Having competently run through consistent and realized eschatology, he opts for “inaugurated eschatology” as the best approach, since it alone does justice to the “now” and the “not yet” dimensions, while giving the teaching real ethical bite without turning it
into legalistic entrance-requirements (73–79). He argues for an “otherwordly” dimension to the material, where there is a heavenly zone in frame with its own privileges and obligations (79–97). Finally, he shows how this ethical material requires one to esteem people over things and warns of impending judgment (97–104). It would have been interesting if Carter had undertaken more to contextualize this material (or at least what he considers its dominical core) in early first-century Galilee, as Sean Freyne, for example, has so interestingly done. This would have brought out more sharply its radical edge (for example, in the way that Jesus subverted the local honor code) and allowed it to be more fully understood. We would then have a richer sense of what it means to tell a peasant subsisting from day to day to lend (that day’s bread? his only cloak?) without hope of reward (Luke 6:34–35).

Chapter 5 (106–203) is a long and closely argued chapter where Carter seeks to relate 1 Corinthians to the great sermon tradition. He organizes the material along the themes he has previously employed in relation to the great sermon: eschatology as a hermeneutical framework (117–28), arguing for an “already but not yet” dimension to 1 Corinthians (e.g., in 1 Cor 3:11–15; 5:7; 6:9–10; 15:24); an otherworldly perspective (129–69), especially covering 1 Cor 1:26–28; 5:9–11; the ethical dimensions of an otherworldly perspective (169–83); the relational perspective of an otherworldly perspective (184–90); and impending judgment (190–202). The argument in this chapter is clearly written and critically engages with a wealth of scholarship (much of it very recent) on 1 Corinthians. Nevertheless, although he argues that, “despite the absence of quotation [in Corinthians], sermonic influence is plausible” (109), in my view he only proves such influence as a possibility. This is the case, for example, when he argues that the essence of 1 Cor 1:26–28 is “blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (134). While 1 Cor 1:26–28 could indicate that Paul is writing within a community that has taken on board views of Jesus, this falls a long way short of proving that he is aware of the great sermon material. Even more problematic is the argument that the injunctions to avoid rapacious people in 1 Cor 5:10–11 state “negatively what the sermons declare positively” in relation to commanding extravagant generosity with regard to possessions (182–83). This seems to miss the huge difference between not doing something evil and doing something extravagantly good that is embedded in the Matthean version of the great sermon: “Again you have heard that it was said.... but I say to you” (Matt 5).

In chapter 6 (204–25) Carter ably works through important aspects of the first-century context (biblical Judaism, Second Temple Judaism, and the Greco-Roman world) and reaches the view that none of them provides the common view on attitudes to material possessions to be found in the Sermon on the Mount tradition and in 1 Corinthians. He finds the major point of difference to be in “inaugurated eschatology.”
His main conclusion (226–29) is that “a common oral source lies behind the great sermon tradition and 1 Corinthians” (226) and that “the pervasively eschatological and otherworldly perspective” (228) of Jesus and Paul lies at the heart of what they both have to say about material possessions.

This is an important book that offers interesting new insights into the much-disputed question of how Paul related to Jesus. While I doubt that Carter has proved knowledge by Paul of anything as specific as the great sermon, he has certainly in my view done a valuable job of proving that Paul did not invent the ethical dimension of Christianity nor do violence to Jesus’ teaching (as many still claim). Although unfortunately not noticed by Carter, the likely explanation for the similarities he has demonstrated between the thought of Jesus and Paul is found in that branch of social psychology known as social identity theory. This explanation is that Jesus’ distinctive moral thinking in these areas (and others) was embedded in the identity of the earliest Jesus-groups as norms for behavior (or identity-descriptors) that told the members who they were in relation to how they should behave—as a matter of course and also in new and ambiguous situations. These norms were then faithfully maintained and transmitted throughout the Christ-movement so that they crop up in the writings of later Christ-followers as diverse as Paul, Matthew and Mark, James, and so on. What makes this even more remarkable is the way that these norms emerged in the life of Jesus, a member of the Judean ethnic group in Galilee, then moved into the entirely different (nonethnic) identity of the Christ-movement. In the result, then, Carter has performed the valuable service of forcing us to confront and acknowledge phenomena (even if I have interpreted their transmission by a different mechanism) that speak of the magnificent new moral vision that Jesus released into the world, which, when you encounter it in the great sermon or in Rom 12:9–21, sounds fresh as ever. We should all be grateful to him.