THE EPISTLES OF PAUL

"So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."
—GALATIANS 2:16

The theology of the Apostle Paul was not formulated in his study but in his evangelistic exploits on the mission field. He did not sort out his doctrines to make them tidy or even give them systematic form, much less to stereotype the kindness and grace of God. He formulated them to address the crying needs of the people to whom he ministered.

Unlike professional theology, Paul's doctrines are about life, behaviour, victorious living and enjoying the presence and activity of God in the real world. He did not set out to write handbooks of Christian doctrine, for his letters were provoked by the need to address particular situations and problems that had arisen in the churches to which he wrote.

We may never have known what Paul believed about the Lord's Supper had some believers in Corinth not acted irresponsibly when they gathered to celebrate it. If it were not for the Judaizers who insisted on circumcising Gentiles, thus provoking the letter to the Galatians, we would know little about Paul's view of the place of the law in Christian experience. An emerging heresy in Colosse provoked Paul's letter to the church in that city, giving us insight into what he believed about the undermining of the pre-eminence and centrality of Christ. We would not know Paul's stance on the gift of tongues, had

not some Christians in Corinth gone overboard in the use of it, provoking Paul to rebuke and correct them. It is only Paul's letter to the Romans that stands alone in not being instigated by a pastoral concern for the people to whom he was writing.

We must be cautious, however, of attempting to put Paul's teaching into a watertight system of theology, which he does not do himself. At the same time, we must seek to understand the major concerns and thrust of his ministry. Interestingly, no matter what his starting point is, Paul always returns to the central issue of the Gospel. Sheer repetition alone would give us a good indication of what was central to his thoughts. Paul's primary message is the righteousness of God; a righteousness imputed to us as an act of faith, and then imparted experientially as an ongoing process, also on the grounds of faith.

Paul writes, "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:17). At the heart of this experience of God's righteousness is the believer's union with Christ. In all his Epistles to the churches, Paul directs the people to Jesus.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank You for the remarkable teachings of Paul that directs us to You and your sufficiency in every problem and situation I face.

TO REFLECT UPON: Am I bringing my problems, concerns and doubts to Christ?