

6. A PASSION FOR CHRIST: PAUL THE APOSTLE



FOCUS: Little of what most people think of as Christianity has been untouched by the legacy of Paul's writing and influence. The many understandings of his interpretation of Christianity continue to be re-examined in the 21st century.

Perhaps no single person is more responsible for the existence of Christianity as we know it today than that balding preacher from Tarsus whom we know as Paul.

Idolized by some as the conduit through which God dictated an eternal and unchanging moral code and discredited by others as a misogynist crank, Paul is without question one of the most controversial figures in the history of Christianity. But one thing can't be questioned: his passion for Christ and his apparent willingness to risk life and limb in propagating his interpretation of Christ's message and purpose. As very little, if any, of what most people think of as Christianity has been untouched by the influence of this itinerant tentmaker, a thorough examination of the changing understandings and significance of Paul's writings and ideas is critical to a faithful expression of Christianity today.

THE LEGACY OF PAUL

From "opposing Cephas to his face" (Galatians 2:11) to stick-waving threats (1 Corinthians 4:21), it is abundantly clear from his own writings that Paul was never a stranger to controversy. His writings continue to spark controversy and debate to this day. Very little is known about this prolific writer of nearly a quarter of what has come to be known as the New Testament. What most people *think* we know about his life actually comes from Luke's *Acts of the Apostles*. *Acts* conflicts in chronology and theological content in so many ways with the authentic writings of Paul as to be profoundly suspect in offering an accurate account of his life. According to Luke, his name was Saul when he was born in Tarsus of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). He may have been born to a Roman family who was committed to his Jewish education and upbringing. According to Luke, the young Saul studied in Jerusalem with Rabbi Gamaliel and persecuted those on "The Way" as heretics before experiencing a profound life-changing encounter with the Christ on the road to Damascus. As uncertain as these Lukan story elements are, they nonetheless express the conviction that Paul straddled two very different worlds and was uniquely situated to translate the universal message of a local Jewish sect into language that the whole world could embrace.

But his biography is by no means the most controversial aspect of Paul's life. Reviled and discredited for writings attributed to him, he has the dubious honor of being one of the most admired *and* hated proponents of Christianity. Women,

slaves, Jews, and homosexuals are just some of the many groups who can point to Paul's writings as having provided fodder for those who would defend an unjust and cruel status quo.

Much of what Paul is held negatively accountable for is, in fact, the work of others. Letters attributed to Paul have introduced the idea of Jesus as the divine savior from sin and set the foundation for a church that administers sacraments and ordains clergy. Likewise, Paul's writings have been the springboard from which theologians have woven complex theories of blood atonement and recast the faith we now call Christianity into a religion "about" Jesus rather than the religion "of" Jesus. The first step in sorting out Paul's social, theological and ecclesiastical legacy is to establish exactly what can be attributed to him and what cannot.

GENUINE PAUL

Paul's authentic letters are the earliest writings in the New Testament. It is often a challenging leap for people conditioned by assumption and tradition to realize that the Gospels were written some twenty to forty (and perhaps fifty?) years *after* Paul's letters.

The evidence that the Gospels were written later is clear in that the genuine Paul never quotes from the Gospels, seldom quotes Jesus (and then nothing from the Gospels), and never refers to the dramatic conversion experience testified to by Luke in *Acts* – an event one would think Paul would use as an example of conversion possibilities. Yet it also seems clear that Luke (and probably the other Gospel writers) were unaware of much of Paul's life and ministry. None of Paul's letters are mentioned in *Acts*. The language and theology of Paul's speeches portrayed by Luke are so different in vocabulary and theology from the Paul of the authentic letters that it seems much of Luke's Paul can be chalked up to "dramatic license." Although the authentic Paul's emphasis is on Justification and Reconciliation, Luke's "Paul" preaches on Righteousness and Forgiveness. In other words, Luke's Paul preaches in the theological language of Luke, not Paul.

Without *Acts*, the letters become our primary source of understanding the real Paul. However, many of the books attributed to Paul are either anonymous or pseudonymous. Analysis of the vocabulary, style, and theological focus of the letters attributed to Paul has led scholars to agree on seven letters as genuine "Paul." All probably written in the 50s of the first century, they are: 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans. 1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest and Romans the latest, most mature statement of Paul's theological views.

While the superscription, "The letter of Paul to the...", appears on many other letters, the use of the superscription can only be traced back to the second

century CE and was most certainly used to lend credibility to an otherwise anonymous work. In Hebrews, Paul is mentioned only in the superscription and nowhere in the body of the letter. In Ephesians, both the superscription and the interior mention Paul, but the content is so wildly different from the authentic letters, scholars agree that it is “pseudo” Paul.

You can still find theologians who will argue about the authenticity of Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, but most agree that Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus are later creations.

The two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus are good examples of “pseudo-Pauline” literature. Having come to be known as the Pastoral Epistles, many Bibles will still print the heading as “The Letter of Paul to Timothy or Titus.” But even the most cursory reading will reveal the profound differences between these Pastorals and the undisputed letters of Paul. The vocabulary, theology, and style of the Pastorals are closer to that of the second century’s early church fathers. The matter-of-fact discussion of church “order” (bishops, elders, deacons, etc) had not been established when Paul was writing in the 50s and perhaps 60s of the first century. In Paul’s day, Christians were still what might be called a Jewish reform movement, not a “church.” Reflecting a transition time from Paul’s loose community structure to the hierarchy of the second century church, these letters are best read keeping in mind their context and setting as post-Pauline works of the early Christian community.

SOMEONE ELSE’S MAIL

Although Paul’s letters are often read as if they are somehow letters to “us,” they are actually glimpses into the everyday circumstances of Paul’s efforts to oversee a fledgling movement 2000 years ago. Each of the authentic letters reveals a slice of Paul’s life never intended to be collected and venerated as they have in their role anchoring what has become the New Testament. Paul would undoubtedly be apoplectic if he knew that some of his letters, dashed off in impulsive outbursts at disobedient and wavering little faith communities were now held up as “holy” and as the “word of God.” The Peanuts comic strip character, Linus, was wise to express discomfort at reading Paul’s letters, saying, “I feel like I’m reading someone else’s mail.”

All the authentic letters of Paul were “occasional,” having been written in response to a particular situation, with the content of the letters were generated by the circumstances and actions of a particular set of folks in each community. In many cases it is clear that someone like “Chloe’s people” (1 Corinthians 1:11) have snitched or written a letter to Paul, the contents of which compel him to respond in writing. Romans, the only letter written to a church Paul didn’t start, was a letter of introduction to a church he intended to visit and wanted to “butter

up” before he arrived. As such, Romans stands out as the most comprehensive statement of Paul’s theology, independent of particular crises.

While never intended to be universal manuals for Christian behavior, Paul’s letters are nonetheless invaluable in guiding and shaping the lives of Christian individuals and communities. For instance, the only reason we have the written details of celebrating the “Lord’s Supper” as a community is because the Corinthians weren’t doing it right. Paul sets them straight in 1 Corinthians 11 and casts the model for the practice of communion in the institutionalized church.

THEOLOGICAL SHENANIGANS

Paul’s major themes of grace, faith, freedom, and Christ crucified are interwoven through his letters. However, much of Paul’s writing remains cryptically dense or repetitive to many. Theological projections from later developments or outright mistranslations often obscure Paul’s original meaning. A case in point is Paul’s concept of faith. Translators, often influenced by theological developments in the later church, are also restricted by the limits of language. The English word translated as “faith” is *pistis* in Greek. For Paul, *pistis* was less something to “possess” than it was a concept that included a whole way of living. “Having” faith in the way it is spoken of today would have been foreign to Paul. However, no English word exists to translate the breadth of meaning suggested by Paul. Professor J. Paul Sampley has suggested “faithing” as a better translation of *pistis* while others have suggested “faithfulness” as a better word. Far from simply indulging in esoteric theological shenanigans, such a distinction can have profound implications.

In the grammatically confusing context of Romans 3:22, *pistis* can be interpreted in two very different ways. Overall, Paul was interested in the “faithfulness (or faithing) of Jesus” and his obedience to death. However, instead of being translated as the faith “of” Jesus, Romans 3:22 is translated as faith “in” Jesus, essentially suggesting “right belief” as the priority. Believing “in” Jesus and faithing the way Jesus did are amazingly different translations of the same passage. Such choices in translation can and have contributed to Christianity’s emphasizing an aspect of discipleship Paul may never have intended.

HARD TO UNDERSTAND

“So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”

– 2 Peter 3:15-16

Paul's writings remain a mystery to many Christians today. Full of seemingly contradictory concepts, Paul preached a radical grace as God's law-opposing work in the world. He advocated a freedom that doesn't equal the absence of restraints, but responsibility in love. Some readers are frustrated by Paul the polemicist, who often squares off when cornered and overstates his argument in triplicate twelve times over until his opponent's case is beaten down or neutered. In addition, Paul's efforts to translate Hebrew concepts into a Greco-Roman cosmology can sometime leave the reader wondering where he is going.

Even the pre-eminent Pauline bumper sticker, "Christ crucified," meant to be a shocking oxymoron in Paul's day, seems pedestrian and old hat today. In part because its importance has been commandeered by literal interpreters of scripture and in part because of our distance culturally from Jesus' and Paul's world, such phrases have lost their edge and become simple litmus tests of right belief. The idea of Christ crucified for today's progressive Christian can be lost in light of gross literal overstatements like Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Yet Christ crucified and the resurrection still hold power for the likes of Marcus Borg, who claims them as "the metaphorical embodiment of the path of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new identity."

Human beings have a capacity for self-destruction that Paul saw as being altered only by the grace of God.

For Paul, due to the grace of God and not merit of our own earning, we are

<u>No longer</u>	<u>Now</u>	<u>Not Yet</u>
Weak (helpless)	dying to sin	share glory of God
Enemies	justified	saved (whole)
Sinners	reconciled	perfect (complete)
Ungodly	"in Christ"	

In the midst of all this, Paul speaks of our solidarity with Jesus, having died *with* Christ to sin (as opposed to Christ having died *for* our sins). Freed from the "no longer," we are unfinished creatures living in the "now" that the Divine will complete in the "not yet." Those who have died in Christ will be finished as they press on, "faithing" and participating in the faithfulness of Jesus.

All of this leads to one of the most important aspects of Paul's teaching, namely, that as a by-product of grace, there is hope. In both the courtroom language of "justification" and the familial language of "reconciliation," Paul expresses a belief in a God who is up to something in the world. It's not about people believing in extraordinary things, but about people being in a renewed relationship with the Divine and with their fellow human beings. As one unpacks Paul's "Christ in me" and "Christ in us" language, we get a glimpse of the almost mystical sense in which Paul felt God "participates" in our lives and we "participate" in God. As

such, we are profoundly interconnected as the body of Christ and called to participate in God's program of making the reign of God real in the world.

Try as one might, it's hard to pin down a real center or core truth to Paul's message. However, if one embraces the many different facets tugging and pulling at one another in creative tension, a student of Paul can begin to sense his passion for Christ and his grace-drenched hope for the human enterprise.

Paul's confidence in the future was based solidly on his perception of what God had done in the past and had promised for the future. Paul lived believing that what God had begun would be completed sometime in the "not yet." In the meantime, the form in which one's faith is best expressed is in a love that cuts across social orders and barriers, a grace that heals all divisions, and a hope that can overcome all the violence, injustice, and grief the world can muster.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story and opening sequence)

DVD Chapter 2:

Flunder points out that Paul was a man in transition. Explain.

What are some of the benefits Levine describes Paul using in promoting his message to the people of his day and age?

DVD Chapter 3:

According to Varghese, what was Paul's passion?

According to Cobb, what is so crucial about Paul's message?

DVD Chapter 4:

What are the seven authentic letters of Paul?

The role of women is just one example of a teaching that is confused by later authors claiming Paul's authority. Explain.

Describe the attributes and purpose of what Crossan calls the "three different Pauls."

DVD Chapter 5:

According to Nelson, what did Paul warn against when considering "the letter of the Law?"

Describe some of the characteristics of Paul's message and its similarity to the "alternative wisdom" taught by Jesus.

Name two ways in which the notion of "Christ crucified" challenges conventional wisdom.

DVD Chapter 6:

Elaborate on how the concept of “*pistis*” being mistranslated as “faith *in* Jesus” (as opposed to the “faith *of* Jesus”) has shaped Christianity as a whole.

SPIRITPRACTICE:

“Risk Taking” with Potter Roger Strom.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 6’s *Living it Out:* “13 Candles,” distributed by your facilitator.