



What Every Christian Should Know about Paul's Letters

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Much can be said about Paul of Tarsus, a persecutor who became a proclaimer of Jesus Christ, an unlikely apostle, whose contributions to the New Testament have done more to influence the history of humankind than perhaps any other writings. Sometimes so much is said about Paul that people find it difficult to know where to begin. This article offers a beginning; it presents a basic overview of Paul and the ideas that animated the letters he wrote. It aims to be a resource for those who wish to go inside Paul's world so they can explore his place in history and his distinctive way of articulating the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹

PAUL HIMSELF

Paul was a Jew. He became a Christian (although his letters never use that word) within a couple of years after Jesus' death and resurrection, but he never stopped being Jewish. The same God at work in Jesus Christ was the God Paul already worshiped as a descendant of Abraham (2 Cor 11:22). Prior to encountering

¹Those interested in digging deeper into Paul's life and theology may find these introductory books helpful: Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Paul* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008); David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*, 2d ed. (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

Paul was first and foremost a pastor, addressing particular issues facing people in churches he loved and tended. To read his letters properly is to understand Paul in the context of that world and of his Jewish faith—a faith not replaced but transformed by his experience of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, Paul had been deeply influenced by Pharisaism, which meant that he zealously adhered to the law of Moses (Phil 3:4–6). Following Jesus did not change his view of God as much as it changed—radically changed—his understanding of how God operates on behalf of humanity and brings people to receive God’s blessings. In his letters, therefore, Paul frequently draws from Jewish Scriptures (known now to Christians as “the Old Testament”) and describes Jesus Christ as the means by which God fulfills great promises made long ago (for example, 2 Cor 1:18–20; Gal 3:29).

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Paul was also deeply shaped by Greco-Roman culture. His letters reflect his knowledge of urban contexts, and they employ language of economics, citizenship, and athletics. Obviously educated and familiar with travel and commerce, Paul was well suited to preach the gospel in cultural settings much different from the places where Jesus lived and taught. Plus, Paul had plenty of help as he formed new Christian communities across Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Greece, and Macedonia. He was part of a larger network of people—including women—who founded and provided leadership to churches. Most of his letters name coauthors, and frequently he mentions associates in ministry (most notably, in Rom 16:1–23).

Still, not much of Paul’s life story comes through in his letters. He says next to nothing about the first seventeen years that he lived as a Christian, when he was in Arabia, Syria, and points north (Gal 1:15–2:1). His letters that survived and found their way into the New Testament were written during a later period, probably between the years 50 and 58. The evidence suggests he was executed soon after, in Rome during Emperor Nero’s reign in the early 60s.

PAUL’S LETTERS

With the exception of his Letter to the Romans, Paul directed his letters to churches that he had founded, communities he knew and loved well. His letters were public documents, apparently intended to be read to the whole assembly (for example, Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 5:27). They allowed him to offer pastoral leadership remotely.

Paul did not write to impart theological ideas. Theological instruction—at least, in an abstract sense—was far from his primary purpose. He wrote to address particular issues that churches were facing, to encourage churches undergoing difficulties, and to gather support for his ministry. For example, to the church in Corinth he seems to answer questions they had previously posed to him in a letter of

their own (1 Cor 7:1). To churches in Galatia he argues against a message they had heard from rival Christian missionaries, who were trying to persuade the Gentile (non-Jewish) Galatians to observe the law of Moses. To the Thessalonians he offers encouragement as they suffer persecution (1 Thess 1:6–8) and instructs them about how to live distinctively within a hostile environment. To those in Corinth and Rome he appeals for support in his efforts to help impoverished churches and to preach the gospel (2 Cor 8–9; Rom 15:22–33).² The detailed conditions to which Paul wrote, as well as Paul's specific intentions, always remain unclear to us, because of our distance from these times and places. We are, literally, reading other people's mail. Our situation is similar to listening to someone speak on the phone to another person. We have access to only one voice in the conversation; we must infer the circumstances on the other end by listening for clues in what we can hear.

Paul's letters are, therefore, pastoral correspondence: words written to specific flesh-and-blood people about particular circumstances they were facing. Only after we recognize this can we explore the theology of his letters. Of course the letters and everything about Paul's ministry spring from his convictions about God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the theological content of the letters comes in the service of pastoral aims. For example, Paul writes to the Thessalonians about Jesus' impending reappearance, not because a lesson on "end times" is next in some educational program, but because those people appear to have been flagging in hope because members of their church had died (1 Thess 4:13–5:11). Probably they thought that believers would not die before Christ came to meet them, since Christ had defeated the power of death. Paul's main point is to reassure those still alive that the dead will be at no disadvantage when Christ returns to earth.

Paul never, to our knowledge, wrote a comprehensive theological treatise. The topics about which he wrote were situational, directed to address specific needs and concerns. This is true even for his Letter to the Romans, his longest one. That epistle, for all its breadth, leaves many theological subjects unaddressed. It is a sketch of selected yet foundational topics, probably meant to be Paul's letter of introduction to Christian communities that he had never visited and that he feared might be struggling with the challenges that came from their diverse membership (Rom 14:1–15:21).

Paul was first and foremost a pastor. He instructed churches for which he had great affection and whose vulnerability deeply concerned him. Certainly he viewed his pastoral instruction in a theological light, meaning that he made his case based on convictions about God and the gospel, and not based on morality, expediency, or other logics. But he was hardly a theologian in an academic or abstract sense. He was not the kind of theologian who sits at a desk surrounded by books, enjoying the leisure to think deep thoughts and expound a comprehensive *system*. Instead, Paul was a theologian more like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American

²For introductory comments on all of Paul's letters and the churches to which he wrote them, see <http://www.enterthebible.org>.

circuit riders, on the move and providing leadership to multiple communities by drawing upon whatever theological convictions seemed to him most appropriate to bring to bear on a given situation. This description does not mean to derogate Paul; rather, it reminds us that to peer into his understanding of God and the gospel—his theology—we need to take seriously the contexts in which his letters expressed it.

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

God

It might sound like a truism, but it is vital to emphasize that God sits at the center of Paul's theological ponderings. The foundational, principal convictions, from which Paul writes, then, are not about the human condition or morality. They are about God: who God is and how God has demonstrated that identity.

Paul describes God in ways consistent with Jewish monotheism of his day. Not only is God, as mentioned earlier, utterly faithful to promises (see Rom 11:29); God also is the source of all that is (1 Cor 8:6). Paul expresses confidence in God's power to reconcile a sinful world to God. That power also equips human beings to share in God's work and keeps them holy and blameless in God's sight (2 Cor 4:5–7; Phil 2:13; 1 Thess 5:23). Correspondingly, for Paul, the gospel is a drama of God's power displayed in Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:18–25). Yet the salvific power on display in this drama is not sheer dominion or force; through Jesus' death and resurrection God's power is exercised paradoxically through submission and obedience (Phil 2:5–8).

Because he sees no reason to doubt either the efficacy of God's power to save or God's faithfulness to promises, Paul looks to the future and sees God's vindication as certain. Yes, the gospel declares God's commitment to humanity through past events. Likewise, this commitment continues in the present tense. Paul speaks in Rom 1:17 of "the righteousness of God" perpetually being revealed in the good news about Jesus Christ. By "the righteousness of God" Paul refers, not to God's moral perfection, but to salvific activity in and on behalf of the world. The expression reprises Old Testament statements about God's persistent obligation to the creation and its inhabitants. This is an obligation to nurture, to execute justice, and to accomplish restoration. In the future when all is said and done, Paul declares, God will have done these things fully.

God saturates Paul's letters. Even the practical instructions offered in the letters stem from Paul's understanding of God. Paul certainly says many things that reflect the values of the culture in which he was situated (for example, his remarks about men and women in 1 Cor 11:3–16), but he also consistently brings his theological convictions to bear on his practical judgments. Paul expects his life and his churches' practices to display who God is and the implications of God's gracious activity through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ

Paul's letters contain hardly any mention of Jesus' life and ministry. He describes none of the miracles, parables, or sermons that make the four gospels so prized. Some wonder whether Paul even knew about any of these stories. What seems more certain is that he considered any such details of only secondary importance in light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The cross and resurrection stand at the center in Paul's recounting of the theological drama that assures salvation for humankind. The manner by which Jesus died—crucifixion—is pivotal for Paul. Because Jesus died a death of utter ignominy, the gospel message that promises salvation coming through that event sounds like foolishness and gives offense (1 Cor 1:18; Gal 5:11). Moreover, Jesus' death brands him as accursed according to the law of Moses (Gal 3:13).

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Yet, God raised Jesus from the dead. In doing so, God does not reverse Jesus' death. Nor is the resurrection a correction of the cross, as if God were righting a big mistake. Paul's comments about the resurrection imply that it was God's validation of Jesus' faithfulness, a demonstration of God's power over death, and a declaration of God's commitment to bring new life through Jesus (see Rom 1:4; 6:4–10; 1 Cor 15:42–45).

Paul declares that the risen Lord Jesus was revealed to him (literally, “in” him) in an undeniable way (Gal 1:11–17). Because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, Paul regards the crucifixion of Jesus in a totally new light: it becomes the vehicle of God's grace. What should have led to cursing instead brings blessing, and so the cross upends many of Paul's former moral and religious values. Through the cross and resurrection, God acts decisively to reclaim the world. This gracious act benefits Jews and Gentiles alike (Rom 3:21–26), obliterating any qualitative distinctions between these groups that Paul may have once affirmed (see Gal 3:28). Paul asserts more strongly than any other New Testament writing that Gentiles benefit fully—as Gentiles—from God's grace. As the entire Letter to the Galatians insists, Gentiles need not observe the law of Moses to be adopted into the family of God; God's acts through Jesus' death and resurrection are sufficient.

Jesus' role in the theological drama is hardly finished. Paul expected him to appear again soon. Jesus' return constitutes for Paul the completion or consummation of God's work on behalf of humanity and creation. Paul associates this future event with neither the destruction of the world nor a snatching up of the saints to transmute them to heaven. He describes it as the time at which God will trans-

form the world and transform us into imperishable beings (Rom 8:18–23; 1 Cor 15:51–54).

In what is almost certainly Paul's earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, his manner of speaking about Christ's reappearance suggests that Paul expected to be alive to witness it (see 1 Thess 4:15, 17). Later in his letter-writing career, however, Paul acknowledges that he will likely die before this occurs (see Phil 1:20–24). Although his sense of the proximity of Christ's coming may have varied, much of Paul's instructions to his readers appears animated by a basic assumption that not much time remained. For example, he counsels believers in Corinth to avoid marriage (1 Cor 7:8–35) because "the appointed time has grown short" (v. 29). Despite the urgency, however, he does not tell people to withdraw from society; he directs them to continue living in normal and unassuming ways (1 Thess 4:9–12). Christ's impending appearance and the promise of his judgment (2 Cor 5:10) should inspire hope, watchfulness, and urgent action. For Paul the expectation gives no excuse for bizarre behavior or nurturing fantasies of vengeance.

What God Does

Paul's writings repel many people—even as they attract others—because of their nearly mythic and absolute characteristics. Sometimes it seems that Paul leaves little wiggle room and shuns nuance. For example, a person is either enslaved to sin or enslaved to God (Rom 6:20–22); Paul sees no middle ground.³ He usually shows little interest in compromises, and images of warfare and conflict pepper his rhetoric (for example, 2 Cor 10:3–6). These aspects of Paul's letters have less to do with an intense and unyielding personality on his part and more to do with his comprehension of the gospel—what it is that God has done. When Paul considers God's having set things right through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ (language of God "justifying" people and God "demonstrating" or "showing" God's "righteousness" often describes what God has done), he likens this work to an incursion into the world and into humanity's state of affairs. Paul sees winners and losers, for God has, quite simply, won a battle. As a result, Christ has liberated and reclaimed humanity, bringing the old age to an end and ushering in an altogether new reality (for example, Gal 1:4; 2 Cor 5:17). Among the war's casualties is death itself:

Then comes the end, when he [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Cor 15:24–25).

Of course, Paul knows that the old age, tyrannized by sin and death, still remains and bares its teeth (see Rom 8:18–25). At the same time, the new creation

³Notice that Paul speaks about "sin" mostly in the singular. Very infrequently does he discuss "sins," as a set of discrete deeds or misdeeds. The overarching problem for him is "sin," a power that oppresses humanity. Sin is the sickness that holds humanity in its clutches, a sickness intrinsic to the current age from which Christ sets us free. Our sins are but symptoms of that sickness.

that he articulates is not merely a promise about a hoped-for future or a fuzzy abstraction with little connection to daily living. It is real in the experiences of believers, who even now exist “in Christ.”

That expression *in Christ* is important to note. In Paul's understanding, we do more than merely affiliate with Jesus or expect to receive benefits from him. Belief—or faith—for Paul involves trust and reliance. It is experiential, for it corresponds to this idea that we now exist *in*—within—Christ himself. This is our new and complete identity: “in Christ.” In an almost mystical way, believers participate with Christ in the whole drama of the gospel. Like Paul (Gal 2:19), we were crucified with Christ and thus we will be raised as he was (Rom 6:3–8). Christ himself lives within us (Gal 2:20; cf. 1 Cor 6:17, 19), and believers constitute nothing less than “the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27).

The Implications of the Gospel

Many aspects of Paul's letters impress upon modern readers just how different his world was from our own. We do well not to overlook these differences even when they are subtle, such as when we consider the social and political implications that the gospel had for Paul and the churches he founded.

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For one thing, the separations that societies draw today between people's political and religious identities would have been utterly foreign—and impossible—to the people in Paul's world. Christians' monotheism, their exclusive devotion to one God, to say nothing of their embrace of a Savior who died a death that marked him an enemy of the Roman Empire, made them look more than strange in the eyes of their neighbors. In many cases, Christians' claims, beliefs, and practices could make them appear dangerous and subversive.

When Paul mentions persecution in his letters, he usually does not elaborate on the sources and reasons behind the persecution. But, given the general contours of the Roman urban sociopolitical contexts in which many of his churches sat, it is fair to assume that some persecution stemmed from Christians' refusals to participate in imperially sanctioned religious rituals or from basic suspicions about Christians' effects on social well-being. When a drought struck, could not Christians attract the scornful attention of their neighbors who had been praying fervently to other deities in hopes of a successful harvest? The Christian gospel that Paul advocated called people to align themselves not merely with a new theological order but also with a new political order.

Paul's theological vocabulary, which was hardly unique to him, underscored and maybe exacerbated such a reality. Speaking of Jesus as “Lord,” “Savior,” and a

bringer of “peace” echoes the use of similar terms to describe emperors past and present in Roman imperial propaganda. The “good news” (gospel) about Jesus offered a contrast to other expressions of “good news” concerning Roman military victories or the benefactions of the emperor. The language that gave meaning to Paul’s proclamation about Jesus Christ had roots in the Jewish Scriptures and also currency in the sociopolitical settings of the empire. The language makes subtle claims, but claims nevertheless, about God and the gospel as an alternative to the sociopolitical status quo. Paul hardly presents his gospel in a politically revolutionary vein, but the terminology that gives that gospel flesh and meaning in his letters is terminology that created a counter-identity for his readers. The language unmasked imperial pretensions, declaring God’s lordship over all creation and God’s superiority over the familiar struggles and accomplishments of the status quo.

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There is at least one more major difference between our sense of our existence and what Paul’s letters reflect. This difference has to do with the nature of community. Many moderns consider themselves primarily as individuals, individuals who may consent to form communities with other individuals. Paul’s outlook on human existence, however, emerges from a more corporate understanding.

For example, when Paul speaks about the Holy Spirit and its work in people’s lives, he hardly focuses on an individual’s spiritual practices or what people today would call personal spirituality. Much more, he discusses the Spirit’s role within a community to promote human flourishing in community. Therefore, love and mutual upbuilding receive much attention (1 Cor 12:4–26; Gal 5:22–6:2).

Moreover, the unity of Christian communities receives major attention in Paul’s letters (see 1 Cor 1:10). Paul invested great concern in the unity of these churches because he considered it a vital and tangible sign of the gospel, which brings people into a unified relationship with God no matter what their ethnic identity, religious credentials, gender, or socioeconomic position (see Gal 3:28). Paul would have been baffled by modern notions of private religion. Through the gospel, God calls people together to be in Christ and to become members of God’s own family, inheritors of God’s promises (Gal 3:29; 4:7). Christians’ common life should embody such radical solidarity.

Paul generated controversy. It appears that from time to time his preaching and ministry attracted hostility from members of different groups: imperial authorities, other Christians who opposed his understanding of the gospel, Jewish

leaders, and other segments of the wider population. For various reasons, his writings have remained controversial—but rarely boring—throughout the centuries. Christians regularly debate the meaning of these letters and how they best inform our faith and life. We will continue to learn from and wrestle with Paul, but in doing so we must pay heed to who he was and what informed the convictions and passion that his letters express.⁴ ⊕

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⁴Some readers may note that although thirteen books in the New Testament bear Paul's name, this article cites only a fraction of them. This reflects a debate—rather, a collection of debates—in New Testament scholarship about the authorship of some of the thirteen. The virtual consensus among scholars is that seven letters share much in common in terms of vocabulary, theological outlook, and literary style and were therefore probably all written or dictated by Paul. These are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and (the shortest letter, which is not cited here) Philemon. Authorship of the other letters remains disputed among scholars, with various arguments applied to each letter considering the possibility that it was penned at a later date by Paul's associates, successors, or admirers. An overview of these arguments falls outside the scope of the present article. Nevertheless, the simple fact that the authorship of some of these writings remains disputed is definitely one more thing that “every Christian should know about Paul's letters.”