

Introducing Paul

The earliest Christians were Jews

The earliest Christians were Jews. The earliest Christian proclamation invited fellow Jews into Christian Judaism. It respected the culture they all shared based on the Law of Moses. For the first Christians, however, Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfilment of the Law. He was the promised *Messiah* of their sacred scriptures, the *Suffering Servant* of Isaiah, the *Son of Man* of Daniel. He was *the Risen Christ*.

Naturally, this Christian proclamation confronted orthodox Jews with a fundamental decision. Increasingly, Christians were persecuted as a threat to orthodox Judaism.

Paul: Pharisee and Christian

Paul himself was a devout Jew, born in Tarsus of Jewish parents (Acts 22:3; Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5). He was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3) and had a sister who married and lived in Jerusalem (Acts 23:16). He spoke Greek and Aramaic (Acts 21:40; 26:14), and held citizenship of both Tarsus and Rome, a privilege that served him well on his missionary journeys (Acts 16:37ff; 21:39; 22:25ff; 25:10ff). As a young Pharisee, he was trained by one of the greatest rabbis of the day, Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 1Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6) Perhaps his dedication to follow the Law perfectly led him to oppose vehemently the notion that Jesus could be the Messiah. Clearly he hated Christians and engaged in *murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord* (Acts 9 and 7:58). He participated in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60) and did all he could *to destroy the Church* (Acts 8:1-13). He arranged with Jewish authorities to authorise him to go to Damascus and arrest Christian believers there (Acts 9:1, 2).

What happened on the road to Damascus is one of the great turnarounds in human history (cf Acts 9 and 22:26). Paul's experience of the risen Christ made him now do all that he could to build up the Church, *the Body of Christ*, as he came to call it (cf Rom 12:5; 1Cor 10:16; 12:12-27; Eph 1:23; 4:1-16; 5:30; Col 1:18). What was it that changed Paul so radically? In short, it was the experience of the risen Christ. But how did this change his religious attitudes so fundamentally? How did he now regard the Jewish Law? How was Christ's life and message translated by Paul into the Christian way of life that he subsequently taught? Did it replace the former Law and Covenant, or fulfil them? And how could *gentiles* be accommodated into this religion? Would they need to adopt Jewish Law and customs, or did the following of Jesus mean freedom from that Law?

Moreover, Jesus died as an abject criminal before the Jewish Law. How could that be explained, if he was to be regarded as Lord and Saviour, not only of the Jews, but of all humanity? How could Jesus Christ bring about a new creation and new world order?

Such were the questions Paul addressed as he travelled widely proclaiming the risen Lord. They form the substance of the many letters he wrote to the Christian communities he established and visited around the Mediterranean.

As for Paul's letters, keep in mind they include *the earliest writings in the New Testament*. For example, the two letters to the Church at Thessalonica introduce us to a very young Church founded in a gentile community. They take us into the world of small Christian communities just twenty years after the resurrection.

Paul's Christian mission

*For this reason I kneel before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,
that he may grant you
in accord with the riches of his glory
to be strengthened with power through his spirit in the inner self,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;
that you, rooted and grounded in love,
may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

(Eph 3:14-19)

In many ways this beautiful prayer of Paul for his Ephesian converts sums up his mission. Having experienced in his own life the power of the Risen Christ, he is compelled to preach the mystery of Christ to others.

As we reflect on Paul's journeys, engage his Christology and ecclesiology through his writings, and gain insight into the life of the earliest Christian communities, it is worth reminding ourselves of three matters.

- Paul's letters are generally dated in the 50s and 60s CE and are among the earliest of the Christian Scriptures. Hence they represent some of the earliest accounts of traditions foundational to Christianity — Jesus' teaching, the Eucharistic traditions, Jesus' death and Resurrection, the life and outlook of early Christian communities. There are seven letters generally agreed by scholars to have been authored by Paul. They are the letters to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.
- While Paul is rightly called 'the Apostle to the Gentiles' (reflecting something of his extraordinary missionary journeys and writings), the title can be misleading. Paul was not like a second founder of Christianity taking the message of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles for the first time. The Acts of the Apostles reminds us the Christian message moved beyond Judea before Paul's mission. For example, Acts 8 and 11:19-26 indicate that a Christian mission to diaspora Jews and to Gentiles 'as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch' followed Stephen's

martyrdom in Jerusalem and the Christian persecution in which Saul of Tarsus took part. So while Paul's life and conversion are fascinating in themselves, they also throw light on the energetic missionary expansion of early Christian churches throughout the Roman Empire.

- Paul's letters reflect development and change in his own theology. The early letters (i.e. the two letters to the Thessalonians) stress that the return of Jesus is imminent. The great letters (i.e. the letters to the Galatians, Romans and Corinthians) wrestle with the great theological issues posed by considerations of Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Saviour. The captivity epistles or letters traditionally believed to have been written by Paul in prison (i.e. the letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon) emphasise the Mystical Body of Christ and Jesus Christ as Lord of the cosmos. The pastoral epistles (i.e. the epistles to Timothy and Titus) are letters composed by followers of Paul and reflect the developing pastoral needs and administration of early Christian communities.

Paul's Letters

May the God of peace ... preserve you blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:23).

The earliest writings of the New Testament are Paul's *Letters to the Thessalonians*. Reading them gives us insights into Christian communities in a Gentile setting less than twenty years after the death of Jesus. We also gain insight into early Christians' theologising that the *parousia* is near. That is, the second coming of Christ in glory to judge the world and gather the faithful was thought to be imminent.

You will notice in the later *great letters* development and refinement in Paul's theology. For example, the growing realisation that Christ's second coming may not be imminent has its refining effect on Paul's theology of Church and ministry.

In Christ you are a new creation — live as free people (Gal 5).

In Paul's lengthy *Letters to the Corinthians, Galatians and Romans*, he wrestles with major theological questions concerning redemption:

- How has sin affected humanity?
- What is the relationship between the Law of Israel and Jesus Christ?
- How is the former Israelite Covenant replaced by a new Covenant in Jesus Christ?
- How are we *ministers of a new Covenant*?
- What does it mean to say that we are *saved by Jesus Christ*?
- Are we saved by works or by faith?
- How does Jesus' death on a cross free us?
- What are the implications for us of Jesus' resurrection?
- What does it mean to *live in Christ* and *to be one body in Christ*?

- What is the *grace of Christ*?
- What is *life in the Spirit*? How is it that for the Christian there are no more commandments, only *the inner law of the Spirit*?

It is Paul's theological efforts to address these crucial questions that have us refer to these texts as Paul's *great letters*

The theology of the risen Christ, his relationship with his followers and with the whole world is developed remarkably by the time of Paul's *captivity epistles*.

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross through him, whether those on earth or those in heaven.

(Col 1:15-20)

The poetic arrangement of these extraordinary lines suggests it may be a hymn taken by Paul from early Christian liturgy. Similar hymns are found elsewhere in Paul's letters (Phil 2:6-11; 1 Tim 3:16). Paul uses it as an introduction to his expression of the divine nature and role of Jesus Christ. 'For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily' (Col 2:9).

In the *Letters to the Colossians* and *to the Ephesians* we find a deep refinement of Paul's theology. The earlier letters speak of Jesus as the Suffering Servant, the promised Messiah. Jesus Christ fulfils the Law and the Prophets and establishes a new Covenant through his redemptive suffering and death. These later letters emphasise Jesus Christ's exaltation by God. He is Wisdom incarnate, the pre-existent Son of God, and Lord of the Cosmos. Baptised in Christ, we are united with him in the Spirit of God. In Jesus Christ, '*you are also being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit*' (Eph 2:22).

Being followers of Jesus Christ means then *putting on Christ* (Gal 3:27) and living a way of life that is Christ-like. It means building our foundations on Christ and living with the Spirit of Christ Jesus.

'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving' (Col 2:6,7).

Some questions for group discussion:

Something extraordinary happened to Paul on the way to Damascus. Whatever the details of the experience, it changed his life radically. From being a committed Jewish opponent of Christianity, he was converted to being an ardent proclaimer of Jesus' resurrection and way of life. His was a new vision and a renewed energy. His letters bear witness to the influence of the risen Christ on him. Do you have a conversion or reorientation experience in your own life or in the life of someone close to you that you are willing to share with the group?

What impresses you as you reflect on St. Paul's life and message?

What impresses you about St. Paul's missionary journeys?

What are key features of St. Paul's writings? What was his understanding of the person and message of Jesus Christ?

What are some sayings from St. Paul's writings that have special appeal for you?

Is there a particular letter that has had a special impact on you?

How is St. Paul's life and message relevant for us today?

Sampling the Epistles

From the Letter to the Romans

'We know that all things work for good for those who love God ...we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us ... nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Rom 8:28,39)

'... so we, though many, are one body in Christ ...' (Rom 12:5)

From the Letters to the Corinthians

'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?' (1 Cor 6:19)

'... if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.' (1 Cor 13:2)

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the holy Spirit be with all of you.' (2 Cor 13:13)

From the Letter to the Galatians

'... I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me ...' (Gal 2:20)

From the Letter to the Ephesians

'(May you have) the strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

(Eph 3:18)

'Live as children of the light, for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.' (Eph 5:8-10)

From the Letter to the Philippians

'And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value ...' (Phil 1:9)

'(Jesus) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this God greatly exalted him ... Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.' (Phil 2:6-11)

'For Christ's sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them as so much rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him ...' (Phil 3:8)

From the Letter to the Colossians

'(Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God ... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church.' (Col 1:15,17)

'So, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.' (Col 2:6-7)

From the Letters to the Thessalonians

'... always seek what is good for each other and for all. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil. May the God of peace make you perfectly holy ...'

(1 Thess 5:15-23)

'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

(2 Thess 1:2)

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