

PAUL, APOSTLE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
Growing in Faith
March 10, 2022

Introduction:

- Paul as towering figure in the New Testament.
- Paul as participating in “two worlds”: Hellenistic and Jewish.
- Distortions about Paul (“founder of Christianity”; misogynist; “lone ranger”; abstract and cerebral; etc.).

I. Paul and His Letters.

a) Paul is known through his letters; preference of Paul’s letters over the Acts of the Apostles as source; challenge of interpreting Paul through his letters.

b) Question of “authenticity”:

--Undisputed letters of Paul include: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Philippians; 1 Thessalonians; Philemon.

--Disputed: 2 Thessalonians; Colossians; Ephesians; “Pastoral Letters” (1 & 2 Timothy; Titus).

II. Key Factors for Understanding Paul.

1. Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew and a Roman citizen who lived in the first half of the first century A.D. Paul was a devout Jew and remained proud of this heritage all his life (see Phil 3:4-6).

2. Paul was a first generation Christian but never personally met Jesus of Nazareth (see 1 Cor. 15:8-11; Gal 1:13-24).

3. Paul experienced a dramatic “conversion” or “call,” from being a committed Pharisee to being a committed believer in Christ (compare Acts 9:1-30; Gal 1:11-24). Before his conversion Paul had been in violent opposition to Christianity and all his life remained remorseful and embarrassed by his excessive zeal. (Gal 1:13-24).

4. Paul was a member of a community of faith, not its founder. While his teaching was innovative, Paul was also dependent on early Christian tradition (see 1 Cor 11:23-26; 15:3-4).

5. Paul believed that the Crucified Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Jewish Scriptures and the Risen Lord, and, therefore, that all of history, including his own Jewish tradition and his profound allegiance to it, as well as the universe itself, should be interpreted in view of this triumph. Through baptism the follower of Jesus received the power to move from “death” (that is, from the power of sin) to new life (participating in the abundant life of the Risen Christ).

6. Paul strongly believed that being baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, being “in Christ,” also meant that the believer became bound together with all other Christians in the community of faith, and therefore mutual forgiveness, love, and compassion were essential to

Christian life (Phil 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:1—13:13).

7. Paul’s moral exhortations usually proceed from the “indicative to the imperative” rather than from the “imperative to indicative” (e.g., 1 Cor 6:15-20). The Christian was a “new creation,” the living “temple of the Holy Spirit, a member of the Body of Christ, and so on, and therefore the key to holiness was to “be ourselves,” as we truly are in the sight of God.

8. Paul conceived of himself as a missionary from start (conversion) to finish (Rome) and had an ambitious (and unrealized) plan to bring all of the Mediterranean world to Christ. Part of that plan included his passionate belief that God’s promises to and covenant with Israel were not void (see Rom 9:1-5; 10:11-15; 11:25-36; 15:14-29).

9. Paul was a pastor who felt responsibility for and authority over his churches. He was not a “lone ranger” but worked in close collaboration with other Christian leaders and missionaries, both men and women. (See the list of collaborators mentioned in Rom 16:1-23 and his words of tenderness toward the community in his letter to the Philippians 1:3-11).

10. Paul was a sensitive, passionate, emotional person who incorporated his own human and pastoral experience into his vision of Christian life (see his lament in 2 Cor 11:21-33; his realization of his own physical and spiritual weakness in 2 Cor 4:7-12).

11. Paul faced intense opposition to his ideas and his ministry throughout his Christian life, from opponents within and outside the community (Gal 1:6-10; 2:11-14; 5:2-15).

12. Paul’s vision of the future destiny of the world and of creation itself is intensely hope-filled, despite his awareness of his own—and the world’s—weakness and mortality (Rom 8:18-39; also Phil 4:4-9).

Conclusion:

1. Paul has left to the Church an extraordinary heritage of pastoral and theological insight. His own passionate zeal and his profound capacity for reflecting on the mystery of Christ and the Christian community, along with his rhetorical ability, have left an indelible imprint on Christian consciousness through the centuries.

2. The dynamic and sometimes complex expressions of Paul’s theology calls for careful interpretation and a thorough acquaintance with the entire body of his letters.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

1. Donald Senior, **The New Testament: A Guide** (Guides to Sacred Texts; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), esp. pp. 139-170). Note, these pages on Paul are posted on the PFFel.portal.

2. Maria Pascuzzi, **Paul: Windows on His Thought & and His World** (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2014).

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