

PAUL: INTERPRETER OF THE JESUS-TRADITION

Paul is unquestionably the most influential character in the religious movement that developed out of the whole charismatic phenomenon of Jesus Christ. Paul was not only convinced by the message of Jesus but was completely captured by the realisation that Jesus was both Israel's messiah and God's agent of universal salvation. We get glimpses of Paul's life and character from his letters in the New Testament and from the accounts in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Paul is a particular hero of Luke because he was one of the most prominent figures in the spread of the Gospel to the Roman world.

Like the first disciples of Jesus, Paul was Jewish, but probably not from Palestine itself. Luke says that he came from Tarsus in Asia Minor (Acts 9:11). He was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5) whose attachment to the Mosaic Law produced in him a violent reaction to the disciples of Jesus. To Paul the Jesus followers appeared to be undermining some of the most sacred traditions of Judaism. They maintained that the temple was not necessary, as God could be worshipped anywhere, and they were making claims about Jesus of Nazareth that amounted to making him equal to God. Paul undertook harassment of the Jesus people and tried to stamp out their movement.

Along the way he came to realise that *Jesus was the authentic way to salvation* and then became a most ardent convert, dedicating all his life and energy to spreading the good news of Jesus Christ throughout Asia Minor and Greece. Paul wrote letters to some of the communities he had set up and copies of a small number of these are contained in the New Testament.

In the letter he wrote to the Galatian communities Paul gave a brief autobiographical sketch of his conversion to Christ and his interview with Peter and other apostles in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:11-24). He mentions that he had a spiritual experience in which he became aware that the salvation of the world lay in following Jesus Christ. There is no evidence that Paul had ever met Jesus in person during his life on earth but he writes that he had certainly encountered the risen Lord (Gal. 1:16) and this convinced him that Jesus Christ was the authentic way to God.

Paul's Missionary Program

One of the major insights Paul gained from his spiritual experience was the realisation that salvation was not the privilege of the Jews alone. God had made promises to them in the past, but this was no guarantee that they alone would be justified

before God. Some of the Hebrew prophets also realised that God desired the salvation of the whole world and that Israel's task was to bring other people to the knowledge of the one true God, Yahweh (cf., Isaiah 42:6; 49:6).

Paul's conviction was that Jesus Christ came to bring salvation and freedom from the power of sin to all people on the earth. Since this gift was not confined to any ethnic group but was universally available, all that people had to do was accept Jesus Christ in faith, become baptised into the Christian community and live the life of the Spirit according to the teachings of Jesus. Paul further believed that he had been given a divine mission to go to other nations and tell them about Jesus Christ and the salvation that faith in him would bring. Just after his conversion Paul spent time in the Antioch community, which was the first large Christian group outside of Palestine. He ventured out on missionary journeys in the company of other leading missionaries, like Barnabas, and gained experience in preaching about Christ in different parts of the Mediterranean world.

While in Antioch Paul had a disagreement with Peter over the place of Gentiles in the new Christian community. The Jewish followers of Christ were still keeping their Jewish practices regarding food and eating. Jews were forbidden to eat in the homes of Gentiles for fear of eating food that had not been prepared according to the laws of *kashruth*, which determined what was clean and unclean. For instance, meat and dairy products could not be mixed in the preparation or eating of food, and the utensils used in the preparation could not be mixed either. Meat had to be slaughtered according to rabbinic law in order for it to be *kosher*, that is, permitted for eating. In Antioch Peter was happy to mix with the Gentile Christians at table but some men came from James in Jerusalem and criticised Peter for this practice. Peter went back to eating only with the Jewish Christians and Paul accused him of inconsistency. As far as Paul was concerned the food laws of Judaism did not apply to Gentile Christians and they should not be forced to practise them. Moreover, he argued that the Gentile Christians did not have to be circumcised as Jews in order to belong to the Christian community. Faith in Jesus Christ was alone sufficient for baptism and membership of the church. We have no information about the outcome of this dispute with Peter, but Paul left Antioch soon afterwards and began his missionary endeavours in the Greco-Roman world. His custom was to have one or more

coworkers with him to help in the task of spreading the good news about Jesus Christ.

Paul's practice was to enter a town, seek employment there—he was a tentmaker and leather worker by trade—and gradually get to know people and then start talking about the wonderful experiences he had had in coming to know Christ. As people became attracted to his message he began to win followers for Christ and eventually formed the nucleus of a Christian community. Over a period of months he saw the community grow, and when he considered it strong enough to stand on its own feet, he would move on to new areas to begin the same work over again.

Sometimes Paul left these communities a little too soon and after he had moved on things occasionally went wrong. In order to keep in touch with a given community he would write to them and encourage them in their faith, correct their mistaken ideas or praise them for their sincerity. Copies of some of these letters have survived to this day. There are no originals in existence, just as there are no originals of any biblical writings, but some recipients of Paul's letters kept copies. These letters were looked upon with respect in the early days of Christianity and in time were regarded as inspired writings, with the result that they finally ended up forming an important part of our New Testament.

Occasional Letters

It is important to remember that Paul's writings are occasional letters. In other words, each one was written for a specific purpose, which was usually to respond to concerns that were relevant to a particular community. They are therefore not general letters in which Paul intends to teach or outline all the beliefs of Christians in the middle of the first century. For example, the letter to the Galatians was written after Paul had left the area and learned that communities in Galatia were being persuaded by Jewish Christians, who had followed Paul there, that they needed to be good Jews before they could be good Christians.

These 'Judaisers' were saying that Paul gave the Galatians only a half-baked message and that now the males would have to be circumcised and the whole community would have to observe the Mosaic Law and Jewish customs. Paul was furious when he heard this and wrote to the Galatians to tell them that they were being tricked by false preachers. He commended them for their faith and urged them to trust his original message. He then put forward some arguments to support his position and encouraged the Galatians to ignore any contrary ideas that preachers might put to them.

Because these letters address specific community situations and problems *it is a mistake to read them as always having universal application to all Christians for all times.* There are many things that do apply in a universal way, such as Paul's ideas on faith, salvation, discipleship, resurrection, but there are other issues that only refer to a certain community in the world of the first century. For example, in the first letter to the Corinthians he answers a question that has been put to him. The Corinthian Christians wanted to know if they could lawfully eat meat that had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 8). This refers to a custom in the Greco-Roman world of having all meat intended for human consumption taken to the local temple and offered by the priests to the gods. The blessed meat would then be put into the market place for sale. The Corinthians were afraid that if they ate this meat they would be taking part in, and giving assent to pagan gods and practices. Paul writes to them to say that they should not worry, because, in reality, there were no such things as other gods. There was only one God, so these sacrificial rituals with the meat were really non-issues. Paul tells the Corinthians to just forget about it and go ahead and buy the meat to eat at home.

Obviously this matter has no specific relevance to the twenty-first century and does not affect us. However, one message that comes through in this discussion of Paul's is that Christians should avoid giving offence to one another, so that if a person is a bit delicate about eating this meat offered to idols, then other members of the community should respect that and not give offence. *Respect for other people was more important than the issue of food offered to idols.*

Paul presumes many things in his letters. He knows the community he is writing to, because he started it off (Romans is the only exception to this) and he knows that he has taught them all the fundamentals of Christianity. Consequently, in his letters he does not go over old ground without reason when he is trying to cover only those issues that were relevant to the community at the time. It is a mistake, therefore, to assume too much about Paul's concerns if he does not mention them.

One example of this is his discussion of the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11). He brings up the question of how the members of the Corinthian community are behaving when they come together to share the Lord's Supper. He is not pleased with their behaviour and tells them so. Then he presents his ideas about the Eucharist. The point is that he might never have written about the Eucharist if the Corinthians were not having problems in this area. This means that *if he is silent on a certain issue it*

is no indication that he considered it to be unimportant. It may simply mean that it was not a problem for the community he is addressing. In any assessment of biblical literature it is dangerous to argue from silence, that is, to presume that if a topic was not dealt with explicitly then it was not considered important.

Pauline Christology

Paul's Christology, that is, his theological reflection and what he has to say about the person and work of Jesus Christ, forms a large part of the teaching in his letters. Paul declares to the Corinthians that he proclaims 'Christ Jesus as Lord' (2 Cor. 2:5). The title *Lord* certainly points to the early Christian belief that Jesus was more than human even though it is not an explicit statement of belief in the divinity of Christ. Paul also states that the basis of Christian belief is the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:12-19). He is convinced that Jesus plays a crucial role in God's plan for the salvation of humankind, a plan that was revealed in the early chapters of Genesis and spelt out in the promises made to Abraham.

With the earliest disciples Paul believes Jesus is the Son of God who was sent to overcome the power of sin (Rom. 6:22) and who will come at the end of time to judge the world (2 Cor. 5:10). He saw the death and resurrection of Christ as the saving event of all people (Rom. 4:26). Humans can embrace this salvation by responding to God's call to faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9, 24), by renouncing sin and becoming part of the body of Christ through baptism (Gal. 3:26-27). Paul emphasises the fact that this call to salvation is a favour or gift (*charis*) from God (Rom. 3:24).

Paul also uses the imagery of a new creation, which he borrowed from references in the Hebrew Scriptures to God as creator of the world and everything in it (Pss. 89:48; 104:1-30). Christ has given humanity a newness of life (Rom. 6:4) meant to be lived in oneness of mind and heart with Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5). Paul expresses this unity when he says 'Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20). However, Paul does not pretend that Christians can no longer sin. If they live according to the flesh and not according to the spirit they will compromise themselves to the power of evil (Gal. 5:13-26). He urges vigilance, as there are no automatic guarantees of salvation for those who follow Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-13).

Paul has very little to say about the human Jesus of Nazareth in his letters. He makes occasional references to the historical Jesus as 'the Lord' (1 Cor. 7:10, 25; 9:5; 1 Thess. 2:15) but apart from this he rarely quotes the teaching of Jesus. He does cite a teaching of Jesus when referring to marriage

in 1 Cor. 7:10 but this is an uncommon instance. It is the example of Jesus, the obedient Son of God and suffering saviour that inspires Paul's life and missionary activity.

Paul's main focus is on the risen Lord whom he describes, in the poetic imagery of the ancient Near East, as sitting in a position of exaltation at the right hand of God (cf., Pss 45:9; 80:17; 110:1). A key aspect of Paul's Christology is that Christ will come again to bring the Reign of God to fulfilment. In Paul's terms Jesus overcame death and the power of sin and began a new age through his resurrection, an age of salvation for human beings. Christ's second coming will bring this age to a climax. Paul uses a mixture of apocalyptic imagery to refer to this second coming and so never really paints a clear picture of how he imagines the event will take place.

Paul's Letters Precede the Gospels

Paul's missionary life spans nearly three decades from around 35 to 62 C.E. The letters he wrote reflect his own thinking about Jesus Christ, salvation, how Christians should live, the Eucharist, discipleship, God's plan for the whole world and many other issues that were important to him and his communities. In fact, the writings of Paul are the earliest records of Christian thinking that we have. Paul was writing in the 40s and 50s, at least ten or so years after the death of Jesus, and the last of his extant letters, Romans, was written around 57/58, that is some ten years before Mark, the first of our four Gospels, was written.

This means that in the three to four decades after Jesus' death there was some fairly sophisticated thinking going on in Christian communities about Jesus as the Christ and his part in the divine plan for the salvation of humanity. Paul presents these ideas in his letters in a discursive way with reasoned arguments. The gospel writers, on the other hand, present the tradition about Jesus in largely narrative form. Unlike Paul, their focus is on the life and mission of the historical Jesus. The one exception would be the Gospel of John, which does contain large sections of discourse, involving teaching and explanation coming from the mouth of Jesus. In this context it is very difficult to say whether any of the evangelists had read any of Paul's writings. The evidence of the New Testament would suggest that this was unlikely.

The Pauline Corpus

The earliest writings of the New Testament are the letters of Paul, which were penned during the period 48-60 C. E. Paul's reflections on the person and role of Jesus and how this has a bearing on the Christian commitment and lifestyle of his communities are the main considerations in the letters. The thing to remember is that Paul did not

just write, or rather dictate, theology in a vacuum. Each one of his letters was addressed to a particular community that had specific problems requiring specific answers. Paul's aim in these writings was to encourage, offer guidance, correct errors, rebuke, if that became necessary, clarify matters of Christian teaching and generally stay in touch with the people he had brought to Christ through his initial preaching in their town. It was in this context that Paul 'theologised' in his written response to a given community's problems and needs. In short, Paul's letters are pastoral responses to various situations and his 'theology' really emerges from this pastoral intent.

It is also wrong to imagine that **all** of Paul's theology is contained in his letters because there are issues and themes he does not touch on but rather takes for granted. For instance, he may never have mentioned the Eucharist if the community in Corinth were not having problems when they came together to eat the Lord's Supper. It is only in 1 Corinthians that he discusses this issue and if this letter had not been preserved we might have easily presumed that Paul did not give great importance to the Eucharist. This would be to seriously misinterpret Paul altogether. Again, Paul hardly ever mentions anything to do with the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but it would be dangerous to suggest that the apostle was not interested in the life and message of Jesus. It is likely that Paul introduced his communities to these details when he lived among them and presented them with the gospel message for the first time. From a reading of the letters one will quickly gather that Paul is concerned with the faith and perseverance of each community and he offers them whatever he calculates will bolster their spirits and encourage them to remain ever faithful to their baptismal commitment.

It was customary in the case of these letters of Paul for the whole document to be read out to the assembled community. In this sense they are not private letters but are epistles intended for the benefit of the whole group. Consequently, there are some remarks in them that do not apply to everyone in the community. Some of the reprimands in 1 Corinthians, for example, do not apply to every individual in the community at Corinth. However, Paul does not single out any groups or individuals but addresses the whole community as one body.

Two notable exceptions to this rule are the letters to the Romans and Philemon. Paul had never been to Rome and had not, therefore, visited with the Christians there. So his letter is really a personal introduction of himself and his teaching. He wants them to know that his teaching is sound and in this context he takes up a few issues that might well

have been topics of current concern and debate in the Roman community. Scholars still wrestle with this letter in an effort to understand all the reasons Paul had for writing Romans. One major issue seems to revolve around the relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in the Roman community. Apparently some or all of the Jewish Christians could not understand how the Gentile Christians could attain salvation if they were not circumcised as Jews and did not follow the Law of Moses.

The letter to Philemon is the only true 'letter' in the sense that it was addressed to an individual and is not in the form of an epistle addressed to a community.

Letters Written by Paul

There is no final word among scholars today as to which letters were actually written or dictated by Paul and which ones were written by followers of his who wrote in the spirit of their teacher. A large number would agree that there are 7 letters that are without doubt authentically Pauline:

- 1 Thessalonians
- Galatians
- 1 & 2 Corinthians
- Philippians
- Philemon
- Romans

Scholarly opinions are divided when it comes to the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians and the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). This second group of letters, however, do belong to the Pauline tradition inasmuch as they reflect many of Paul's ideas and attitudes, but there are some differences in style, language and theology, which indicate that some other person may have had a hand in the writing. We should not be surprised that literary property was not an issue in ancient times and copyright did not exist. A disciple of Paul could write a letter to a community, put Paul's name to it and have no qualms of conscience if he were satisfied that the contents were faithful to Paul's thought and teachings. Such a practice was common enough in the ancient world of letters. The technical term given to such 'forgeries' is pseudepigrapha (false title).

The following is a brief summary of the characteristics of the major Pauline letters.

1 Thessalonians

Occasion:

Paul had sent Timothy back to the Thessalonian community and received news from Timothy that the community was progressing well, but that they

were concerned that Paul had not returned to them and had misunderstood some of Paul's original teaching. Paul wrote this letter, almost certainly from Corinth, to encourage the faith of the community, to express his concern for them and to correct mistaken ideas by restating the teaching he had originally presented to them. It was probably written around 50 C.E.

Style:

1 Thessalonians is written in a warm, pastoral style. In fact, it has a more personal style than the other Pauline letters, with the exception of Philemon. Paul has clearly had a good experience in Thessalonica and retains an affection for the community there. The Thessalonian Christians were converts from paganism.

Theology:

Exhortation to practise chastity and respect for the sanctity of marriage.

Encouragement to practise love towards one's fellow Christians.

Paul reiterates his teaching about the second coming of Christ and reassures the Thessalonians that those who have already died will be raised again at the second coming (parousia).

A call for moral behaviour and good order in the community, particularly in view of Christ's imminent return.

Galatians

Occasion:

Judaizers have persuaded the Galatian Christians that they need to be circumcised and practise the ritual as well as the moral requirements of the Law of Moses. Paul writes from Corinth to assure them that what they received from him was the whole Christian message and that they do not need to embrace the Jewish religion in order to be part of the body of Christ. The Judaizers have also questioned Paul's apostolic status, so Paul takes the opportunity in this letter to defend his right to be called an apostle and to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Style:

Paul writes in a fairly argumentative or polemical style in his effort to convince the Galatians that following the recommendations of the Judaizers would be a backward step for them. He becomes quite passionate in his attempt to dissuade the Galatians from adopting Jewish practices.

Theology:

Right relationship with God does not depend not on observing the Law of Moses but on commitment to Jesus Christ whose obedience to God brought about our salvation.

Faith in Christ and living the life of the Spirit are the hallmarks of commitment to Jesus Christ.

The death of Jesus has initiated a new era that supersedes the era of the Law of Moses.

Exhortation to live the life of Christian love and to practise the works of the Spirit.

1 Corinthians

Occasion:

This letter was written partly out of Paul's concern for the disunity that had crept into the Corinthian community and partly as a response to a letter the community had written to Paul (1 Cor. 7:1). In the former case Paul had heard of divisions in the community and wrote to remind them of their responsibilities to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. In the latter case, the Corinthians had written to Paul to clarify issues of Christian teaching. 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus around 54 C.E.

Style:

This is also a very pastoral letter containing a central call to unity. Paul presents arguments to support his apostolic character and delivers a few reprimands in an attempt to get the community to see their errors on a number of issues. There are echoes of disappointment with the Corinthians in Paul's writing as well as a plea that they think carefully about the implications for daily living of being followers of Jesus Christ.

Theology:

A call for unity in view of factions that have arisen in the Corinthian community.

Clarification of misunderstandings regarding sexual morality, marriage, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts.

Instructions on the conduct of the Lord's Supper.

Love, the greatest of gifts.

The nature of prophecy and other spiritual gifts.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Christians.

2 Corinthians

Occasion:

Paul's apostolic status has been called into question by opponents of his who have come to Corinth and denigrated him. He writes to defend his position and respond to the claims of his opponents. In fact, most modern commentators regard 2 Corinthians as a composite of at least two letters. Chapters 1-9 can be said to be a single unity, despite certain changes of tone that might point to breaks in the flow of the letter.

Chapters 10-13 are clearly different and seem to be part of a letter that was written after chapters 1-9. The situation that was alluded to in 1-9 apparently was the occasion for the writing of chapters 10-13.

The first letter in 2 Corinthians was probably written in 55 C. E. some twelve months after 1 Corinthians. A short time later the second letter (chapters 10–13) was written after Paul had heard of a serious downturn in the Corinthian church's regard for him and his apostolic mission.

Style:

In view of the composite nature of 2 Corinthians the style and tone change at different points. In chapters 1–9 Paul defends his authentic apostleship and appeals to the community to be open in their judgement. His tone ranges from elated and conciliatory to ironic and confrontational. In chapters 10–13 Paul adopts a harsh tone and becomes quite sarcastic in his references to the opponents in Corinth. Paul's disappointment with the Corinthians comes through in his language, which is often peppered with anger and rebukes.

Theology:

The nature of apostolic ministry.

The importance of faith in discipleship.

Paul exercises a ministry of reconciliation in imitation of Christ.

Paul's authority as founder of the Corinthian community.

The disciple of Christ is prepared to suffer and appear weak in imitation of the Lord.

Philippians

Occasion:

In Philippians Paul mentions that he is in prison, although no one knows where exactly. A significant body of scholarly opinion believes there are three letters in Philippians. The obvious break in the flow of the letter at Phil 3:2 strongly suggests that there are at least two letters making up Philippians. The letters were probably written between 55 and 58 C.E. Paul writes to thank the community for their generosity to him; he urges them to maintain unity and encourages them to endure in the face of suffering. The Philippians have been assailed by Judaisers and Paul writes to assure them that their commitment to Christ does not involve undertaking Jewish practices.

Style:

Philippians contains the most affectionate language of any of Paul's letters. He clearly has a deep affection for this community and rejoices in the spirit of generosity and concern the Philippians have shown him. There is a note of disappointment in the letter with the Judaising Christians—missionaries who seem to be set on undermining his own work.

Theology:

The selflessness of Christ in obeying the will of the father. This is a model for community unity.

Arguments against the Judaisers; the goal of the Christian in life is oneness with Jesus Christ.

Suffering for Christ's sake will bring reward in the end.

Philemon

Occasion:

Paul writes from prison to Philemon, a member of the Christian community at Colossae, about his slave Onesimus. The latter has either run away from his master or has had a disagreement with him and turned to Paul. He has been converted to Jesus Christ by Paul and has actually been of assistance to the apostle. Paul asks Philemon to take Onesimus back and to treat him, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (16).

Style:

Paul's style is very guarded as he cautiously requests Philemon to take Onesimus back. He is conscious of the slave owner's rights and addresses him deferentially. Paul does not adopt a position of authority but alludes to the Christian relationship that exists between him and Philemon and thus shows careful diplomacy in his request.

Theology:

For his time, Paul demonstrates a peculiarly Christian attitude toward slavery.

Paul demonstrates a pastoral approach to a significant problem.

Paul's language shows the importance of love in the communities of Jesus Christ.

Romans

Occasion:

Paul was planning to visit Rome, while on his way to Spain, but had never met the Christian community there. This letter is partly a note of self-introduction and partly a pastoral letter dealing with the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in the same community. The community in Rome is probably Gentile, for the most part, with a minority of Jewish Christians.

Style:

Addressing readers he has not met, Paul goes deftly in this letter with a care to be precise and to avoid being heavy handed in his recommendations and advice. He puts forward his position using techniques from rabbinic argumentation and Greek rhetoric.

Theology:

Romans is as close as Paul gets to a theological treatise and yet it is not a compendium of Paul's theology, simply because there are major themes of his theology omitted altogether from the letter. For

instance the Lord's Supper does not get a mention; neither does resurrection of the body nor eschatology. The major issues dealt with are:

God justifies, through Jesus Christ, those who respond to Christ in faith.

Gentiles and Jews cannot share in God's salvation if they do not respond in faith.

Christ by his death has overcome sin and those who follow Christ can live in freedom from sin.

By dying with Christ to sin we can rise with him to a new life.

Commitment to Christ implies freedom from the Law of Moses.

Despite the promises made by God to Abraham, Israel has failed by refusing to accept Jesus Christ as saviour.

Dominant Features of Paul's Theology

As with Jesus, the centre of Paul's theology was God. His life and all his energy were directed to fostering and strengthening an intimate relationship with God. As a pious Jew Paul believed that God is one, that God is creator and sustainer of the universe and intends that humanity ultimately become united with God. To enable humanity to seek and attain this unity, the Son of God was sent by the Father to overcome the power of evil and rescue humanity from the clutches of Satan. For Paul, this saving action took place through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus, therefore, opened the door for human beings to become righteous and respectable. All that remains, according to Paul, is that human beings take advantage of this opportunity by committing themselves to Jesus Christ through faith and a carrying out of the law of Christ. The only and ultimate way to God, as far as Paul is concerned, is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul represents a major shift in focus in theological orientation. Jesus taught about the reign of God and, as a pious Palestinian Jew, was deeply committed to doing the will of his heavenly Father (John 5:30,36) and developing his relationship with the *abba* who dominated his prayer life and personal spirituality (cf., John 17). By contrast, Paul focused much of his teaching on Jesus himself. Jesus never taught about himself and certainly did not make himself a cult figure. Paul, on the other hand, based his whole life on the person and teachings of Jesus, whom he believed to be the Christ, the universal saviour and unique Son of God.

Many of Jesus' teachings were directed at Jewish life in first century Palestine. His audiences, especially in Galilee were country folk, so it is not surprising that many of his examples and analogies were drawn from a rural setting. Paul was a city dweller and his missionary activity was almost

exclusively addressed to urban people from non-Jewish backgrounds.

Jesus was more of a reformer than an innovator while Paul was introducing a whole new set of ideas to Gentiles of the Greco-Roman world. Jesus was able to presume that his listeners understood the elements of the Mosaic Law. Paul had to start from the beginning to explain the message and mission of Jesus Christ.

With the risen Christ at the centre of his theology Paul focuses particularly on the work of Christ as the universal saviour of the world. In this respect his view of Christ is functional rather than philosophical. That is to say, he is not so much interested in defining the theological nature of Christ as in preaching the message that Christ has saved us through his obedience to God. The central event in this saving work was the death of Jesus Christ. In this way Christ delivered humanity from the power of sin and reconciled all people to God. Sin, in Paul's theology, isolated human beings from God making them slaves to evil. The resurrection of Christ was God's supreme act of endorsement by which everything Jesus had done was given divine approval. Through his resurrection Jesus Christ conquered death and opened the way for all who believe in him to also overcome death.

Paul's Contribution to the Jesus-Tradition

It is difficult to accurately gauge the enormity of Paul's contribution to Christian thinking over the centuries. It cannot be denied that his interpretation of the person and work of Jesus has had the most enduring influence in the development of Christianity. He was probably the first to face the reality of interpreting Jesus' life, death and resurrection, as well as his teachings, for new believers living in the urban centres of the Gentile Greco-Roman world.

The letters of Paul reflect his preoccupation with the saving work of Jesus and bear witness to a shift in focus from the teachings of Jesus to the person of the risen Lord and his achievement as universal saviour. In view of this shift, some commentators down through the ages have regarded Paul as the founder of Christianity as we have come to know it. Paul always considered himself to be a servant of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; Gal 1:10) and he would be horrified at the idea that he might be regarded as the founder of Christianity. In any case, the Christian church has recognised that Paul has interpreted Jesus and what he stood for in such a way that the truth of the Jesus phenomenon was revealed. While Paul saw the necessity of making the teachings and the message about Jesus comprehensible in the context of the Greco-Roman world his interpretation was faithful to the intention

of the teachings of Jesus. In this sense he was certainly not moving away from the mind of Jesus in an attempt to start up his own religion. It is important to note that Paul made a trip to Jerusalem to speak with the leading apostles there, namely, James, Peter and John. He tells us in his letter to the Galatians that he wanted to be sure that what he was preaching was the authentic message about Jesus. He then writes:

...and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognised the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal. 2:9)

This is a firm indication that the apostles in Jerusalem approved of the teaching Paul was putting before his converts.

The earliest witness of the impact of Paul's teaching and personality is Luke's Acts of the Apostles in which Paul is portrayed as a successful missionary responsible for the spread of the gospel through the Aegean world. Paul is depicted by Luke as a heroic figure converting a great many people and founding Christian communities in a number of towns and cities. The following is typical of statements in Acts:

The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. (Acts 14:1)

The work known as the first letter of Clement was written around 95-96 C.E. and it contains messages from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth. The letter reminds the Corinthians of how important Paul was to the Corinthian church and encourages them to remember the example of the "illustrious apostles" Peter and Paul (1 Clem. 5). The letter also alludes to the epistles written by Paul to Corinth (1 Clem. 47). Clearly, by the end of the first century Paul's reputation as a leading figure in early Christianity was well established.

The very fact that his letters were preserved and then included in the canon of Scripture demonstrates the enormity of Paul's stature. One of Paul's staunchest supporters was Marcion, a second century Roman, who was eventually condemned as a heretic. He maintained that the Christian message was best contained in the writings of Luke and Paul. Around the year 150 he put together a 'canon' of inspired Christian writings that consisted of edited versions of Luke's gospel

and Paul's letters (excluding the Pastoral Epistles). Marcion's work indicates that the influential and inspired nature of Paul's letters was never questioned by early Christians.

By the year 200 Paul's letters were regarded as authoritative and his prominence had been confirmed to the extent that the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* was written in the second century to lionise him. The *Acts of Paul* show that the life and achievements of Paul had passed into legend in the collective psyche of early Christians.

The influence of Paul was carried forward by the great Augustine of Hippo (342-430), one of the most significant thinkers of western civilisation. Augustine himself was deeply affected by Paul's theology of grace, that is, God's free gift of justification through faith, and he identifies with Paul in seeing himself as an undeserving servant (*Confessions* Book 8.29-30; Books 10-12).

Martin Luther (1483-1546), an Augustinian monk, was a noted university lecturer teaching the letters and theology of Paul. He was strongly influenced by Augustine's interpretation of Paul's teaching on justification by faith. Luther understood Paul to be saying that, through our faith in God and Jesus Christ, God justifies us by the exercise of divine mercy and grace. Luther saw in Paul an opposition between faith and human effort to attain righteousness, between the gospel of Christ and the observance of law and this perspective shaped Protestant interpretations of Paul for centuries after.

There have been, over time, some negative outcomes from different interpretations of Paul. For instance the Apostle's attitude to the Law of Moses has led some interpreters to assume that Paul was anti-Jewish, which has been known to fuel anti-Jewish attitudes among Christians. Some have regarded Paul as misogynistic and this in turn has led to dubious attitudes toward women in the Church. It should be said that this apparently negative influence of Paul has derived from misinterpretations of the Pauline letters and not from authentic exegesis. We have only to examine what Paul writes in Romans 9-11 and 16, and Galatians 3:28 to get a more accurate view of Paul's position on these issues.

Perhaps one of the most influential aspects of Paul was his conviction that Jesus Christ was the universal saviour and that the way to gain access to this salvation was to have faith in Christ and commit oneself to a lifestyle in conformity with the teachings of Christ. Paul strongly opposed those of his contemporaries who maintained that one could only be an authentic follower of Jesus Christ if one first adhered to the rites and practices of Judaism.

Paul was convinced that salvation was not an exclusive right of any ethnic group like the Jews. If it were not for Paul it is possible that the Jesus-tradition might not have moved beyond the boundaries of the Jewish faith and Christianity might have stayed where it began, as a sect within Judaism.

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Dr Woods is preparing two more articles for publication in future issues of this journal: one on Luther and one on Liberation Theology. These articles are designed to provide background and orientation for religious educators who are teaching the New South Wales HSC Syllabus, Studies of Religion.



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