

Paul the Complex Man and Apostle of Christ

Introduction

Let me begin by listing 5 reasons for Paul's importance to Christianity.

- Paul was the primary proponent of Christianity throughout Turkey, Greece, even Yugoslavia, and Spain.
- Paul was the key figure in the transition from the sect of Judaism to a gentile universal faith and he did this as a Pharisaic Jew.
- Paul's letters proved our first and most important interpretation of the story of Jesus and the Christian movement. (Paul's wrote between the years 50-68 AD, the gospels were written between the years 70-90 AD.)
- Paul's writings dominate the New Testament—13 (or 14) out of the 27 NT books are his. And, Paul is pretty much the hero of the book of Acts.
- Paul is the most distinctive and dominant voice within Christian theology.

The Importance of Paul's Activity and Writings

Paul started out as a persecutor who then became Christ's most passionate advocate. His obedience to the great commission resulted in the birth of churches all across the Mediterranean world.

- **Acts 9:1-19** — The familiar Damascus road story [Here Paul's companions hear the voice but see nothing...it doesn't address their falling, but it says afterward they stood and led blind Paul.]
- **Acts 22:1-21** — Paul's testimonial defense before the Jews [In this account they see the light but hear nothing...doesn't comment on the companions, but Paul says he fell.]
- **Acts 26:12-23** — Paul's testimonial defense before Agrippa [Doesn't says what the companions did or didn't see but all fell.]

1. Paul's TRANSFORMATIVE ministry is the main reason why Christianity became a world religion rather than a Jewish sect.

- Paul taught, and defended, the teaching that Gentiles were truly and completely saved without having to be circumcised or obeying other Mosaic laws.

(Gal 3:26-29)²⁶ For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs, according to promise.

The paradox is that Paul was a Pharisaic Jew; a man who in his former life would not have eaten with a gentile but after his conversion, he becomes the fiercest defender for the gentile's inclusion in the people of God.

- Paul's letters, written 50-68 AD provide the earliest extant interpretation of Jesus and the Christian movement.
 - 1 and 2 Thess. (A.D. 50, 51)
 - 2. 1 and 2 Cor., Gal., Rom. (A.D. 55, 57)
 - 3. Philip., Col., Eph., Philem., (A.D. 60, 62)
 - 4. Titus, 1 and 2 Tim. (A.D. 64, 65)

The most obvious fact often overlooked is that Jesus left no writings. All biblical historical accounts and records of Jesus Christ come, either through the observations of the writer, or the insight the Holy Spirit gives the writer.

I believe it would be correct to say that Paul is the first and greatest Christian theologian.

Although Paul admits to having never met Jesus in the flesh, yet he is the earliest personal individual account witness to someone being "born again" surrendering to Christ in salvation.

The most theologically poignant element in Paul's transformation is that his conversion was gained by the argument of the teachings of Christ, but rather by an experience, a revelation of Jesus that he was not seeking.

That profound moment in time shaped Paul's thinking and theology.

The Damascus road was not Paul changing religions but Paul realizing that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of his Jewish faith.

- Paul dominates the NT canon and his adventures form the climax of The Acts of the Apostles, while his 13 letters make up the core of NT teaching.
- Since the reformation, and before the great schism, Paul has been the most dominant voice in Christian theology. It has been said, "if you reject some of Paul you reject all of Christianity."

2. Paul is CONTROVERSIAL because of his teachings.

- As conservative Christians, we believe God's word is infallible, inerrant, and inspired and we accept all of it (including Paul's writings) as God's word.

(2 Tim. 3:16) All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.

- Liberal and non-believing scholars do not have the same view of scripture. Academics in both groups will agree that Paul is central but then they say Paul is what is wrong with Christianity. Their mantra is, "good Jesus, bad Paul."
- Jews regard Paul as the source of Christian anti-Semitism. In Romans 11:17 Paul writes that the Jews have been cut off from God and the gentiles have been grafted into the tree. In that context Paul writes:

(Rom 11:7-10) ⁷ What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; ⁸ just as it is written, "GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR, EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT, DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY." ⁹ And David says, "LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP,

AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM. ¹⁰ "LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT, AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER."

- Feminists see Paul as the cause of sexism.

(1Tim 2:12)¹² But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man

- The gay, lesbian, and transgender see Paul as homophobic.

(1Cor. 6:9)⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,

- What is most perplexing is that the criticisms of Paul which originated among the enemies of the gospel have now become the position of modern celebrated Christian scholars and theologians. [Some examples Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Bart Ehrman.]

[Last Wednesday the scholar and professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University Marcus Borg died. For 30 years he has been involved with the Jesus Seminar. A group of “scholars” that deny most of what is written in the NT. He and his confederates, like John Dominic Crossan, an emeritus professor of religious studies at DePaul University all called “Christian, they are anything but Christian.]

3. Paul is ESSENTIAL because he was a polarizing figure in his contemporary world.

- Paul was opposed by those who did not trust his transformation. He had been a persecutor of Christians and suddenly he becomes a passionate, unwavering believer, follower, supporter, and evangelist for Jesus.
- Paul had no credentials except his testimony. He did not follow Jesus during the Lord’s earthly ministry. He was not one of the chosen 12, nor a witness to the resurrection.

- Paul's teaching demanded a choice between the polar opposites of flesh and spirit, law and grace, disobedience and faith.
- As you read Paul you soon realize that in many cases the churches born through his work and ministry soon preferred other leaders to Paul.

(1Co 3:3-6)³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and are you not walking like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? ⁵ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

4. Paul was the DOMINANT teacher and pastor in the early Christian community.

- Paul's teaching in his writings was a primary response to real-life problems in the churches God gave birth to through his missionary efforts.

The Pauline letters have been a pivotal element in the formation of Christian theology since the first century and were principal in the theologies of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth.

The theological impact of Paul may cause us to overlook one key fact, he never wrote a systematic theology in which all the elements of his teachings are placed together in a coherent, cohesive, and logical fashion.

On the contrary, he wrote letters to churches and individuals, and these letters were addressed to the particular circumstances faced by the churches and they are more reactionary than proactive. They are addressed to unique situations and specific problems in the various churches and are not theological expressions of a full-fledged theological system.

Galatians is not a treatise on the topic of justification. Paul counterattacks adversaries who are insisting that the Galatians submit to circumcision in order to be right with God. The entire letter is a rebuke to opponents who advocated a return to the Mosaic law.

Ephesians is the nearest letter that could be compared to a theological treatise. Although Paul may be responding to the false teachings in Ephesus this does not dominate the conversation. Paul spends three chapters explaining who God says we are in Christ, and then three more chapters describing what that looks like. This letter, because of the scope and influence of Ephesus, may have been intended for a larger region of churches in Asia as opposed to just one.

Philippians is not merely a delightful little manual upon joy. The Philippian church was troubled by disunity (Phil 1:27-2:4; 4:2-3). Paul wrote the letter to unify the church so that they would live ardently for the cause of the gospel. Virtually everything in the letter is designed to attain this specific goal.

In **Colossians**, certain adversaries trumpeted ascetic practices, the observance of the sabbath, festival days, and “the worship of angels” (Col 2:18) either some form of Jewish or pagan mysticism. In this letter, Paul addresses deviant teaching, which threatens the Colossian community.

In **1 Corinthians** there are numerous problems: incest, elitism, the cult of religious personalities, and a great misunderstanding about the doctrine and work of the Holy Spirit.

In **2 Corinthians** Paul is defending his ministry and Apostleship, and ask for monetary help for the widows in Jerusalem.

Even though **Romans** is deeply theological, not all of Paul’s theology is contained in the letter. Yet, it would not be incorrect to say that Romans is the fullest and clearest expression of the gospel and the most comprehensive of all of Paul’s writings.

In Romans, Paul covers the topics of faith, hope, the law, sin, depravity, redemption, sanctification, glorification, covenant, Christ’s death, but we do not find the reflective Christology we see in Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20. Furthermore, Christ’s return is assumed, not explicit, in the same way, we read in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and nowhere does Paul speak of the Lord’s Supper.

As with Paul’s other writings, Paul is addressing a problem in the church in Rome—there is tension between the Jewish and Gentile believers and Paul needed them to be unified if he is going to accomplish his intended mission of taking the gospel to Spain. This forces Paul to address the topics of, clean and unclean, law and grace, flesh and Spirit, and who is the true Israelite.

In **1 Thessalonians** Paul responds joyfully to recent news that the Thessalonians have persisted in the faith despite trials and persecutions and it ends exhorting the believers to be strengthened in their earthly walk. In the course of the letter, Paul emphasizes the eternal existence of the soul after this life through the resurrection, and the subsequent glorified body; teaching which was apparently the point of confusion in the church.

Apprehension continued over eschatological matters in Thessalonica, and so Paul addressed these same issues again in **2 Thessalonians**.

Often scholars have identified the Paul wrote all three Pastoral letters because false teaching menaced the churches.

Titus is addressed to a church that was recently established.

1 Timothy Paul is writing to Timothy about the Ephesus church dealing with the problems related to false doctrine, authority structures in the church, and prayer (**Ephesians** addresses the internal problems among the people envious over who possessed which spiritual gifts.

The situation in **2 Timothy** is personal due to Paul's suffering and discouragement at the end of his life and ministry. So, the call to suffer for the gospel takes center stage.

- Paul drew heavily upon his earlier training and upbringing.

Some scholars have claimed Paul's Pastoral letters to be manuals for church organizations but most of them disagree with what that Pauline polity looks like. I believe this view is not only misleading but also incorrect.

Paul wrote the three pastoral letters because of false teaching in those churches. Certainly, there are wonderful elements regarding church structure included in those letters, but outside of that context, absolute opinions on the contemporary applications of those elements are challenging.

Additionally, any attempt to conflate all three letters into one is virtually unmanageable. Titus is in a young church much more recalcitrant than the church in Ephesus, the church addressed in 1 Timothy, which was a bit more mature. In 2 Timothy, Paul's last letter, the call to suffer for the gospel and endure through hardship takes center stage.¹

Paul was well versed in Greek philosophy and Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17:16 is probably the most momentous sermon in Word of God that so intricately entwines both Christian teaching with philosophy.

5. Paul's writings were AUTHORITATIVE for all the church.

Adolf Deissmann early in the century argued that they should be designated as letters rather than epistles.ⁱⁱ He distinguishes Epistles as artistic work designed for larger audiences versus Letters intended only for a specific audience. He believed that Paul did not write with the intention of creating a guiding document for other churches or succeeding generations.

I would probably agree that was probably not Paul's intention therefore they are letters. I would also assert that this is exactly what the Holy Spirit did through Paul therefore they are also Epistles. I don't know of any scholar today that views Deissmann's distinction between Letters and Epistles as credible.

The thing that Deissmann overlooks in Paul's writings is the authoritative nature. Paul's writings were not intended to be private letters hidden from all but a select group—they were for the whole congregation. Paul is very clear in his writing that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ and so he writes with the expectation that these letters will be not only read to the open congregation but also obeyed. (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thess. 5:27; and 2 Thess. 3:14). Also, consider what Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians dealing with their unique situation, *'When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.'* (Col. 4:16) It is beyond doubt that Paul believes his exhortations to Colossae will have practical applications in Laodicea as well.

- The structure of Paul's Epistles

Paul's letters maintain the structure of an opening salutation, a body, and a closing salutation. His openings usually include mentioning the sender, the recipient(s), a greeting, and a prayer of thanksgiving.

Paul's use of these four elements often carries theological and interpretive weight.

For example, we see Paul's defensiveness in the opening of Galatians (1:1) which is preparing the reader for the following firm apologetic of his apostleship—which his opponents had called into question. The inclusion of the phrase "all the brothers with me" (Gal. 1:2) is Paul clearing making the point that he is not alone in his assertion. Additionally, the extended length of the opening of Galatians as well as the lack of thanksgiving, indicate the level of Paul's amazement at their defection.

Frequently the opening of his letters Paul included his title of apostle, but not in Philippians. There he calls himself and Timothy "bond-slaves." Why? Most likely because of the divisions in the congregation and he wants the people to see in him and Timothy as both equal and in humble submission to each other. He specifically addresses the "overseers and deacons," in 1:1 implicating them for their role in the disunity and their negligence in allowing "dogs and evil workers" to come into the church.

The body of Paul's letters reveals both his genius and creativity approaching each topic with the skill of a surgeon. His distinctive approach in each letter highlights his rhetorical prowess and theological depth as he administrates the intricacies of ceremonial and governmental law which

are no longer valid as the remaining moral law fulfilled in Christ and now to be understood within the framework of the Greco-Roman world and applied in the present context.

Paul's closings are equally significant. In many of them Paul writes of travel plans, personal situations, prayer requests, he commends co-workers, final instructions, exhortations, and benedictions. Romans is particularly unique in its length possibly beginning as early as Romans 15:14 or perhaps 15:22 extending to the end of chapter 16.

Another example of the interpretive weight of this element is found in Galatians. Paul writes in Galatians 6:11 "See what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand" to emphasize and give force to his passion regarding the distinction between himself and his adversaries. While they are boasting in their circumcision and the compelled circumcision of others (vv. 12-13) Paul is boasting in the cross of Christ (v. 14) viewing both circumcision and uncircumcision as adiaphora (v.15). These bewitchers (3:1) avoid persecution "for the cross of Christ (v. 12) but Paul gladly bears on his "body the brand marks of Jesus" (v.17). In this short closing, the reader realizes that the fundamental issue of controversy in the Galatia church is how one views the cross of Christ.

6. Paul's ETHICAL TEACHINGS carry a perspicacity that gives guidance for counter-cultural living in any age.

The idea of an ethical code for a collective group has been a part of the human psyche for thousands of years.

The code of the Ten Commandments is the cornerstone of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The Athenian Oath required of the 18-year-old sons of Athenian citizens, as well as the 1700-hundred-year-old Hippocratic Oath still used in the medical community today, are (in one degree or other) commitments regarding obligations and admonitions toward a standard of living within a certain collective.

So, why use Paul as the primary source from which to construct this ethical code? Taking to risk of being redundant I repeat, "Paul can truly be called the first missionary of his kind." He was a Jewish believer whose ministry focused on those outside the Jewish faith. He was the person God chose to articulate the theological and organizational groundwork for the local New Testament Church. His writings to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are the only pastoral epistles we have. Finally, the second half of Acts is a historical recounting of Paul's ministry, and there is nothing else like this in the scriptures.

Certainly, the Pauline writings are contextualized in an ancient world with very different cultural norms than our own, but his mission is our mission, and that mission is the significant commonality. On the other hand, Paul's culture was as heterogeneous as our own, yet in that

environment, Paul sought to establish, structure, and develop cohesive communities of faith comprised of individuals seeking to live out their belief in Christ together as one.

In the pursuit of constructing a “Pauline” code of ethics, I believe it is possible to accomplish three things.

- First, through a careful study of Acts and Paul’s writings, I believe we can identify the moral values, norms, and virtues that guided Paul’s behavior, choices, and relationships.
- Second, Paul’s writings were most often a reaction to a conflict in the church-laity and clergy. Being that human nature is as consistent as time itself an investigation of these dynamics will help inform and guide us each in our individual struggles.
- Finally, by seeing how Paul’s moral values, norms, and virtues influenced his problem solving, we may be able to extrapolate rules for ethical behavior and universal principles for problem-solving.

Paul’s writings have endured two thousand years and as a part of the canon of scripture, they speak authoritatively to our lives. Therefore, knowing how to apply Paul’s teachings to present circumstances, is crucial.ⁱⁱⁱ

Certainly, time and space create a distance between Paul and us, and that makes application challenging but not impossible. Please allow me three short illustrations. What are we to learn from Paul’s request for Timothy to bring him his cloak and parchments (2 Timothy 4:13)? We are powerless to obey this command. However, in the command, we see the loneliness of Paul, the sense of cold abandonment, and we learn the humanity of Christian leaders and the need to help and encourage them. In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul encourages Timothy to drink wine for his stomach. Is Paul encouraging the consumption of adult beverages or is Paul advocating the wisdom of medical remedies? In Colossians 3:22-4:1 is Paul endorsing slavery or is he commanding obedience to civil law and embracing the local culture when they do not explicitly violate the essential teachings of scripture. As I said, “challenging but not impossible.”

On one hand, it would be easy to dismiss every complex teaching, deny its validity, and gloss over it as though it doesn’t matter—many do. Such is the manner of the lazy and disingenuous. We must avoid following the path of indolence and instead insist on rigorous scholarship. On the other, we must not make the mistake of missing the biblical principle within the teachings and instead attempt to legally apply the teachings of Paul out of context.

Paul’s prescription for Timothy to use wine for his stomach problems does not mean that wine is the only allowed remedy for that ailment. In 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; and 1 Thess. 5:26 Paul

writes, “Greet all brethren with a holy kiss.” Certainly, Paul was not prescribing the only “biblical way” to greet but instead instilling in his readers the need for courtesy and hospitality. A worst-case example/scenario would be when, before the Civil War, some Americans defended slavery based on Paul’s words in Col, 3:22-4:1 Eph 6:5-9; 1 Tim 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10. Transferring Paul’s teachings into our day *carte blanche* is dangerous as well as antithetical to the methodology of Jesus and the Apostles' usage of the Old Testament.

When considering the writings of Paul (and for that matter all scripture) we must recognize the vast difference between the world and culture of the original audience and our own, and then make every effort to ascertain the cross-cultural eternal principles. When doing that we must remember two things. First that every teaching is to be understood within the semantical context of Paul’s usage of language, the immediate context of that particular passage, then the context of that letter, the larger context of all Pauline writings, the even larger context of the New Testament finally within the context of the whole canon. Nothing in scripture is isolated from scripture. All things must be considered before application.

Second, we must not allow the pendulum to swing to the other extreme and undervalue the importance of a particular text simply because we do not prefer its teaching. We must be willing to embrace our limited ability to understand and ignore internally defending cherished cultural partialities. The Bible says what it says, and we must vigorously engage in the difficult task of honest interpretation.

Among interpreters, there is much disagreement over which teachings are culturally limited and which ones are cross-cultural norms. This obvious incongruity among interpreters can be traced back to the scholar's understanding and belief regarding God’s nature and the created order. For example, most interpreters, if not all, would embrace Paul’s exhortations to love, live in truth, and seek righteousness because those things reflect God’s nature. However, many modern scholars do not accept biblical creation and so they reject Paul’s teaching on homosexuality (Romans 1:26-27). Contrariwise, those who believe in biblical creation accept Paul’s teaching acknowledging that homosexuality along with polygamy and other sexual perversions violate God’s created order (Gen. 2:18-25)

The principles and teachings of Paul, relevant in the time of the original audience, are transcultural and should be understood, taught, and applied in every age, culture, and place.

Final Thoughts

Sadly, too much of what passes for Christian theology today ignores the uncomfortable truth and bows to the dominant culture. Too many have reduced Paul’s teachings down to a thin soup of easy believe-ism with little substance or written his letters off as harsh and archaic. Yes, Pauline theology is a high mountain to climb but we must not surrender to hermeneutical despair. We must embrace the task of Pauline theology, not it is not easy, but it is a worthy one.

ⁱ Cf. L. T. Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) 212-213.

ⁱⁱ A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927) 228-241; idem, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988) 3-59.

ⁱⁱⁱ W. J. Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 325-360.