

M E E T I N G

St. Paul

T O D A Y

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a book in connection with the Pauline Year came at an opportune time.

In my opinion, the best way to meet Paul today is to consider what Paul wrote about himself and what Luke wrote about him in the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 1); to read carefully the letters that Paul wrote to early Christian communities (chapter 2) and the letters that admirers wrote in his name (chapter 3); to learn some basic principles for reading and interpreting a Pauline text (chapter 4); and to reflect briefly on Paul's significance for us today (chapter 5). In the first and fourth chapters I have adapted some material from my articles in *The Bible Today* and in *Church*.*

I've had the privilege to study, teach, and preach on the Pauline writings for almost forty years. I love these texts and never fail to be stimulated and challenged by them. When I read them, I often recall Karl Barth's comment in the preface to the first edition (1918) of his *Epistle to the Romans*: "If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours." My hope is that the readers of this book may come to see the truth of Barth's statement, and that the Pauline Year of 2008–2009 may exercise its positive effects for many years to come.



1

Who Was Paul the Apostle?

Next to Jesus, Paul is the most prominent figure in the New Testament. Of the twenty-seven documents that constitute the New Testament, thirteen are letters attributed to Paul. Also, more than half of the Acts of the Apostles describes Paul's conversion and subsequent activities on behalf of the spread of the good news about Jesus (the gospel).

Where We Learn about the Life of Paul

These ancient sources tell us a lot about Paul, but they do not tell us all that we would like to know. Paul was not a professor who wrote essays on theological topics. Rather, he was an apostle—one who preached the gospel and taught the Christian community. Paul wrote his letters in response to problems that had arisen mainly in the Christian communities that Paul himself had founded. These communities—churches—were extensions of his apostolic ministry. Because Paul's theology developed out of his work with the Christian community (as opposed to being formed in what today would be a seminary or graduate school

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setting), Paul is best classified as a *pastoral theologian*. He was a missionary and a pastor.

When dispensing pastoral advice, Paul sometimes refers to himself and his own experiences. Of course, these statements are the very best sources for information about Paul and his activities. But he never gives us anything like what we would call an autobiography. The biblical writers, like most writers in ancient times, did not talk much about themselves. They especially avoided describing their feelings and explaining the psychological processes going on within them. So there are limits to what we can learn about Paul even from his own letters.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles was Luke, apparently the same person who composed the Gospel that bears his name (Acts 1:1–2). Luke gives a great deal of attention to the apostle Paul and his missionary endeavors. Throughout Christian history, Luke has generally been regarded as one of Paul’s coworkers and even as a companion of Paul in his work as an apostle. In Acts 16 especially there is a good deal of “we” language, suggesting that the author of Acts personally accompanied Paul on some of his journeys and is giving us eyewitness testimony.

However, modern scholars have recognized that Luke (even if he was Paul’s coworker and companion) had certain distinctive theological ideas of his own, was a learned and sophisticated writer (Luke 1:1–4), and often shaped historical facts to strengthen his theological interpretations. Luke tells us a lot about Paul, and what he writes cannot be ignored. But there are also limits to what we can learn about Paul from Acts. For

example, from Acts we would not know that Paul wrote letters to early Christian communities!

Paul’s Early Life

According to Acts 22:3, Paul was “a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia.” Cilicia was a Roman province on the southeastern coast of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). In Acts 21:39 Tarsus is described as “an important city.” It was a major commercial and cultural center linking east and west in the Roman Empire. When exactly Paul was born is not clear. In his letter to Philemon, written in A.D. 54 or 55, he describes himself as “an old man” (v. 9). However, the Greek word used here can also be read as “ambassador.” And even “old man” is quite vague. Most scholars place Paul’s birth around the time of Jesus’ birth, with some putting it a few years before and others a few years afterward.

According to his own testimony in Philippians 3:5, Paul was a “Hebrew born of Hebrews,” a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and circumcised on the eighth day. His Hebrew name was “Saul.” The name “Paul” was most likely his “Gentile” name to be used outside the Jewish community and was given to him probably at birth and not only at his conversion to become a follower of Jesus. Paul certainly had strong credentials as a Jew.

In Acts 22:25–29, Paul claims also to be a Roman citizen, which was somewhat unusual for a Jew. When the Roman official observes that it had cost him a large sum of money to get his own citizenship, Paul responds, “But I was born a citizen.”

The implication may be that Paul's parents had been slaves of the occupying Romans and managed to purchase their own freedom and to obtain Roman citizenship, which they in turn handed on to Paul.

It appears that Paul spent his early years in Tarsus, where he was part of the local Jewish community. Thus he belonged to the *Diaspora* of Israel—that is, Jews dispersed outside the land of Israel. In Tarsus, Paul would have learned to speak, read, and write in the Greek language, and he would have had some exposure to Greek and Roman culture. His mastery of the Greek language and his use of various classical rhetorical devices in his letters show a fairly high level of non-Jewish education. The mixed atmosphere in which Paul was raised is often characterized as Hellenistic Judaism, because Jews were exposed to the language, customs, and educational system that were rooted in ancient Greece.

Somewhere along the line, perhaps from his parents, Paul learned the trade of tent making or leather working of some kind (Acts 18:3). Practice of this trade enabled Paul to support himself and his missionary activity (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 9:6) without having to rely on financial support from others. It also may have provided him the opportunity to meet and influence his colleagues in the marketplace. It certainly linked him with the couple named Aquila and Prisca (also known as Priscilla in Acts), who were active in the churches at Rome and Corinth (Acts 18:2–3).

The only ancient physical description of Paul comes from the late second-century work known as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*:

“A man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness.” How historically accurate this description was is debated among scholars. Paul's opponents, quoted in 2 Corinthians, claimed that his “bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (10:10). Rather than rebutting these charges directly, Paul accepts them and goes on to argue that they only prove that God's “power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). In the same context he complains about “a thorn . . . in the flesh” (12:7). The precise nature of this problem is not specified, leading to speculations ranging from a speech impediment to epilepsy. Again Paul offers no diagnostic details and prefers to reflect on its positive theological value in keeping him “from being too elated.”

Paul's Life as a Jew

Among the various movements within the Judaism of his time, Paul chose to be a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5). In the Gospels the Pharisees emerge as the chief rivals of Jesus. They were a Jewish sect that arose in the second century B.C. While dedicated to exact observance of the Mosaic Law (the Torah), they were also the progressives (at least in comparison with the Sadducees and Essenes) among the Jewish religious movements of their day. They were often trying to adapt Jewish practices to both the letter of the Law and the changing realities of everyday life. An important feature of their movement was communal meals, which served as occasions for religious sharing. In their zeal the Pharisees

sought to extend the laws of ritual purity pertaining to priests in the Jerusalem temple to other Jews, thus forming a spiritual priesthood of all Jews. At some points in Jewish history, between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D., the Pharisees had great political influence, especially under Queen Alexandra (76–67 B.C.). At other times they were out of favor, and so withdrew from the political struggles and tended to more traditional religious and legal matters.

According to Acts 22:3, Paul had a first-class Jewish education. He is quoted as saying that he was “brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.” According to Acts 5:34–39, a certain Pharisee named Gamaliel (“a teacher of the Law”) showed admirable wisdom and restraint when he counseled other Jews that the early Christians should be allowed to prove by their actions and results whether their movement was from God or not. Exposure to this kind of education under Gamaliel would help explain Paul’s great knowledge of Scripture and his ability to make an argument on the basis of various biblical texts, as he does frequently in his letters. It would also place him in Jerusalem around the time when the early Christian movement emerged.

Paul the Persecutor

Paul never claims to have met the earthly Jesus. But he often confesses that in his “earlier life in Judaism I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it” (Galatians

1:13; 1:23; 1 Corinthians 15:9). According to Acts 7:58 and 8:1 Paul was present at, and approved of, the killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in Jerusalem. Whatever Paul’s actual role in this execution was, the connection with Stephen’s death may explain more precisely why and to what extent Paul became a persecutor of the early Christian movement.

Paul, a Hellenistic Jew from Tarsus, was residing in Jerusalem. The conflict around Stephen seems to have mainly involved other Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, belonging to “the synagogue of the Freedmen . . . Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia” (Acts 6:9). Bear in mind that Paul was one of those Jews who had come from Cilicia. Stephen’s Greek name and the views attributed to him in his long speech in Acts 7 indicate that he, too, was a Hellenistic Jew. And Stephen (and others like him) had become part of the early Christian movement. In Acts 6:5, Stephen is described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”

According to Acts 6:8–15, Stephen’s opponents charged that he spoke “blasphemous words against Moses and God.” These charges are made more specific when “false witnesses” claim that Stephen “never stops saying things against this holy place [the Jerusalem temple] and the law [the Mosaic Law],” and quote him as stating that “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us” (13–14). In other words, Stephen’s adherence to the Jesus movement led him and other Hellenistic Jews to question the ultimate value of the Jerusalem temple and the Mosaic Law. Thus it appears that the controversy that led Paul to become a persecutor of the

Christians was primarily based in one segment of the Jewish population in Jerusalem, that is, among the Hellenistic Jews from the Diaspora.

It is easy to see how attitudes like those of Stephen might have developed among Diaspora Jews. They lived far from the Jerusalem temple and could make the required pilgrimages infrequently and not without inconvenience. Also, they were living in a pagan, Greco-Roman cultural environment, with little support for the practices that made Jews different: circumcision, Sabbath observance, avoidance of certain foods, ritual purity rules, and so on. These were some of the factors that drew Paul and other Diaspora Jews to Jerusalem in the first place—they wanted to live a fuller Jewish life.

It appears that Stephen had found what he was looking for in Jesus of Nazareth, and had decided that the Jerusalem temple and the Mosaic Law were not so important anymore. Paul thought otherwise. According to Acts, Paul not only participated (if only as a coat holder—see 7:58) in the stoning of Stephen but also was raving the church in Jerusalem and dragging both men and women off to prison (8:2–3). In Acts 26:10–11, he claims that he had locked up and killed “many of the saints” in Jerusalem. He also notes that he sought and received an official commission from the Jewish high priest who gave him “letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2; see also 22:5 and 26:12).

That Paul’s persecution was focused on Hellenistic Jewish Christians is confirmed by the notice in Acts 8:2 that all the

Christians were scattered “except the apostles.” Why were “the apostles” spared? This term very likely refers not only to the key Christians in Jerusalem but also to the “Hebrews” mentioned in Acts 6:1, most likely all the Palestinian Jewish Christians who spoke Hebrew (or, more likely, Aramaic) and were led by other Palestinian Jewish Christians such as Peter, James, and John. Also, in Galatians Paul says that he was “still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea” (1:22)—that is, to the Palestinian Jewish Christians. Meanwhile, the remnants of the Stephen group took refuge in Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19). There they encountered non-Jews who showed great interest in their new kind of Judaism. Armed with his commission from the high priest, Paul set out for Damascus.

Paul’s Conversion and Calling

Around A.D. 32 or 33 Paul, a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, a Pharisee by choice, and a persecutor of Christians by conviction, underwent a remarkable transformation. What happened to Paul can be called a “conversion,” at least in the sense that he moved from Pharisaic Judaism to Christian Judaism. This life-changing experience also involved a call to proclaim Christ to those who had not heard of him, especially to non-Jews.

In Galatians 1:15–16 Paul describes his transformative experience of the risen Christ partly to defend the divine origin of his apostleship: “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles . . . ”

By evoking the language of Jeremiah 1:5 (“ . . . before was I born and called me . . . ”), Paul places his experience in line with the Old Testament stories of people being called by God (Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and so on) and also insists that his experience involved the special vocation of bringing the good news to non-Jews. Paul maintains that his apostleship and his call to bring the gospel to Gentiles came directly from “Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Galatians 1:1). Only later did Paul confer with the Jerusalem apostles (Galatians 1:18; 2:1), who in turn approved his calling to “go to the Gentiles” (2:9).

In Philippians 3, in response to the attacks on his apostleship by other Jewish Christian missionaries, Paul observes that this experience had changed his perspective entirely: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:8). In light of this experience, Paul’s sole desire became knowing “Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (3:10). This is the heart of Paul’s spirituality. It involves a kind of mysticism well expressed by Paul himself: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Paul’s brief autobiographical references to his “conversion” are paralleled by three much more elaborate accounts of the event in Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–21; and 26:9–18. Biblical scholars have long debated the origin and accuracy of Luke’s versions. Did Luke get them directly from Paul? Or are they largely the product of Luke’s own religious imagination? Rather than getting bogged down in this complex debate, I suggest that we take Paul’s own statements

as a reliable criterion for what happened, and judge the accounts in Acts according to their conformity with them.

Paul’s confession that he had persecuted the church of God violently (Galatians 1:13) is a prominent theme in all three accounts in Acts (especially 26:9–11), and it’s hardly the kind of thing that early Christians would have invented about him. His boast to have reached an advanced stage in Judaism and to have been very zealous (Galatians 1:14) is paralleled in Acts 22:3 and 26:4–5. The connection between the conversion of Paul and his mission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles is drawn in both Galatians 1:16 and Acts 26:16. Finally, Galatians 1:17 (“and afterwards I returned to Damascus”) connects the incident with Damascus, though we are not told that it occurred on the way to Damascus, as in Acts. There are certainly enough similarities between Paul’s statements and the three accounts in Acts to conclude that the accounts in Acts reflect some good historical traditions going back to Paul’s personal experience.

Paul the Missionary

Paul was not the first Christian missionary. Early missionary activity was based to some extent on Jesus’ own practice. Jesus was a traveling teacher who invited even outcasts to share in God’s kingdom. He enlisted disciples and sent them out to extend his mission (see Mark 6:6b–13 and parallels). The missionary activity of the first Christians was rooted in the commission of the risen Jesus (Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:47). It involved the witness

of Jesus' disciples "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

At Antioch, Hellenistic Jewish Christians expelled from Jerusalem came into contact with Gentiles who surprisingly "became believers and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). Thus the Christian mission to non-Jews was already in operation before Paul came upon the public scene, and Christianity was soon spreading across the Roman Empire to Rome itself (though the number of converts remained relatively small).

The spread of Christianity outside of Palestine and through the Mediterranean world was facilitated by the steady growth of the Roman Empire and the external conditions that accompanied it. The peace imposed by the Romans (*pax Romana*) made travel relatively safe by ridding the roads of bandits and the sea of pirates. The improved road system and the Roman dominance of the Mediterranean made east-to-west journeys more feasible, though not necessarily easy (2 Corinthians 11:25–28). The common language in the cities of the Roman Empire was Greek, and Paul was well trained in it.

The great cities of the Roman Empire—such as Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome—had large Jewish populations, and early Christianity came to them through Jewish Christians and took root in the local Jewish communities. The synagogue was the "gathering place" and local cultural center as well as the site for worshipping the God of Israel. Monotheism, high ethical standards, and frequent communal celebrations attracted non-Jews to the synagogue. Some became Jews, while many others remained in a less formal association as "God fearers." This

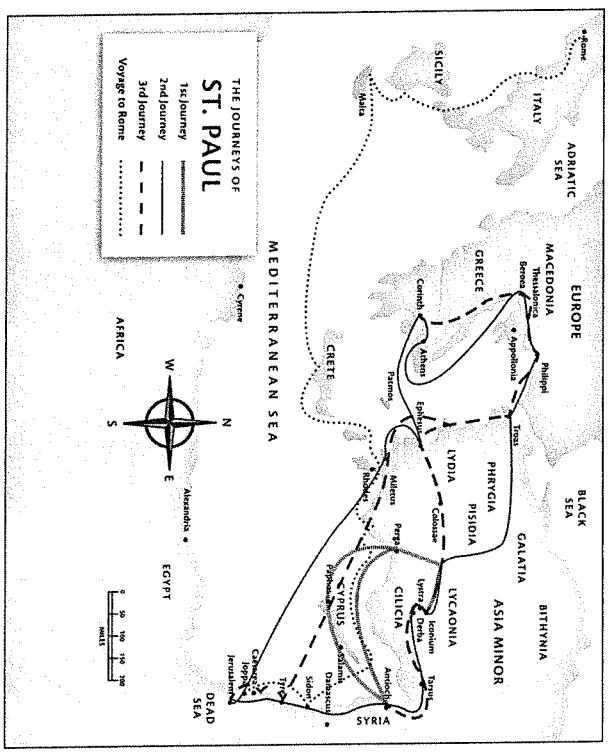
development helps to explain how Paul, even when writing to Gentile Christians, could presume that they possessed a good knowledge of Judaism and its Scriptures.

The workplace and the household were also crucial to the spread of early Christianity. Paul was a "tentmaker" or leather worker (Acts 18:3), and his presence in the workplace made it possible for him to meet new people and exchange ideas about philosophy and religion. The Roman Empire featured many voluntary associations based on trade, religion, philosophy, or some other common interest. Such groups often met in the private homes of members wealthy enough to accommodate a fairly large number of guests. Depending on the group, the wife of the owner might play a prominent role in organizing and overseeing the gatherings.

The ten years between Paul's conversion and the letters and accounts of his missionary activity in Acts remain obscure. Paul says that he first "went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus" (Galatians 1:17), and then after his first visit to Jerusalem he went into "the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (1:21). Whether he engaged in direct missionary activity or in some kind of spiritual formation (or both), we do not know for sure. But from roughly A.D. 46 on, we have solid evidence from his letters and the book of Acts that Paul traveled about the Mediterranean world, fulfilling his call to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Detailed information about Paul's missionary travels throughout the Mediterranean world between A.D. 46 and 58 appears in the Acts of the Apostles. Modern readers of Acts have

divided Paul's missionary career into three journeys or phases: Acts 13:1—14:28 (A.D. 46–49); 15:30—18:17 (A.D. 50–52); and 18:18—21:16 (A.D. 54–58). The geographical scope of these journeys is breathtaking, with stops at Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, Antioch in Syria, Jerusalem, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Antioch in Syria again, Ephesus, Macedonia and Greece, Troas, Miletus, Ephesus again, Jerusalem again, and Rome. Luke shows how Paul fulfilled the mandate of the risen Christ about the apostles being witnesses to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).



Paul did get to Rome but not in the way he envisioned in Romans 15:14–29. He had hoped to visit Rome on his way to Spain, where he was to begin a new mission in what to people of the Mediterranean world was indeed “the ends of the earth.” But as he was bringing the proceeds of the collection from the Gentile Christian churches of Asia Minor and Greece to the “mother church” in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested (Acts 21:27–36), imprisoned at Caesarea Maritima, and eventually sent off to Rome, where according to Christian tradition he died a martyr’s death, probably in A.D. 67, toward the end of Nero’s persecution of the Christians at Rome. Whether Paul ever got to Spain is not clear. In Acts 28 Luke’s story of Paul’s missionary activity breaks off abruptly, with Paul in prison or under house arrest at Rome but still entertaining inquirers about Christianity and “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31).

The Chronology of Paul’s Life

The precise or absolute chronology of Paul’s life as a Christian is not easy to discern, with various learned scholars proposing different dates for where Paul was and what he was doing. The two instances of relatively “hard data” providing exact dating in his letters to the Galatians turn out to cause as many problems as they solve. According to Galatians 1:18, Paul went up to Jerusalem for the first time as a Christian only “after three years,” presumably after his transformative experience of the risen Christ. If we leave

some time for Paul's activity as a persecutor of Christians after Jesus' death, that would put Paul's conversion around A.D. 32 or 33. Then his first visit to Jerusalem as a Christian would have been in 35 or 36.

In Galatians 2:1 Paul says that "after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem." Was that fourteen years after his first visit, or fourteen years after his conversion? The latter seems more likely, and that would place the second visit and the Jerusalem conference or council (see Galatians 2:1–10; Acts 15) in 47 or 48. Between his second visit to Jerusalem and his long stay at Corinth, Paul had his famous confrontation with Peter in Antioch in 48 or 49 over the propriety of Jewish and Gentile Christians eating together (Galatians 2:11–14).

According to Acts 18:11, Paul then stayed at Corinth for a year and six months. There Paul wrote his first extant letter, 1 Thessalonians, to one of the communities he had founded. According to 18:12, Gallio was proconsul of Achaia when the local Jewish leaders attacked Paul and brought him before the tribunal there. From an inscription found at Delphi in 1905 we know that Gallio served there between 51 and 52. So Paul must have spent time at Corinth in 50–51 (or 51–52).

Following a return to Antioch, Paul settled down in Ephesus for a period of about two years (53–55), with side-trips elsewhere. While there he wrote the letters known as Galatians and 1 Corinthians. Many scholars suppose that while in Ephesus Paul suffered another imprisonment (2 Corinthians 1:8–11) not mentioned in Acts, during which he wrote his prison

letters to the Philippians and Philemon. He seems to have written 2 Corinthians (or parts of it) while in Macedonia. During another stay in Corinth he wrote his letter to the Romans in the year 56 or 57.

While bringing the proceeds of the collection taken up among the Gentile churches for the "poor" Christians at Jerusalem, Paul was arrested and imprisoned in 57 in Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, off the Mediterranean coast. From there he was taken by ship in 58 to Rome for trial, on the grounds that he was a Roman citizen and deserved a trial befitting his legal status. In Rome he was in prison or under house arrest from 58 onward. According to later Christian tradition, Paul was executed under the emperor Nero sometime in the mid- to late 60s of the first century.

Paul the Partner in Ministry

The concept of collaborative ministry in the church is not a late twentieth-century invention. Rather, the earliest complete documents in the New Testament—Paul's letters from the 50s of the first century—show that the Christian mission was collaborative from the beginning. Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, worked as part of a team of Christians.

Both in his missionary travels and in his local pastoral activities, Paul depended on a network of friends and associates. Paul did not work alone. In fact, his frequent use of the Greek word for "coworker" (*synergos*) is the biblical basis for talk about

“collaborative” (the Latin-based equivalent) ministry today. Paul bestowed the title *synergos* on the following persons:

Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:2; Romans 16:21)
 Philemon (Philemon 1)
 Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke
 (Philemon 24)
 Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25)
 Eudola, Synryche, Clement, and others
 (Philippians 4:2–3)
 Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5–9)
 Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23)
 (perhaps) Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1
 Corinthians 16:17)
 Prisca and Aquila (Romans 16:3)
 Urbanus (Romans 16:9)

Related expressions are applied to Mary in Romans 16:6 (“who has worked hard among you”) and to Tryphaena and Tryphosa in Romans 16:12 (“those workers in the Lord”).

Paul is best described as a pastoral theologian. His letters provided advice on being a Christian to the early communities, and he developed his theology mainly in the process of giving this pastoral advice. Because Paul’s advice was so sound and inspiring, his letters eventually became part of the canon of Christian Scripture, and he is justly celebrated as one of the greatest theologians ever. Nevertheless, apart from Galatians and Romans, all

the undisputed Pauline letters are identified as jointly authored compositions:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1 Thessalonians)
 Paul and Timothy (Philemon, Philippians,
 2 Corinthians)
 Paul and Sosthenes (1 Corinthians)

Even though in the main text Paul often speaks in the first person singular (“I”), his letters presumably also were shared by his coworkers and represented their views as well.

The communities that Paul founded gathered in the houses of certain well-to-do members who could host assemblies of up to forty or fifty persons. In fact, without the householder’s consent and some organization by community members, there wouldn’t have been local community gatherings. Paul’s letter to his “coworker” Philemon is also addressed to “the church in your house.” The implication is that Paul intended that the letter would be read publicly to the community based at the home of Philemon and Apphia. In this short letter, part of Paul’s strategy was to persuade (or shame?) Philemon to take back into his household his runaway slave Onesimus as “a beloved brother.”

Before Paul’s letters from the 50s of the first century, Christians had already developed faith statements about Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3–5; Philippians 2:6–11; Romans 1:3–4; 3:25), the rituals of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and ethical teachings. It is enough to read Paul’s earliest letter (1 Thessalonians)

written some twenty years after Jesus' death, to recognize the linguistic, conceptual, and theological "explosion" that took place in the earliest days of the Christian movement. In his ministry and writings Paul was able to build upon these established beliefs and practices, and in many cases to provide theological depth for them.

Paul's Motivations

Paul took up his missionary practice out of a strong sense of vocation. His conversion experience of the risen Christ was for him also a call to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:16). That experience was so profound that Paul felt himself mystically identified with Christ: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul was convinced that his spiritual gift (or charism) was to be an apostle, one sent to proclaim the gospel (Galatians 1:1), especially to non-Jews. Paul's ultimate hope was to know Christ and to share in his sufferings and resurrection so as to "attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10–11).

In the midst of his apostolic activity, however, Paul did not lose sight of the fact that he was always acting as God's servant. In response to members of factions at Corinth who boasted about the different apostles who had brought them to Christian faith, Paul condemned their bickering, on the grounds that Cephas (Peter), Apollos, Paul, and all the other apostles were merely servants of God and Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul uses the analogies of caring for a plant and constructing a building to show that

in the Christian mission God gives the growth and Christ is the real foundation (3:11). There Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) that "we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building" (3:9).

Paul's own stated policy (Romans 15:14–29) was to proclaim the good news of Christ to non-Jews in places where there was no church and where the gospel had not yet been preached (15:20). He took care not to build on anyone else's foundation. And when Paul perceived that the new local church was "up and running," he moved on to a new site.

Christianity had come to Rome through the local Jewish community, long before Paul arrived there. This fact explains the tone of the thanksgiving (1:8–15) in Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul knew well that Christianity was already established in Rome. And so he presented his planned visit as merely a stopover on his way to the western edge of the Mediterranean world: "I will set out by way of you to Spain" (15:28). In other words, one of Paul's purposes in writing his long letter to the Romans was to request hospitality on his way to Spain. He hoped that his stay there might be an occasion for sharing spiritual gifts (1:11–12). While undertaking his pioneering mission, Paul was nevertheless deeply intertwined with and dependent upon other Christians.

The Role of Paul's Letters

Of the seven letters generally acknowledged to have been written by Paul himself (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans), all but Romans

were sent to communities that Paul had founded. These letters were intended primarily as extensions of Paul's own missionary activity. They provided advice, encouragement, and correction from the founding apostle in his physical absence.

In writing to these communities, Paul followed the conventions of letter-writing in the Greco-Roman world at that time. The opening or salutation identified the writer and the addressee by name, and included a greeting ("grace," or "peace" in the Jewish tradition). This was generally followed by words of remembrance and thanksgiving for past favors and wishes for good health and prosperity in the present and future. The body of the letter dealt with the major topics and concerns that had led the writer to compose the letter. At the end of the letter there might be personal greetings, more good wishes, news about travel plans, and a final benediction.

Most of the Pauline letters follow this outline, though always there are adaptations that serve to "Christianize" the pattern and to respond to the circumstances of the local community. For example, in identifying himself Paul often expands upon his call to be an apostle (Galatians 1:1), and uses the thanksgiving as the occasion to introduce the main themes to be developed in the body of the letters. And in Galatians, Paul was so incensed that he omitted the thanksgiving entirely and got right down to the business of correcting the situation among the Galatian Christians.

Paul's letters were "occasional" writings—that is, Paul wrote them in response to specific events or problems within the Christian communities. In them Paul applied theological insights to the issues that had arisen in these congregations.

The letters were intended to be (and most certainly were) read publicly to the whole community. So prized were these letters that early Christians saved them, copied them, and began to put them together in packets or collections. Eventually these packets began to circulate among the different communities, even those not directly addressed by Paul. This process may well have initiated the development of the New Testament canon of Sacred Scripture alongside what had been the earliest Christians' biblical canon, what we now call the Old Testament. By the late second century the four Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline epistles had become the core of the emerging New Testament canon.

In editions of the Christian Bible it has become customary to arrange the thirteen Pauline epistles into two groups: those addressed to communities, and those addressed to individuals. Within these two groups the individual letters are arranged by length, from the longer to the shorter. Thus the nine letters addressed to communities are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians. The four letters addressed to individuals are 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

While all thirteen letters are attributed to Paul in some way or other (several are presented as joint compositions), many modern scholars have argued that six out of the thirteen letters may have been written in Paul's name by students or admirers of Paul, most likely after Paul's death. These letters are called the "Deuteropaulines" or secondary Pauline letters.

The Deuteropaulines are certainly part of the Christian canon of Holy Scripture. While their authenticity is not at stake, their

authorship by Paul is questioned on several accounts. Their language and style are often somewhat different from those of the undisputed letters of Paul. They may reflect problems and conditions within the churches later in the first century than the undisputed letters do. And they show different theological emphases and concerns from what we find in the earlier letters.

The practice of imitating, updating, and expanding model compositions as a way of learning how to write various literary forms and in various literary styles was common in the schools of the Greco-Roman world. Moreover, it is likely that a Pauline “school” developed, most likely at Ephesus, after Paul’s death. Perhaps by preserving fragments written directly by Paul, these Deuteropauline letters try to tell us what Paul *would have said* in response to changing conditions and concerns that developed in the late first century.

Not all scholars have been convinced by these arguments. They point out the complex process by which the Pauline letters were written. In several of the undisputed letters Paul clearly used the services of a scribe or secretary. In Romans 16:22, one of them even steps out of his role and sends his personal greetings from Corinth to his Christian friends at Rome: “I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.” How much freedom was allowed to such a scribe makes the argument about language and style not as strong as it might appear at first sight. Not only that, several of the letters are presented as joint compositions by Paul and other coworkers, which raises the question as to how much influence these other persons exercised in the composition of the letters. We should remember, however, that

Paul immediately shifts into first-person singular language rather quickly in most of these jointly authored letters. Of course, one can argue (as most earlier interpreters did) that Paul’s theology and style changed and developed as he grew older, and so the Deuteropaulines can be read as reflecting Paul’s mature thinking on matters that he confronted during his later years.

I find convincing the arguments for distinguishing between the undisputed Pauline letters (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans) and the Deuteropauline letters (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus). Therefore I will treat them in two separate chapters. In the undisputed letters we will meet Paul the apostle and letter writer firsthand. In the Deuteropauline letters we will encounter the legacy or influence of Paul the apostle and letter writer. From both groups of letters we can learn much about Paul and the early Christian movement that he did so much to strengthen and spread. And of course, both groups of letters are part of sacred Scripture for Christians.