

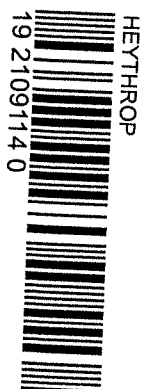
Paul is the most powerful human personality in the history of the Church. A missionary, theologian, and religious genius, he laid down in his epistles the foundations on which later Christian theology was built. In this highly original introduction to Paul's life and thought, E. P. Sanders, whose research on Paul has substantially influenced recent scholarship, pays equal attention to Paul's fundamental convictions and the sometimes convoluted ways in which they were worked out.

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Lisa Jardine, *The Times*

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Nicholas Lezard, *Guardian*



Paul: A Very Short Introduction

'He presents Paul, for all his inconsistencies, with great clarity and insight... The book is an apt introduction to Paul; a bold confrontation of the boldest of Christian theologians... his interpretation is eloquent for his generation and historically a clear advance.'

Church Times

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v. Chapter 3

1e **Missionary strategy and message**

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Acts offers two descriptions of how Paul won adherents. In one instance, in Athens, he debated with other philosophers in the public market (*agora*) (Acts 17: 17). In Athens and other cities, however, he is depicted as going first of all to the local synagogue to attempt to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 9: 20; 13: 5, 14; 14: 1 and elsewhere). Both procedures were reasonable, and their reasonableness doubtless accounts for their description in Acts. Yet the author of Acts and Paul disagreed fundamentally about his mission. Acts sees Paul as first of all apostle to the Jews of the Greek-speaking Diaspora. Paul regarded himself, however, as apostle to the Gentiles. So he describes himself (see above, pp. 3-4), and accordingly he describes his converts as former pagans: the Thessalonians had turned to God from idols (1 Thess. 1: 9); the Galatians had formerly worshipped 'beings which are not gods' (Gal. 4: 8); the Corinthians had worshipped dumb idols (1 Cor. 12: 2; cf. 6: 9-11); the Philippians were not circumcised (Phil. 3: 2).

Perhaps most telling is the fact that near the end of his career, when he wrote Romans, Paul could imagine for himself only an indirect role in the redemption of Israel. The Jewish people as such hardly figure in his letters until Romans 9-11. Had he spent the previous twenty years

preaching in synagogues, the letters to his own churches would reflect the effort in some way or other; there would be some remark about the former state of Jewish members of his churches or about the Jews' rejection of his message. But in fact, apart from Romans 16, we learn only about Gentile converts, and until chapters 9-11 there is no reflection on the fate of the Jewish people. It seems, then, that we must think of Paul as preaching directly to Gentiles.

How did he go about it? It may at first strike us as difficult for a wandering evangelist to stroll into a city, address himself to pagans in the name of the God of Israel, and persuade them that God had sent his Son for the salvation of all, Jew and Gentile alike. In fact this may not have been all that hard. He could have argued in the public market; and had he been a philosopher, this is probably what he would have done. Thus when the author of Acts depicts Paul as speaking in the market square of Athens, he also describes his debating partners as Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (Acts 17: 17f.). Religion, however, was either civic, ethnic, or personal, and religious cults were usually established by means other than philosophical debate. While Paul may sometimes have engaged in public discussions, we should be prepared to think of other methods by which he spread the gospel.

We noted above that Paul was not an eloquent speaker, and this is a further reason for doubting that he relied principally on public addresses. There is a more likely explanation. Whenever he entered a new city, he probably took a room in which to ply his trade, and he talked with whoever came in or walked past. Cutting and sewing leather (of which tents were usually made) was a fairly quiet occupation, and it would not have interfered with discussion. We cannot know for sure just how Paul reached interested hearers, and he may have employed diverse means. He was probably most effective, however, one-to-one, or in small groups.

The fact that he represented a religion from the Middle East would not

have been a barrier. While the success of Asian cults in Mediterranean cities may have been overestimated in the past, they were not uncommon. Pagans knew Jews and Judaism, and some would have been interested by a new movement within it. Although Judaism was often scorned, it also had its admirers. Monotheism was philosophically attractive, Judaism's high ethics appealed to many, and the sabbath rest was sometimes emulated. A spokesman for the God of Israel would have found willing hearers.

The message that Paul offered had its allure. There was only one feature which would have made its acceptance difficult: exclusivism. We learn in 1 Corinthians that not all the converts there wanted totally to exclude participation in some of the aspects of the common paganism, and we must imagine that many more refused to join the Christian movement because Christians, like Jews generally, would not tolerate the worship of other gods by full members of their own communities.

Many, however, would have heard quite gladly the message that, by being baptized and professing faith in Christ, they would be assured of eternal life. In matters religious, the general attitude was often the more the merrier – or at least, the more the better chance – and it seems not to have been difficult to get a sizeable number of people to increase their chances of a happy future by joining religions or cults. Paul may not have emphasized at first the exclusivism which he shared with other Jews, and the opening message of Jesus' death and especially his resurrection – to which Paul could personally testify – would have captured interest.

His basic message

We know with a good deal of precision what Paul preached, at least in outline, since in his surviving letters he often recalls what he had first said. He preached the death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ, and he proclaimed that faith in him guaranteed a share in his life. This is

the earliest surviving summary of a Christian sermon, written to Thessalonica in Macedonia possibly as early as 41 CE, no more than about ten years after Jesus' death.

[Others] report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess. 1: 9-10)

Here Paul emphasizes Jesus' resurrection and the promise that those who belonged to him would be saved from the coming 'wrath'. The promise of salvation to believers was not only important, it was urgent. Paul expected most people then living to be still alive when the Lord returned (1 Thess. 4: 14-18; see further in Chapter 4 of this book), the event which would end this present age. Those who were in Christ would be saved, those who were not would be destroyed (see the two passages in 1 Thess. just cited; further Phil. 3: 10 f. (resurrection) and 3: 19 (destruction)).

Yet Jesus' dreadful death, as a condemned criminal, was also central to Paul's message. When he wrote to the Galatians, he recalled that he had 'placarded' before their eyes Jesus Christ as crucified (Gal. 3:1), and he reminded the Corinthians that he had known nothing among them 'except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2: 2).

Jesus' crucifixion, then, the beginning of the Christian proclamation, was not a defeat, but a step to ultimate redemption. It was for the believers' benefit, as is argued in a passage based on a pre-Pauline formula:

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom. 3: 23-5)

In these and many other passages we see the emphasis of the Christian message: (1) God had sent his Son; (2) he was crucified, but for the benefit of humanity; (3) he was raised from the dead and exalted to heaven; (4) he would soon return, and those who belonged to him would live with him forever. Paul's gospel, like that of others, also included (5) admonition to live by the highest ethical and moral standard: 'May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thess. 5: 23).

The sermons attributed to the apostles in Acts agree fairly closely with what we learn from the letters about Paul's basic missionary message. Acts contains several sermons by Peter, Jesus' chief disciple and later the chief apostle. This is the best short example:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and signs which God did through him in your midst; as you yourselves know - this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death . . . This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. (Acts 2: 22-4, 32-3)

'This which you see and hear' refers to the disciples' speaking in tongues, a charismatic gift which they attributed to the Spirit. In this sermon, besides the reference to the Spirit, we see another important point, one which is of the greatest relevance for understanding the development of the gospels. Jesus was 'attested to you by God with mighty works'. This is the seed which would grow, as time went on, into the great tree of the gospels: it became necessary to tell of Jesus' deeds.

Paul, however, has very little to say about the life of Jesus. He

occasionally cites his words (as he seems to do in 1 Thess. 4: 15-18, speaking of 'the word of the Lord'). The only other teaching which he quotes is the prohibition of divorce (1 Cor. 7: 10-11; see also Matt. 5: 31-2; Luke 16: 18; Matt. 19: 3-9; Mark 10: 2-12). In addition to these teachings, he repeats Jesus' words at the last supper (1 Cor. 11: 23-5; see also Mark 14: 22-5 and parallels). Of his deeds Paul says nothing, at least not in the surviving correspondence. Paul's message focused on God's saving action in sending his Son and in raising him. This, Paul and the others held, assured believers that they would share his life.

The other difference between Paul's summaries of what he preached and Peter's sermons in Acts is that the former emphasize the nearness of the return of the Lord. As time passed, and the Lord did not return, this motif receded. The author of Acts probably revised Peter's sermons accordingly.

Modern people have a difficult time seeing how believable the basic message was to many ancients. If we now heard the proclamation of resurrection, the first questions would probably be, 'How do you know he was really dead?' and 'What was the resurrection like, what form did it take?' These questions did later come up, and Paul replied to the second in 1 Corinthians 15: 36-50. (His answer, which we shall consider in the next chapter, was that the resurrection was of a spiritual body, not a physical body, not 'flesh and blood'.) The first question in the ancient world, where many believed that humans were basically immortal, seems to have been, 'How do we know that God raised this man to heaven and appointed him Lord?' Paul testified to his own vision of and commissioning by the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9: 1; 15: 8), and it is evident that many believed him and accepted Jesus as their saviour.

Powerful acts

Besides offering this simple message, Paul performed miracles which established his authority as a true prophet or spokesman of God. He



4. Saint Peter and Saint Paul are seen together as founders of the Christian faith.

wrote to the Thessalonians that 'our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and the Holy Spirit' (1 Thess. 1: 5). 'Power' is *dynamis*, 'mighty deed', often with the meaning 'miracle'. When the Corinthians, inspired by other apostles, doubted that Paul was a true apostle, or at least a good one, he reminded them that he had done the 'signs' (*semeia*) of a true apostle, including 'signs and wonders' (*terata*) and 'powerful acts' (*dynameis*) (2 Cor. 12: 12; cf. Rom. 15: 18 f.; 1 Cor. 2: 4). Some of his converts could also do *dynameis*, and they had charismatic gifts (*charismata*): Gal. 3: 5; 1 Cor. 1: 7; 7: 12: 1, 4, 10 f.; 28 f. These gifts included speaking in tongues, interpreting them, and healing (for example, 1 Cor. 12: 1, 10, 28), but for the most part 'powerful acts' are unspecified (for example, 1 Cor. 12: 28). Paul was prepared, however, to challenge his rebellious church in Corinth about their 'power' and to assert that he might come there and demonstrate his own:

Some are arrogant as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4: 19-21)

Paul

We would like to know what these powers were. We know that Paul could speak in tongues 'more than you all' (1 Cor. 14: 18), and he saw visions (2 Cor. 12: 2-4, 7). Acts depicts him as healing and exorcizing (Acts 16: 16-18; 19: 11-12), and even as raising the dead (20: 7-12), but Paul himself says nothing of his own miracles. That he did things which were counted in the ancient world as miracles, however, need not be doubted.

Despite boasting of his 'power', when pressed for signs of his apostolic authority Paul appealed more to 'weakness' than to miracles, and more to the results of his missionary work than to his prowess. In the midst of assuring the Corinthians that he had performed the mighty deeds expected of an apostle, he also wrote, 'I will all the more gladly boast of

my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me' (2 Cor. 12: 9). We noted earlier that Paul was not especially impressive in person, yet he was an effective missionary. He saw in this the power of God working through his own weakness. The Lord said to him, 'my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12: 9), and the existence of Paul's churches showed that this was true (2 Cor. 3: 2-3).