

PAUL THE APOSTLE & SALVATION THRU FAITH

With Saul of Tarsus (later renamed Paul), the opportunity for spreading the good news of Christ reached well beyond the original circle of Jesus' followers. This is a man who lived at the time of Jesus, yet most likely never met him *in the flesh*. This is a Jew who was not even from the homeland of the Jewish people.

Yet Paul is the man who almost single-handedly propels Christianity from its status as a minor Jewish cult to eventual adoption as the religion of an empire. This is a tireless evangelist who proclaims a theology of salvation through faith – available to the Gentile as well as the Jew. And this is a man would take his message direct to those Romans at the center of the empire, proclaiming:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

For this initiative, Paul shapes Christianity largely as we know it today. But, to get there, Paul severs himself from his cultural and theological roots.

BACKGROUND OF PAUL & HIS WRITINGS

We begin with bit of background. Saul (aka Paul) of Tarsus is a complex person – quintessentially Jewish but ultimately the driving force behind the eventual separation of Christianity from Judaism.

The late 20th century author Allen F. Segal of *Paul the Convert* describes Paul as “one of only two Pharisees to have left us any personal writings. As the only first-century Jew to have left confessional reports of mystical experience, Paul should be treated as a major source in the study of first century Judaism.” To the Jews, Paul was what the author describes as “a first-century heresy.”

Segal goes on to note that: “Although Paul met opposition from many Jews of his own day, because they believed Jesus to be neither messiah nor God, his greatest battles were fought against other Christians, especially Jewish Christians.” In short, Paul embodied the quintessential role of heretic – for traditional Jew and Jewish Christian alike.

Dating of Written Works: Paul apparently began writing what are now known as the Pauline epistles while on the road. Some scholars believe the epistle to the Galatians to be the earliest written work of the New Testament, dating from about 48-49 AD, just after Paul's first missionary journey and before the Jerusalem council meeting.

An alternative view is that Galatians was written as late as 56 – with I Thessalonians being written first, around 50-51. There is less dispute about the first letter to the Corinthians which

was written about 54-55 toward the close of a three-year residency in Ephesus. The epistle to the Romans likely was written shortly thereafter, about 56-57.

The last extant epistle attributed (by some) to Paul is known as II Timothy, written from prison shortly before Paul's death in 66-67. It is to Timothy that Paul reportedly writes, "... the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Authorship: Most modern scholars ascribe authorship of Pauline epistles to include Romans, both Corinthian letters, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians and Philemon directly to the apostle Paul. Works most disputed (both historically and currently) include II Thessalonians and the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus. Also questioned by some have been the letters to the churches at Ephesus and Colosse.

The Tradition of Paul: Originally called by his Hebrew name, Saul was born in the Cilician city of Tarsus – an intellectual and cultural center and a center of Greek Stoic teaching. In later life, Paul indicated that he was taught "at the feet of Gamaliel," the most prominent Jewish teacher of the early first century.

According to the New Testament book of Acts, Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen. He was not only present, but "approved of their killing him." And Saul's murderous activities were not limited to one evangelist but extended more widely.

After Stephen's death, Acts goes on: "But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." Intense persecution caused Christians to flee for other parts of Judea and Samaria – and beyond.

Saul subsequently extended the geographic reach of his anti-Christian activity. At the time of his conversion, he was headed for the Syrian city of Damascus to arrest those who belonged to "the Way." Subsequent to his conversion, Paul would confess: "I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison..."

While dating is uncertain, it is around 35 AD that Saul experienced his vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Subsequently, he went to Arabia and the city of Petra. Three years later, he appears to make his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem, meeting with both Peter and James as elders of the Jerusalem church.

It has not been easy for scholars to reconcile the subsequent events of Paul's life from the chronology of Acts with Paul's own account in his epistle to the Galatians. However, it appears that Paul spent some time in Arabia preparing himself for subsequent ministry. He was introduced to the church in Jerusalem by Barnabas, a Hellenistic Jewish Christian who made his home on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus.

For about a decade, Paul worked in Syria and Cilicia (though this period of activity is not recorded in Acts). He was then brought to Antioch by Barnabas, which became Paul's base of operations for subsequent missionary journeys.

It was during his stay in Antioch that the controversy over the applicability of Jewish customs (notably circumcision) first surfaced. Paul went to Jerusalem, a conference that is recorded somewhat differently in Acts versus Paul's letter to the Galatians.

In Acts, Paul appears to defer to the judgement of Jerusalem; however, to the Galatians he evidences clear disdain for the supposed authority of the mother church. There also are differences as to which emissaries were to accompany Paul in a subsequent trip to Antioch and as to the reasons for the subsequent split between Barnabas and Paul at Antioch.

Paul spent nearly a decade on three so-called *missionary* journeys:

- From about 46-48 AD, Paul took a relatively short journey from Antioch to Cyprus and through the closer regions of Asia Minor (now eastern Turkey).
- From 49-52, his second journey took him to the western reaches of Asia Minor (including Ephesus) and from there to Macedonia and Greece (both Athens and Corinth).
- His third journey took place over much the same route as the second and lasted the longest, from 53-57 (with much of that time spent in Ephesus).

Both the second and third journeys ended in Jerusalem. Upon completion of his third journey, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem. He was brought before the Jewish ruling council of the Sanhedrin. However, he was protected from Jewish authority by Roman action, being imprisoned in Caesarea for two years.

Paul successfully asserted his right to be tried as a Roman citizen before the emperor in Rome. After surviving two assassination plots, he journeyed to Rome about 59-60 where he lived at least two years under house arrest. During this time Paul was free to receive guests, both friends and adversaries, all the while "... proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

Paul wanted to travel to Spain, but it is unclear whether he actually did. From Acts 28, it appears that Paul was released from Roman house arrest after two years in about 62. The case for a fourth missionary journey to Spain is largely circumstantial, based on Paul's declared interest, a supporting implication by the fourth century Christian writer Eusebius, and statements from other early church patriarchs who attested to the early spread of the gospel to Spain.

In any event, Paul returned to prison under the reign of Nero. Though not recorded in the New Testament, the most common tradition is that Paul was executed at Rome about 67 AD.

SALVATION & GRACE

Paul's distinctive contribution to Christianity is also his heresy – the doctrine of *justification by faith*. A salvation available not just to the descendents of Abraham, but to the pagan, non-Jewish world as well.

Writing to those in the Roman capital, Paul makes the declaration that proved to be the *cornerstone* of all his writings:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for *salvation to everyone who has faith*, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’ ”

Paul had come on the scene at a propitious time for the spread and acceptance of Christianity. By the first century, Jewish populations and synagogues were spread throughout the Roman empire. Judaism was becoming more attractive to a more cultured society because the notion of multiple pagan gods was proving increasingly anachronistic.

However, the legalistic practices of Judaism including blood sacrifice rituals, circumcision of foreskins and avoidance of certain meats were incomprehensible to the non-Jewish mind. What the Roman empire needed was a way for Gentiles to worship one god without the accompanying baggage of repugnant teaching and cultural customs. Paul was the one who made the message palatable – through a liberating theology of God's son, Jesus Christ.

Paul's heresy is centered on four major premises, the latter three of which are not found elsewhere in the New Testament:

- There is salvation in Jesus.
- This salvation comes via the intangible expression of faith.
- Faith is a product of God's grace, not human performance.
- As newcomers to the faith like Paul, we also can be apostles with Christ.

In Paul's view, anyone can experience the godhead acting not from motives of “payback” but acceptance. Like children, we are becoming “joint heirs” with Christ as members of the household of God.

Writing to the Galatians, Paul clearly states his case this way:

...yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because *no one will be justified by the works of the law*.

This is a man bold enough to buck not only Torah Judaism, but to also indict leaders of the early Christian movement for rigid adherence to the religious traditions of yesterday. Lest anyone miss the point, he went on to challenge his Galatian readers: “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves.”

Aggressiveness and persistence would pay off. Paul’s characterization of Christian faith and practice would become a dogma to withstand the test of time.

Relationship of Paul to Peter & James: How is it that a person who was not with the Christ during his earthly ministry became the primary agent for Christian evangelization? After all, Jesus had labeled Peter as “the rock” on which “I will build my church.” And it was the brother of Jesus, James, who would become the recognized leader of the early post-Easter church at Jerusalem.

Yet Paul the apostle is the one who has shaped Christian belief and practice since the first century. In part, this is because Paul is the most voluminous of the writers whose materials are contained in the canonized New Testament. Paul wins by sheer volume of material written – on matters covering both the mysterious and mundane.

And in part, Paul emerges victorious because the legacy of potential competitors was largely extinguished. Paul’s aggressiveness and his persistence paid off – his characterization of the Christian faith appears to be the one that has withstood the test of time over the last two millennia.

Despite his subsequent designation as the first in the line of papal succession, we really know very little about Peter’s leadership role within the early church. The actions of Peter as church leader are recorded early in the book of Acts, and there are two short, relatively little used New Testament books attributed to his name. However, beyond this, we know little.

The legacy of James ends with his illegal lynching at the hands of the Jewish leadership, and the subsequent demise of the Jerusalem church with the Roman destruction of this city in AD 70. However, James (or his followers) leaves one important writing – the epistle of James which stands as a sharp counterpoint to the heresy of Paul the convert.

Acceptance of Paul: Of all the New Testament writings, Paul’s have become the most widely accepted, both by early Christian leaders as well as current scholars from a wide variety of persuasions.

Despite the apparent authenticity of these core epistles and their acceptance as “scripture,” Paul’s writings often were viewed even by the early church – including the apostle Peter – as “hard to understand.”

The epistles of Paul and Luke’s gospel were the only New Testament writings accepted by the 2nd century Gnostic heretic Marcion, albeit conditionally. By the time of church historian Eusebius in the early 4th century, all of the current Pauline epistles were widely accepted,

though there were continuing doubts as to the authenticity of the epistle to the Hebrews. Eusebius also notes that, as of the 4th century, there was even a color portrait of Paul yet in circulation.

PAUL IN SUMMARY

This has been a (too) brief summary sketch of the times and the heresy of Paul the apostle. We have reached to the man who held the keys to formulate a set of Christian beliefs and doctrine that could endure for two millennia. A man bold enough to buck not only Torah Judaism, but to also indict leaders of the early Christian movement for their rigid adherence to a hybrid religion of yesterday.

As one might expect from a man as complex as Paul, his heresy is no less easy to understand – at least at first glance. This is a four-point message – of salvation in Jesus ... manifest through the intangible expression of faith ...a product of God’s grace, not human performance ...with opportunities for all to be apostles with Christ.

The challenge is to accept Paul’s vision of humans reconciled to God not by our own attitudes or actions. Rather, in Paul’s view, we experience the divine purely and solely by universal acceptance from a godhead acting not from motives of “payback” but acceptance. Like children, we are becoming “joint heirs” with Christ as members of the household of God.

The material benefit of Paul’s teaching was the opportunity for the Gentile convert to come into the family of believers without also having to accept the trappings of Judaism. The disadvantage of the Pauline formulation was that it severed Christianity from its Jewish roots, creating ongoing and unnecessary enmity between the Jewish and Christian traditions.

This excerpt is adapted from the “The Heresy of Paul: Salvation through Faith,” further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more information, click www.jesustheheresy.com.