A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO

PAUL

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You can love or loathe Paul, but if you want to understand the first decades of the development of the early Christian movement before the Gospels were written you cannot ignore him. For some he is a heroic figure who looms like a colossus on the horizon, courageously establishing communities, going where no one had gone before, sketching out for the first time a distinctive Christian theology in a way that would shape Christian thought and language down to the present day. For others he was, and continues to be, a figure of controversy on many fronts. Someone who was all too prepared to cast his communities adrift from their moorings in Jewish thought and practice, to claim his own authority in his many conflicts with others—either within his developing Christian communities, or with the already recognized figures of James and Peter in Jerusalem.
I Cor 13:1–13

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iven that this work is to be a friendly guide to Paul it’s important to state at the outset how this is to be understood. This does not so much indicate that the guide is one that will take a stance that is always friendly to Paul in the sense of defending him, so much as being a guide that sets out to be friendly to the modern reader of his letters. Week after week we are invited to make sense of Paul’s writings in our cycle of readings, and often the modern reader laments that his letters are difficult to understand!

If you have ever voiced such an opinion be of good cheer: even in the first century the author of 2 Peter was known to observe “There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” (2 Pet 3:16) Whether the author meant writings or scriptures is open to debate, but what concerns us here is that, even then, Paul’s thought was not easy to understand, even if his writings were already starting to be collected and preserved.

There are a number of reasons why the modern reader should experience some perplexity when reading the letters of Paul, and they are worth outlining. For a start, these letters were not written in English, but a dialect of Greek current in the Roman empire of Paul’s time called Koine. Paul, like his writings, are works of a particular time; written from, and addressed to, a religious and social context that is not our own. It almost seems too simple a point to make, but it is one that our constant exposure to the letters of Paul as Christians tends to obscure. There is the danger of thinking just because we have heard or read these letters from childhood we should have some natural capacity to follow their logic, understand the concepts, and then be moved to implement Paul’s instructions. To be sure, there is a great deal in these letters that transcend the boundaries of time and place and culture. 1 Cor 13:1–13

From our perspective it is understandable that we cringe at the way these probably well-intentioned disciples are caricatured and their reputation maligned by Paul. From a cultural perspective we need to appreciate that Paul and his contemporaries lived in an honour and shame society in which every challenge to one’s honour was expected to be defended; otherwise, one would be conceding the claims of one’s opponents. His honour had been challenged, and that he was within his rights—his honour in fact demanded that—he defend himself by doubting the true motivations of his accusers.

This one example has many applications: Paul’s world is not our world, and his letters are not written for us, even though our Christian life has been shaped by them. There is a famous cartoon of Charles Shultz where Linus reflects on Paul’s letters after returning from Sunday school: “I MUST ADMIT IT MAKES ME FEEL A LITTLE GUILTY... I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE I’M RECEIVING SOMEONE’S MAIL!” This is exactly the point. It is someone else’s mail; we are listening in on a conversation between Paul and his converts that was never intended for us.

One cannot help but wonder what Paul would think knowing that two thousand years later his letters addressed to the communities of Corinth, Galatia, Macedonia and Rome would still be closely read and examined.

Another factor to keep in mind is that not only are we listening to someone else’s conversation, we also run the risk of not having access to the interpretation of the letter that the recipients of the letters had. Some of the unsung heroes and heroines of the Pauline communities were those who first read and explained the letters on Paul’s behalf. Imagine the diplomatic and communication skills required by the person entrusted to challenge...
Pauline communities

It is customary to speak of the communities founded by Paul and his co-workers as Pauline communities. It is worth considering what we mean by ‘Pauline.’ The communities that were founded by Paul and his co-workers represented a certain style of Christianity in terms of their practice and attitudes. While we may think of early Christianity as a single movement it would be more accurate to think of a number of communities and house churches - some predomi-
nately Jewish in thought and practice, others Gentile, and others mixed communities of Jews and Gentiles. The communities established by Paul were deeply indebted, as Paul himself was, to the Jewish tradition, but circum-
cision and obedience to all the precepts of the Jewish Law were not required to become a mem-
er of the Christian community.

From Paul’s perspective we can see that he saw the communi-
ties in some sense as his own. He speaks of betrothing them to Christ (2 Cor 11:2), and he expected their loyalty to the message he first preached to them, as he preached it to them (Gal 1:8-9). He saw himself as having an on-going relationship with them as founder, apostle and guide (1 Cor 4:15).

One of the reasons underlying the success of Paul’s missionary activity was that he was a devout and jealous Pharisaic Jew who grew up in Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia. His mission in Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Achaia and Rome would rely for its success not only on his conviction, commitment and enthusi-
asm, but also on the fact that he was a person in which worlds and cultures met. The Greek dialect that he spoke functioned much as English does today. Geographically he was not from the heart of the Roman Empire, even though he was a citizen, and from a religious perspective he was not from Jerusalem, even though he was a devout Pharisee.
The Cities of Paul

One of the things that can be learned from the letters is that Paul lost no time in trying to spread the Good News of Jesus as far as he possibly could before the return of the Lord. He writes in Rom 10:14, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”

The letters attest to a missionary strategy that involved going to as many major cities as possible, by sea and by foot—making use of the well-established system of Roman roads. Paul and his co-workers targeted major population centres, especially those that were strategically placed to serve as a base for on-going missionary endeavours. Cities such as Philippi and Thessalonica were situated on the Via Egnatia, the major link between the Adriatic and Byzantium (later Constantinople).

Corinth’s location was such that this cosmopolitan city controlled trade and travel between southern and northern Greece by sea or road. Ephesus was the capital for Asia Minor and was accessible by sea or road. Even at the time of writing Romans, Paul’s intention is to move on to new mission opportunities in Spain. (Rom 15:24) Because he is so committed to establish new communities, he expresses great frustration with those who seem to take advantage of the communities he has already established, without taking the risk of starting their own. His aim is to keep moving on so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else’s sphere of action. (2 Cor 10:16)

During this dynamic time of expansion, what is clear is that the Pauline communities were largely urban and, while they were Greek speaking, they were cities of the Roman Empire: as such they were diverse culturally and religiously. Such diversity was both a blessing and a challenge, and the letters attest to the many issues that arose while these early Christian communities were developing, issues that sometimes called for great creativity.

Did you know?

How many times Paul was ship wrecked, scourgéd, beaten, and stoned

(2 Cor 11:24–25): “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea.”

The Journeys of Paul

While we are used to think in terms of four missionary journeys undertaken by Paul, this is largely Luke’s reconstruction of Paul’s ministry written some twenty years or more after Paul had died. This is not to say that Luke’s portrayal in Acts of the Apostles doesn’t contain a good deal of reliable information, but it has been coloured to some degree by Luke’s own narrative agenda and concerns in describing the expansion of the early Christian communities in an orderly fashion. (cf. Luke 1:1–4) It has been said if Paul was asked what missionary journey he was on he wouldn’t have been able to tell you!

This doesn’t mean that Paul didn’t undertake many journeys as an apostle—far from it—it is more a matter of knowing that our picture is always going to be incomplete. It is incomplete because Paul saw no reason to keep a diary of his travels. In 2 Cor 11:22–29 there is a catalogue of the many dangers Paul faced on the road, such as shipwrecks, beatings, robbery, imprisonment, Jewish and Roman punishments. Galatians 1–2 provides a picture written after some seventeen years of ministry in which certain elements are well outlined: his initial ministry in Damascus, going to Jerusalem after three years to meet Peter, returning to Jerusalem after fourteen years of ministry, and confronting Peter in Antioch. The letters indicate that there was an intense period of activity when he was involved in not only preaching the Gospel and the care of communities, but also the collection for the poor in Jerusalem that involved the churches of Corinth, Macedonia, and Rome. When Paul writes to the community of Rome he intends to receive assistance from them and extend his mission as far as Spain. Paul mentions in Rom 15:19 that he had preached the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum! There is a clearly expressed sense of pride that he has not spared any effort to preach the Gospel and establish as many communities as possible before the return of the Lord. (cf. Romans 10:15)

Given his efforts it is understandable that he expresses some sense of frustration with other missionaries who, from Paul’s perspective, take advantage of the base that he has established, without going to new cities and establishing communities where the Gospel message had not been preached before. (2 Cor 10:14–16)

The letters of Paul attest the fact that there was a considerable amount of movement, and that it was not isolated to Paul and his co-workers. Letters were sent by Paul to his communities with trusted co-workers like Timothy and Titus. Community members such as Chloe’s people (1 Cor 1:11) who came from Corinth to Ephesus creatively combined their business travel with opportunities to pass on news and ask Paul’s advice. The letters witness to Paul’s efforts to ensure that wandering missionaries would receive a warm welcome as they moved from one community to another. (cf. 1 Cor 16:10; Rom 16:1–2)
Our picture of Paul is usually a composite one pieced together from Luke’s portrayal of Paul’s life and ministry in Acts of the Apostles, written some twenty years after Paul’s death, and what we can learn from his letters themselves. As a rule of thumb, whenever there is any conflict between the two sets of information, precedence has to be given to Paul’s own words, especially the sequence he provides in Gal 1:11–2:14. Much as we would like it, we have no indication from the letters as to his age when converted, although Acts 7:58 introduces Paul into the narrative as a young man named Saul at the death of Stephen. There is probably no reason to doubt this particular detail, though it is itself imprecise.

As far as external dates are concerned, there is the reference in 2 Cor 11:32 to King Aretas of Damascus who tried to capture him. This would have occurred somewhere around 37–39 CE. This means that the latest that Paul can have begun his apostolic mission is within ten years of the death of Jesus. When writing his letters, Paul was not concerned to give a blow-by-blow description of his ministry, he was living his life rather than describing it for posterity. As a consequence there will always be gaps in the information that can be gleaned from the letters. Acts makes mention of certain details that can be of assistance in placing Paul’s ministry within a framework of external events and people. Acts mentions the time of Gallio as proconsul in Corinth 51–52 CE (Acts 18:12), a famine in Judea (Acts 7:11), Festus’ arrival in Caesarea (Acts 25:1,6,13,23) around 55–60 CE, and the edict of Claudius in around 40–49 CE (Acts 18:2). These details have to be used carefully, but they clearly show Luke’s efforts to place Paul within his contemporary world.

John Knox suggested the following chronology:

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<tr>
<th>TRADITIONAL</th>
<th>EVENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>AD 36</td>
<td>Conversion to Christ</td>
<td>AD 30/34</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>Visit to Jerusalem after Damascus</td>
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<td>40—44</td>
<td>In Cilicia</td>
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<td>44—45</td>
<td>At Antioch</td>
<td>After 37</td>
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<td>46—49</td>
<td>(First) Missionary Journey, beginning in Antioch, to Cyprus and southern Asia Minor, returning to Antioch</td>
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<td>(Second) Missionary Journey, beginning in Antioch, through southern Asia Minor to N. Galatia, Macedonia, CORINTH (1 Thess), return to Jerusalem and Antioch</td>
<td>39—41/43</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>Jerusalem conference</td>
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<td>50—52</td>
<td>(Second) Missionary Journey, beginning in Antioch, through southern Asia Minor to N. Galatia, Macedonia, CORINTH (1 Thess), return to Jerusalem and Antioch</td>
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<td>54—58</td>
<td>(Third) Missionary Journey, beginning in Antioch, through N. Galatia to EPHESUS; three-year stay there—imprisoned? (Gal, Phil, Phlm, I Cor)</td>
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<td>Paul goes through Macedonia toward Corinth (II Cor, Gal?), winters at CORINTH (Rom), returns to Jerusalem</td>
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<td>58—60</td>
<td>Arrested in Jerusalem; imprisoned two years in Caesarea (Phil?)</td>
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<td>60—61</td>
<td>Sent to ROME; long sea journey</td>
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<td>61—63</td>
<td>Prisoner in ROME for two years (Phil? Phlm?)</td>
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<td>after summer 64</td>
<td>Death in Rome under Nero</td>
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Table from AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT Raymond E. Brown S.S. Doubleday 1977
It might come as a surprise to learn that the conversion of Paul is a much debated conversation topic among Pauline scholars. No one would dispute that this encounter between Saul of Tarsus and the Risen Lord would cause him to radically change his life and direction. What is debated is more a matter of whether this radical shift should be called a conversion. The point at issue is whether Paul changed from one religion to another, that is, from Judaism to Christianity, or whether he simply came to see God’s promises of a Messiah to Israel to now be fulfilled in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth.

It needs to be understood that Paul may not have seen the point of our question—he was a Jew and remained so all his life—but his encounter with the Risen one led him to recast his appreciation of his own rich tradition. One of the points that Paul highlights is that the encounter with the Risen Lord was accompanied by a clear sense of mission to the Gentiles. This good news of Jesus was to be shared with all humanity, and it is here that he came into conflict with other early Christian leaders who would have shared in Paul’s vision of God’s saving plan for all humanity, but would have differed in terms of how that would manifest itself in the lives of the communities; in particular, with regard to the demands of the Jewish tradition for circumcision, acceptance of the purity codes, and other regulations of the Jewish Torah.

Our imagination of Paul’s call on the Damascus road has been influenced by many paintings that so often include horses, such as the dramatic one by Caravaggio. It is interesting to note that neither Luke nor Paul make any such mention! Luke will relate the event on a number of occasions in Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:1–22; 22:3–21; 26:1–20) and, while it is clear that these are written with a view to legitimating Paul and his mission, they are second-hand accounts. In his own letters Paul is somewhat circumspect and measured when he describes in Gal 1:16 how ‘God revealed his Son to me’ and gave him the mission to go to the Gentiles. He does claim this moment as one that legitimatized him as an apostle and refers to it indirectly in 1 Cor 9:1 ‘have I not seen the Lord?’, and in 1 Cor 15:8 ‘last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.’ In 2 Cor 12:2–4, Paul speaks in a thinly veiled way about his own experience, as one who was taken up into paradise and heard things that cannot be told. He speaks of this happening some fourteen years earlier; it’s possible that this is the experience on the Damascus road.

Whatever else may be said, Paul’s encounter with the Risen Lord radically changed the direction of his life from persecutor of the early Church to one of its strongest supporters. While it is natural to focus on that single event, there are other formative elements on Paul’s journey of faith that are worth considering. One can only speculate, but what was the effect of conversations with Christians he had encountered in his zealous efforts to eradicate the Nazarene heresy? We will never know but how much of his later belief was shaped by these encounters with Christians whose testimony and faithfulness were already preparing the soil for his later proclamation of Jesus as Messiah. Perhaps even more tantalising to ponder is the impact of his relatives Junia and Andronicus becoming Christians before him. (Rom 16:7)

Whether we can describe Paul going through a conversion from one faith to another will continue to be debated, but one thing that is absolutely certain is that he went through a process of assessment, and reconfiguring the way in which he saw the relationship of obedience to the Jewish law (Torah) and salvation. At least as far as Gentiles were concerned, the need for circumcision and faithfulness to all the requirements of the Torah was not to be demanded of Gentile Christians. Paul was convinced that it was to Gentiles in particular that he was given a mission to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. It was his understanding of a mission to Gentiles with minimal adherence to the demands of the Torah that was to bring him into conflict with those Christians who shared his vision of Jesus’ message being for all humanity, but disagreed as to the status of the Torah and to what degree Gentile Christians would need to follow its laws.
Physical Description of Paul

Paul gives us no description of himself, and we should expect none given that the recipients of the letters, other than the one addressed to the community in Rome, knew Paul well. In 2 Cor 10:10 he is well aware of the claims of his detractors that ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.’

In the Syriac text of the Acts of Paul and Thecla he is described as ‘a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large eyes and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long, and he was full of grace and mercy; at one time he seemed like a man, and at another time he seemed like an angel.’

This tends to bear out the fact that Paul’s physical presence was such that he would not have fitted into any Greco-Roman models of attractiveness, or someone who had been blessed by the gods. In Gal 4:13-14 he admits that it was due to a physical infirmity that he first preached the Gospel message to the Galatians. Though he admits they would have been justified in treating him with scorn, the reverse was true; they treated him as a messenger sent from God.

This might indicate that his appearance belied his claims to be an apostle and servant of the living God. We also have to consider the mysterious reference to the ‘thorn in the flesh’ referred to in 2 Cor 12:7. This has been variously explained as epilepsy, malaria, a disfigurement, or some other kind of disease. Given Paul’s own description of imprisonments, shipwrecks, beatings and other dangers that he endured for the sake of the Gospel in 2 Cor 11:24–27, it is possible that these have left their mark on him physically. If that is true perhaps the description in the Acts of Paul and Thecla is more accurate than we might realize, as it speaks of Paul’s spirit and character transcending appearances! There must have been something about him that could lead to the gathering of companions, and the founding of communities from Jerusalem to Illyricum.(Rom 15:19)

For the most part the letters were not hand written by Paul but dictated. In Gal 6:11 he notes, ‘See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.’ There were good reasons for this since a scribe’s writing was smaller and much more cost effective given the price of writing materials. In Rom 16:22 the Christian scribe Tertius adds his own greeting at the conclusion of the letter. Exceptions often prove the rule and the shortest of the letters addressed to Philemon is one that he claims to have written in his own hand (Phlm 19). One can imagine him engrossed in arguing one position or another, pacing up and down trying to articulate why his opponents were so patently wrong, or why his fledgling Christians in Corinth could still only be called babes in Christ! (cf. 1 Cor 3:1)

In the New Testament there are thirteen letters attributed to Paul; this testifies eloquently to how significant a figure he quickly became in the early growth and development of the Christian movement. It is likely that there are many more letters written by Paul than were preserved. 1 Cor 5:9 refers to advice given in an earlier letter, and 2 Cor 2:4 and 7:12 speak of the contentious letter Paul wrote after 1 Corinthians that is now lost to us. Of the letters that are attributed to him there are seven that are universally agreed to have been Paul’s work: 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and the letter to Philemon.

How Many Letters did Paul Write?

So, what criteria are used to determine if Paul was the author of a letter? And what is the status of those letters not generally considered to have been written by Paul? All the letters have been included in the New Testament, which attests to their ongoing value as inspired and valued texts. To say that Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Thessalonians and Hebrews are disputed as coming directly from Paul’s hand does not mean they were not influenced by Paul, or that they did not come from those influenced by Paul who wanted to preserve his vision, or the on-going development of his tradition. As has been noted from time to time, it is hard to know with precision where Paul ends and his legacy begins.

The grounds on which these judgments are based come down to testing whether the vocabulary, organizational structures, or theology would fit into what we know of the Church during the period of Paul’s ministry. Admittedly, this is an inexact science and debates about Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians will continue, as scholars continue to test the criteria that have been used to determine what is considered to have come from the hand of Paul.

There are strong indicators that ideas that were first expressed in Paul’s undisputed letters come to be further developed within the circle of those communities influenced by him. The fact that letters were attributed to him was not an unusual occurrence in the ancient world, and it provides ample proof of the esteem in which he was held, and his on-going influence within the early church.
In a world like ours where there are basilicas like St Peter’s in Rome, Notre Dame in Paris, and countless cathedrals and churches built over centuries, it’s perhaps difficult to imagine what it was like in the first decades of the Christian movement. They had no buildings in which to gather, and they were not even considered a religion at all, but a potentially dangerous superstition from the Roman province of Syria. As far as having places to gather there were limited possibilities: eating places of various kinds, shared spaces in apartment buildings (workshops or the like), or the households of rich patrons. The Pauline communities relied on the generosity of those community members who had their own households. Given from what we know of the size of these households, it would seem that communities might have been somewhere up to fifty to sixty people. It emerges from letters, such as those written to the Corinthians, that they gathered in a number of households. (cf. Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 11:22,34; 14:15; 16:15; Phil 4:22)

The Greco-Roman household was a much more complex and dynamic structure than our twenty-first century homes. Such households were not like the nuclear families of our own made up of parents and their children. They were more like an extended family, one that included slaves, co-workers, freed men and women. In such households the head of the family (pater familias) held sway. It was clearly a patriarchal and hierarchical structure, and it was felt that order in the household was a microcosm of the empire at large. If the household functioned in an orderly fashion, so too did the city and, ultimately, the Empire itself.

The Pauline and deuto Pauline letters at times makes use of what are known as household codes, a familiar form of instruction regarding the good ordering of a household. (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Tim 2:1–15) These instructions about husbands...
and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves made use of a well-established literary form and are culturally conditioned. There is no doubt that some of this material is problematic viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective, and it inevitably raises the question as to how such texts are to be used in our own context where the starting point is one of equality and co-responsibility, and where slavery should have no place. It is both natural and necessary that these texts be tested and it is instructive to note that even from the beginnings of Christianity there were tensions with the existing patterns for the ordering of society. In Gal 3:28, the vision of a new humanity is outlined where there is no longer slave or free, woman or man, Jew or Greek. But how were Christians going to order their lives and manage their households? It must have been very difficult to establish new ways of thinking and acting that were consistent with their baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is fascinating to explore questions of how these communities were organized, and who exercised spiritual authority. At times, if the leader of the household became a Christian the rest of the household would have followed e.g. Lydia (Acts 16:15). Within a polytheistic religious context this was perhaps not such a problem, but how many of the slaves and freed men and women really decided to become Christians at all, at least as far as we would understand it? This may partly explain some of the chaos that accompanied the Eucharistic celebrations in Corinth where the rich were well fed and drunk before the slaves and others had finished their duties and were able to attend. (1 Cor 11:21–22)

In a world that was highly structured along the lines of honour and shame, the building of Christian communities as an example of a new humanity would have been very difficult indeed. Dining rooms had limited capacity and places at a table were determined on the basis of power and prestige. (cf. Jesus’ instructions on this matter in Luke 14:7–13) Paul was offended by the lack of dignity afforded to the poor among the community and reminded the Corinthians in 1 Cor 8:11 that they were all brothers and sisters ‘for whom Christ died.’

Who would have led the Eucharistic celebrations? And who had spiritual authority? What happened if the person was a slave, a deacon like Chloe, or someone who was normally seen as an inferior? It was one thing to speak of being a new humanity made up of slaves and free, women and men, but it was another thing entirely to begin the process of becoming that new humanity and dealing with the practical consequences of such a belief. The annual pagan festival of Saturnalia enabled slaves and masters to change roles for a short time, but no one saw this as a model for a new society. The brutal suppression of the slave revolt of Spartacus in 73–71 BCE shows how dependent Rome was on slavery, and the measures that would be taken to ensure its continuance.

Deutero-Pauline

The term Deutero-Pauline may seem confusing and disconcerting at first because it leads the modern reader to confront the issue of whether all the letters attributed to Paul were written by him. For some time now it has been accepted that some of the Pauline letters in the New Testament were written by others - usually those who were followers of Paul - or those deeply influenced by his teaching. It was common practice in antiquity to attribute a later writing to a famous or honored person. Letters such as 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus witness to the desire to honor his memory. For this reason they are called Deutero-Pauline, that is, a second stage of the Pauline tradition.

W hile it is natural that we focus our attention on Paul, the letters make obvious that he did not work in isolation, but in conjunction with many others in a quickly developing network that extended across the newly formed communities. In the letters references are made to co-workers as brothers and sisters like Phoebe and Sosthenes (Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 1:1); or as apostles such as Junia and Silas. (Rom 16:7; 1 Thess 2:7) Timothy is called at different times a brother (2 Cor 1:1); apostle (1 Thess 2:7); fellow slave (Phil 1:1) and co-worker. (Rom 16:21)

Paul worked with husband and wife teams such as Aquila and Priscia in Corinth and Asia Minor (Rom 16:3–5), and had a loose, and perhaps tense relationship at times with Apollos in Corinth and elsewhere. (1 Cor 3:5, 9; 4:9; 16:12) His long working relationship with Barnabas is clear in 3 Cor 9:6, and in Gal 2:19, 13. Co-workers such as Titus carried Paul’s severe letter to Corinth, indicating that not only did Paul trust in his ability to convey his message, but that Titus had the capacity to build bridges that were very much in danger of being knocked down by mistrust and misunderstanding. (2 Cor 2:13; 8:16–23) Delegates such as Titus were sent into the lions’ den when Paul was in conflict with various points of view and individuals in a community, and they were the ones entrusted with the duty of commanding the communities to reassess their positions in the light of Paul’s advice.

People such as Sosthenes (1 Cor 1:1) and Timothy (2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1) are named as worthy of support and her kindness as a benefactor to Paul and others noted. In 1 Cor 16:10 Timothy is recommended so that when he arrives in Corinth he will be afforded the welcome and support that Paul consider appropriate for a trusted co-worker. In each of the communities that Paul established patterns of leadership needed to be developed and leaders appointed in order for the communities to continue to grow after Paul moved on to establish other communities. 1 Cor 15:16–17 urges the community to give support to people such as Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus who were clearly leaders in the community.

An important group of Pauline co-workers were the women who made their households available as meeting places for worship and other Christian gatherings. As mentioned previously, their generosity was something that needed to be treated very carefully, since it ran the culturally conditioned risk of establishing patterns of indebtedness in terms of dealing with others as clients or patrons, patterns that would undermine the formation and development of vibrant Christian communities.

Paul and his Co-Workers

Deadly Wealth

20

21

DID YOU KNOW?

That his communities gathered in homes
(Rom. 16:3–5):

‘Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.’

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Getting a Handle on Paul’s Thought: Some Key Pauline Concepts

Given that the letters were written to particular communities addressing quite specific questions, it would be too much to expect that we can accurately reconstruct all of the richness and complexity of Paul’s thought. This is not to say that there are not recurring themes, or that letters such as Romans do not go a long way towards providing some major indications as to the scope and depth of Paul’s theology, his understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus, or the life of the Church. It is more a caution along the lines of not presuming that all that Paul’s communities, and his circle of co-workers, thought and believed is captured in the letters. In the end this is not so different from acknowledging that a few photos taken from a photo album will say all that can be said of a person’s life and experience. In a similar way the letters are snapshots of the life and belief of the first generations of Christians. It was a dynamic period when the foundations were being laid, when the very language that we consider to be typically Christian was being developed.

These letters represent the first attempts to articulate their beliefs in written form decades before the Gospels were written. A consequence of this is that we should not expect them to have every concept or theme clearly or systematically formulated: that has come after centuries of reflection, study and debate that built on their foundation. Modern readers of these letters are often surprised to find that events in the life of Jesus and his sayings that are so familiar to us from the Gospels are not mentioned in the letters of Paul. An exception is the tradition that Paul had received about words of the last supper in 1 Cor 11:23–26. In this instance, and in 1 Cor 15:3–4, dealing with the bodily resurrection of both Jesus and those who follow him, Paul explicitly refers to the tradition that he had received from others. In Gal 1:18 Paul makes mention of his first trip to Jerusalem to visit Peter for two weeks, and Gal 2:1 refers to a visit some fourteen years later when he was given the mandate to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. These moments, and others when his path intersected with various apostles and evangelists on the road, would have provided opportunities to share the traditions of Jesus with other leaders within the communities. This is a roundabout way of saying that just because Paul does not refer to the sayings of Jesus it does not mean that he, and the communities that he established and served, were not aware of them.

One of the things that is distinctive about Paul is that he talks not so much about what Jesus said and did, as much as focus on the meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In the letters we witness Paul unpacking for his converts and readers the consequences of the life of Jesus as he struggles to articulate how the crucified and Risen one is the Lord, and how this one life that appeared to end in abject failure has the power to literally change everything God has created. Paul is a big picture person and the big picture is one in which God is faithful to promises made to Israel and all creation. Scholars continue to debate whether there is a key idea or theme in his thought, or whether the answer lies more in the narrative that underlies the many themes and images found within the letters.

Time is Short and Jesus is at the Heart of It

Paul’s framework for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is that of the expectation of Second Temple Judaism, for a Messiah who would usher in the age to come. The Messiah’s coming would set to right injustices, and the powerlessness of the Jewish people in present time would finally come to an end. Understandably, many of Paul’s contemporaries longed for this promised Day of the Lord. It would be a time when their faithfulness to the demands of the Covenant would be vindicated, wounds healed, and justice established. God’s longing for reign would finally begin, not only for Israel, but for all people. While Paul does not speak of the Kingdom of God with the same frequency as is found in Jesus’ teachings and parables in the Gospels it is, nonetheless, a theme that is present in the letters.(cf. Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 15:24; Col 1:13)
Paul saw the dawning of that age as ushered in by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now a new age had dawned, though it was not yet fully inaugurated, and Christians awaited Jesus’ return at the end of time when Jesus would hand back all of creation to God having conquered sin, and even death itself. In 1 Cor 15:24–26 he describes it as: “Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to the God and the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.”

In Gal 4:4, the birth of Jesus is spoken of as coming at ‘the fullness of time’, indicating how this birth was understood to play a critical role in the unfolding of God’s saving history for the world. This present time Paul refers to in Gal 1:4 as an ‘evil age.’ This sort of terminology indicates the sense of struggle and turmoil that these early Christians experienced. In this context Paul exhorts the community to use the present moment as a time to witness to their faith by the quality of their lives, to ‘shine like stars in the world’ in the midst of a world judged to be perverse and crooked. This ‘evil age’ understanding of the present time as one where the ruler of this world continues to battle against Christians.

While the new age had been inaugurated, it will not come in its fullness until the return of Jesus at the end of time. Until that moment, Paul and his Christians live in a world where sin and death continued to be realities. It is in this context that Paul interprets opposition encountered as being the direct work of Satan. In 1 Thess 2:18, his inability to return to Thessalonica was seen to be the direct consequence of the opposition provided by Satan. ‘For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to see you again and again—but Satan blocked our way.’ Even the opposition provided by other Christians could at times be interpreted as due to the efforts of Satan. In 2 Cor 2:11 he urges the community to forgive the one who opposed him. He explains: ‘And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.’

It is in this context too that one can appreciate Paul’s reference to powers, authorities and dominions. While Christians continued to live in the world, the old age remained, and it was not giving up without a fight. In 1 Cor 15:28 Paul looked forward to the day of Christ’s final victory when all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.’

Paul and his communities expected that the Lord’s return would come soon, and the letters attest to this in a number of ways. Where there are repeated references to the Day of the Lord. In 1 Thess 5:2 it is described as coming upon us upon us like a thief in the night. (cf. 1 Thess 5:4; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14) There are also texts that witness to the belief that many of Paul’s community would still be alive when the Lord returned. A well-known example of this is 1 Thess 4:14–17 where Paul refers to the Christians at Thessalonica as being comforted concerning those Christians who have already died. In this passage he makes clear what his own understanding of the sequence of events will be at the end of time. Those Christians who have died will be raised. Then we who are alive, who are not left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.’ (1 Thess 4:17) Paul’s belief that time was short gives an intensity and urgency to his instructions to his communities that has naturally been dulled over nearly two millennia of Christian living. Keeping this view of time in mind is particularly helpful when reading his advice on marriage and slavery in 1 Cor 7, otherwise he could be seen to be condoning slavery and devaluing marriage. In Corinth the situation was that some Christians believed that they should split up existing marriages and stop newly engaged couples from getting married so that the kingdom of God would be strong. With the Lord’s coming, as they saw it, there is a debate indicates that there is material from the letters of Paul that can be used to argue either side. There are texts that are negative concerning Jewish practices, such as in Phil 3:2 where Paul talks about circumcision as mutilation, or in 2 Cor 3,7, where he speaks of the old covenant as a ministry of death carved on stone. On the other hand, Paul’s teaching contains quotations from the scriptures, and there are over one hundred explicit citations of Old Testament passages, not to mention many other allusions.

It is here that the caution mentioned earlier concerning looking at each letter in its own context comes home to roost. A case in point would be the letter to the Galatians: written for a group of Gentile Christians who are being encouraged by Jewish Christians to be circumcised and follow some of the demands of the Jewish law. It is a letter in which Paul defends his own approach to Gentiles, for whom circumcision is not demanded for Gentiles who become Christians. Paul warns the Galatians that anyone who teaches another form of the Gospel message than the one he taught should be handed over for destruction (a polite way of saying they could go to hell). One would not be surprised to learn that such a sentiment has been used to argue that Paul no longer valued or adhered to the demands of his own Jewish tradition.

Here it is important to weigh matters carefully, particularly in light of the rhetorical purpose of this letter, that is, to get the Galatians to remain faithful to the form of Christianity to which they had been introduced by Paul. It is less a matter of Paul arguing against his own tradition, and not adhering to it, but ensuring that the Galatians not accept unnecessary burdens in order to continue to be members of the Christian community. It is true that in Phil 3:8 Paul says that he regards everything of his former life in Judaism as so much rubbish (in his heart). For I could wish that I myself was accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. (cf. 1 Thess 2:19) They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. Rom 9:1–5

The letters reveal time and time again that Paul continued to draw on the scriptures as a compass for right behaviour, and as a source for his teaching. He was, and continued to be, deeply steeped in his tradition. Where he parted company with other Jewish Christians was in his judgment of what should be or could be required of Gentile Christians. These were highly emotive and sensitive matters and needed to be addressed so that Jewish and Gentile Christians were able to celebrate the Eucharist together. One needed to look to Gal 2:12–14 where Paul refers to the public condemnation of Peter for his inconsistency in this matter. Formerly, Peter had engaged in table fellowship with Gentile Christians but, when members of the community came from Jerusalem, he changed his attitude and his evangelical practice.  

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ. Phil 3:8

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great reason to be9 speaking as I am in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. (cf. 1 Thess 2:19) They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. Rom 9:1–5

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were Christians before him (Rom 16:7): the apostles, and they were in 
are prominent among 
co-religionists argued that the law 
ing of the Messiah. Gal 3:24) Paul’s 
had an important educational and 
tive, the covenant with Moses 
led astray by their hypocrisy. But 
and not like a Jew, how can you compel 
domestic, the community of 
be righteous before God before 
needed to be in right relationship with God. The second reason is 
that God in Gen 12:3 had prom-
ised Abraham that all the na-
tions would be blessed through 
thereby bringing them 
into God’s saving plan, and this 
text is used by Paul in Gal 3:8. The 
model of Abraham clearly became 
an important part of Paul’s under-
standing and justification for his 
mission, because he is men-
depicted in the letter to the Galatians 
then picked up and further develop-
oped in Rom 4.

1 Cor 9:20–21, Paul makes the 
interesting remark that he is a 
Jew with Jews, and a Gentile with 
Gentiles, in order that he might 
by all means save people for Christ. 
This gives a glimpse into his mis-
ionary strategy which would have 
been one sensitive to the particular 
when he addressed his mes-
sage. The more polynomial 
letters have a context where 
communities that Paul and his 
co-workers have established were 
ones where many Jewish practices 
were not required of them in order 
to be Christian, and have now been 
visited by Jewish Christians who are 
questioning Paul’s minimal require-
ments. One suspects that they are 
saying that Paul had done well in 
establishing the community, but if 
a person really wants to complete 
the process of becoming a Chris-
tian, then adherence to the law and 
circumcision was required. In 
the face of such teaching Paul reacted 
strongly and the modern reader 
needs to be careful in distinguishing 
between what is said in the midst 
of a heated debate, and what Paul 
would have said when asked about 
the beauty and richness of his tradi-
tion that continued to shape his 
understanding of Jesus and Christi-
nity till the day he died.

21 Where is the one who is wise? Where 
is the scribe? Where is the debater of 
this age? Has not God made foolish 
the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, 
in the wisdom of God, the world did 
not know God through wisdom, God 
decided, through the foolishness of our 
proclamation, to save those who believe. 
1 Cor 2:20–21

THE DEATH OF Jesus

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the 
foundational event that Paul 
referred to time and time again. 
Much of the language we generally 
consider to be distinctively Chris-
tian—such as salvation, redemption 
and atonement—originally came 
to be used in response to the ques-
tions that naturally arose in the 
process of preaching the message in 
various contexts. Paul turned to 
a wide range of images and language 
to answer a fundamental question, 
namely: what difference does the 
death and resurrection of Jesus 
make to us?

When he speaks of the death 
of Jesus as foolishness to Greeks 
and a stumbling block to Jews in 
1 (Rom 1:20–21) Paul sometimes 
better experience of teaching, 
and countless beatings and 
imprisonments suffered for the 
sake of the Gospel. The message 
of the Galilean carpenter who was 
killed and now claimed to be raised 
from the dead was an exceedingly 
challenging message to preach. Yet 
this remained the core of Paul’s 
Gospel and the letters attest to the 
variety of ways in which he set 
out to articulate for his fledgling 
communities the importance of 
the pastach mystery for all people 
and all times. It is in unpacking 
the consequences of the death 
and resurrection of Jesus that Paul was 
at his most creative.

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, 
the Gentiles to live like Jews?” In 
11 Cor 9:20–21 it was based on his 
understanding of Jesus and Christi-
nity till the day he died.

22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks 
demand wisdom. 23 But we proclaim 
Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews 
and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to 
those who are called, both Jews and 
Gentiles, Christ the power of God 
and the wisdom of God. 
1 Cor 1:22–24

One of Paul’s great contributions 
to the development of Christian 
thought is that of the many ways 
in which the consequences of 
the death of Jesus are expressed in his 
letters. This brutal death is first of 
all seen through the filter of God’s 
faithful love to humanity and all of 
creation. New beginning is now 
possible. Adam, through wrongdoing 
and death came into the world, is 
compared to Jesus who—as 
the new Adam—brings life. (Rom 
5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:20–22) The death 
and resurrection of Jesus ushers in 
a new age and Paul speaks of this 
as a new creation. (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 
6:15) Much of the rich tapestry 
of images used by Paul have a rela-
tional focus and speak of reconcili-
aton (Rom 5:8–9). It is the atoning 
justification (Rom 4:24; 5:18; Gal 
2:21)—that is, being in right rela-
tionship with God and others. The 
sacrificial language of atonement 
(Rom 3:25) so foreign to people of 
today is also used to express the 
belief that just as the sacrifice of 
animals in the Jewish Temple, and 
in the Temples of Greco-Roman 
religions, maintained or healed our 
relationship with God, so too, Jesus’ 
death brought humanity into right 
relationship with God. Paul also 
uses the language of redemption 
(Rom 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30)—that 
is, the buying back of slaves—to 
speak of the death of Jesus.

In other contexts the language of 
salvation (1 Thess 5:8–9; Rom 
1:16; 11:11; 13:11; 2 Cor 5:2)—that 
is, of rescuing someone—is used 
to describe Paul’s teaching about 
what has been achieved in the 
death of Jesus. To this day people 
ask the question: why did Jesus 
die? And why is it that a loving 
God makes the death of Jesus an 
atonement for human sin? These 
are the questions that the variety 
of the Pauline language can give 
the impression of a vengeful and 
angry God demanding blood to heal 
the wounds caused by sin. In order 
to appreciate what Paul means 
when he speaks of the wrath of 
God (Rom 1:18, 5:9), it needs to 
be recognised that he does not 
refer so much to the feeling of 
anger on God’s part, as much as 
as a commitment to eliminate 
what does not properly belong 
in God’s creative plan—that is, 
that commitment is shown 
upon God’s part by sending Jesus 
to heal what humanity could not. 
In Rom 1–3, Paul outlines the plight 
of humanity that had lost its way, 
be it Jews or Gentiles. All have 
sinned and fall short of the glory of 
God. (Rom 3:23) But all is far from 
lost because ‘God proves his love 
for us in that while we still were 
sinners Christ died for us.’ (Rom 5:8) 
In other words God does for us 
what we cannot do for ourselves. 
Jesus’ death becomes an 
example and model for all 
Christian living. The beautiful 
hymn from Phil 
2:5–11 articulates the profound 
belief that Jesus’ humble outpour-
ning of his life in service and love, 
even unto death, is the model for 
all Christian living. Everything is to 
be based on this extraordinary gift 
of love. As Paul puts it succinctly 
‘And the life I now live in the flesh 
I live by faith in the Son of God, 
who loved me and gave himself for 
me.’ (Gal 2:20)
G iven that the death of Jesus enables the birth of a new humanity, reconciled to God and to one another, it should come as no surprise that the creation and maintaining of a Christian community is a major concern in Paul’s letters. In Gal 3:28 mention is made that there is no longer slave nor free, woman or man, Jew or Greek. It is a radical view of a different world to the one in which the Pauline communities lived, where gender, religion and status determined both how a person judged themself, and how he or she was judged by others.

Most people were not what we would consider ‘free’, with limited possibilities to participate fully in the life of their city. It is instructive that the very word that Paul uses for church, ekklesia, is a word that resonated on a number of levels for his contemporaries. It was a word used to describe an assembly of a small group of free citizens who gathered to debate and consider the issues facing a city. As such it was a political word. It was also the same word that was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the assembly of the people of God gathered for worship, or other purposes such as a holy war. In a world where most people had no vote, and were largely marginalized, the Pauline communities use a political and religious word to describe themselves.

We can only begin to imagine how powerful and exciting it was for them to consider that in their newly established community of believers, where everybody shared the same dignity by virtue of their baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, that a new humanity was being established. Slaves would now have a voice, and be able to call their masters brother or sister. By virtue of baptism everybody had a dignity that needed to be honoured and respected. This would have run against the norms of Greco-Roman culture that was hierarchical, where relationships of patrons and clients were determined by duties and responsibilities, as well as the on-going competition for honour.

One doesn’t have to scratch too deeply in the letters to see that the transition into this new vision of humanity was not an easy one for many to accept or accommodate in the communities. Old patterns of being did not simply cease to exist after undergoing the ritual of baptism. The rich were still rich, and the poor were still poor; slaves were still expected to serve their masters. Something of the hope and frustration can be sensed in Rom 8:22–23 where Paul says:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

The letters reveal that the creation of a new humanity was no easy matter, and they are shot through with demands to live as a new humanity, founded on love, where the fruits of the Spirit are manifested by the desire to compete only in terms of showing honour to others (Rom 12:10), where love provides the basis for actions rather than knowledge (1 Cor 8:1), where the other person is seen and respected as a brother and sister for whom Christ died (1 Cor 8:11), and where all actions are to be based on the example of Jesus’ humble outpouring of his life and self for others.(Phil 2:5–11)

One of the most emotionally charged areas of the study of Paul is that of considering his attitude towards women. It is understandable from a twenty-first century perspective his calls for women to be silent in the religious assembly (1 Cor 14:34), or to wear veils (1 Cor 11:5), or be subject to their husbands (Eph 5:22) are not well received and support the view that he was patriarchal and authoritarian.

It is true that Paul would have been conditioned, as we all are, by his cultural and religious context, and that this can be interpreted positively or negatively by subsequent generations.

In fairness to Paul, all of the evidence needs to be considered and evaluated before judging him as a misogynist. In 1 Cor 11, where Paul calls for women to wear veils in the assembly, he presumes that they are exercising spiritual leadership in the community as prophets, and this cannot be done by being silent in the assembly! One of the possible explanations for his call for them to wear veils is to avoid being mistaken for one of the mystery cults of the time, where women would let down their hair in a frenzy, interpreted as a sign of entering into some form of spiritual state. Unfortunate ly, Paul justifies his argument by reverting to hierarchical language that is singularly unhelpful in our modern context. The text that comes later in the letter in 1 Cor 14:34, asking for the women to be silent in the assembly, is one that is notoriously difficult to pin down as to its precise meaning. It would have been clear to the Corinthians, and they would have had the advantage of being able to ask the bearer of the letter to explain Paul’s advice on the matter. The context in 1 Cor 14 is that of dealing with disorderly conduct in communal worship, and a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles would have had a wide variety of expectations as to what would be acceptable in a worship situation, especially if it was in a household setting. The light that 1 Cor 11 sheds on the matter is that women could not exercise the ministry of prophecy and be silent.

Whatever is intended by Paul in 1 Cor 14:34, it does not cancel out what he had previously indicated about women prophets 1 Cor 11. The profile that can be built up from the letters is that while Paul can be rightly spoken of as being patriarchal, he nonetheless clearly recognized and supported the leadership of women. In Rom 16:1–2...
he recommends Phoebe, who was a deacon and leader in the Corinthian house church in Cenchrea, when she is travelling to Rome; and Rom 16:12 mentions two sisters: Tryphaena and Tryphosa, along with another woman called Persis, who are praised as co-workers. In Phil 4:2–3 Euodia and Syntyche are also identified as co-workers.

Aquila and Prisca worked with Paul as a husband and wife partnership of apostles, establishing household churches in Corinth, and Ephesus (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19), and Junia and Andronicus are also likewise singled out in their ministry in Rom 16:7. Euodia and Syntyche are also identified as co-workers.

Within 1 Cor 7 Paul makes it very clear that both husbands and wives have mutual responsibilities and obligations. One partner could not make decisions about their marital responsibilities without the consent of the other. His advice is based on the principle that ‘For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.’ (1 Cor 7:4) Even in Eph 5 it is clear that, while women are called to be subject to their husbands, the husbands are similarly challenged. ‘In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.’ (Eph 5:28) It is also interesting to note in Eph 5:21, before husbands and wives are addressed specifically, the whole community is called to: ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.’

One of Paul’s leading ideas is that of a new creation (2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15) and one of the consequences of this new time in salvation history is that pre-existing and well-entrenched divisions are now being called into question since: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’ (Gal 3:28) The question as to whether Paul was married is an intriguing one, and it is not one that can be simply answered, or brushed aside too quickly. Some versions of 1 Cor 7:7 translate the verse as though Paul was single, but the matter is more nuanced than that. What he says in 1 Cor 7:7 is ‘I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.’ This could mean a number of things: he might be a widower, he might be single, or, if he is married, they are living separate from one another on account of Paul’s mission; which is possible, given the dangers that he faced. In Phil 4:3 Paul asks his ‘loyal companion’ to intervene in a disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche, two leading women in the community. This word is usually used of a spouse, and it may indicate that, if married, his spouse lived in Philippi. It could explain his powerful bond why this particular community, and why it assisted Paul so consistently.

At the end of this snapshot of women in the Pauline communities what can be said? It is clear that there are texts where Paul’s advice reflects a patriarchal and hierarchical way of thinking. In fairness to Paul, there are other texts that go well beyond what we would expect in his religious and cultural context. He might have been patriarchal in dealing with some issues, but in the light of the evidence that indicates there were many women leaders in the Pauline communities, it would be unfair to brand him a misogynist.
1 Thessalonians
Possibly written from Corinth
(Approx. 50—51 AD)

It is generally agreed that among the preserved letters of Paul, 1 Thessalonians is the first written. It is primarily a letter of friendship, support and encouragement. When Paul wrote to them, the Thessalonian Christians had already suffered much for the sake of the Gospel. (1 Thess 1:6) Paul had to preach the Gospel to them ‘in the face of great opposition’ (1 Thess 2:3), and they had suffered from their own countrymen in a similar fashion to the Christians in Judea who were rejected by their own people. (1 Thess 2:14)

In the light of their faithfulness, in 1 Thess 2:20, Paul praises them as his ‘glory and joy’ with an evident sense of pride that emerges in the first two chapters. It appears that after establishing the community in Thessalonica Paul moved south to Athens, but due to his concern for them he sent Timothy to support them in their trials. Timothy returned to Paul with an encouraging report of their steadfast faith. (cf. 1 Thess 3:7–8) At the time of writing the letter Paul still hoped to visit the community in the near future.

Paul’s advice in 1 Thess 4:1–8 on holiness and chastity points to some of the clear changes of point of view and behaviour that were required in order to become a Christian. It was one thing to become a part of the community, and another thing entirely to live in a manner that distinguished them from the world around them as they waited for the return of the Lord. Paul calls them to base their behaviour on love (1 Thess 4:9), and to ‘live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command respect of outsiders and be dependent on nobody.’ (1 Thess 4:11–12) Working as a tent-maker/leather-worker was a key element of Paul’s own missionary practice, and it enabled him to move into a new city and support himself while establishing a community, ensuring his own independence, and thereby avoiding being treated as a client of a rich patron.

One of the elements of 1 Thessalonians that has drawn considerable attention is 1 Thess 4:13–18. It is a text that is often appropriately used for funeral services. Here Paul comforts and encourages the Thessalonians about those Christians who had died before the Lord’s return. This indicates that, for this first generation of Christians, there was a very highly developed expectation that the Lord Jesus was going to return at any moment. As 1 Thess 5:1 aptly describes it, it will come ‘like a thief in the night.’

One can imagine the dismay and shock for these first Christians when members of the community died who had been baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul promptly goes on the front foot and assures them that those who have died will not be
Philemon

Letters written in captivity

The letter written to Philemon is the shortest of Paul’s letters, but it is by no means any the less interesting. It provides a fascinating window into the very real problems that needed to be addressed by the first generations of Christians where both masters and their slaves became Christians. In this particular instance Onesimus has been with Paul and Timothy attending to him in his imprisonment while awaiting sentencing and punishment. While the precise details of Onesimus’ coming to Paul are not stated, it is difficult to imagine Paul needing to write in the manner that he does if Onesimus had been sent to Paul by Philemon. Even if Philemon had second thoughts later, it would seem that, at the very least, he has chosen to stay much longer than his master intended.

Runaway slaves in the Roman empires remained the property of their masters and could not be sold to anyone else. It was the role of Fugitivarii to track down runaway slaves and bring them back to their households. Such slaves had the abbreviation FUG branded on their foreheads, and often had bones broken as a punishment. In the light of this practice we can understand the difficult position that Paul finds himself in. He has no legal right to claim anything and this is supported by his statement: ‘I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.’(Philemon 14) The fact of the matter is that it is only as a fellow Christian that Paul has any claim at all. It looks as though some financial loss has been incurred by Philemon. This is suggested by the phrase that follows a few verses later: ‘If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.’(Philemon 18)

Ultimately, Paul’s aim is to ensure that when Onesimus returns to his master that he will be received ‘no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.’(Philemon 16) It is hard for us to imagine how challenging it was for these first Christians to work out what it meant to be a part of a new humanity where the normally accepted structures of masters and slaves—such an essential element of the empire—were now challenged. It was all very well for Paul to state, ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28), but it was another matter entirely to deal with the legal consequences of an instance of a runaway slave in a world that did not accept this Christian vision of equality. As 1 Cor 7:21 shows, Paul was not setting out to start a revolution: ‘Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.’ The reason for this advice is that he understood that the Lord was going to return in the near future, and that it was best to live peacefully until that moment. It was only natural that many slaves would desire their freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.’ The reason for this advice is that he understood that the Lord was going to return in the near future, and that it was best to live peacefully until that moment. It was only natural that many slaves would desire their freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.’ The reason for this advice is that he understood that the Lord was going to return in the near future, and that it was best to live peacefully until that moment. It was only natural that many slaves would desire their freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.’

Given the nature of the city it is no surprise that Paul saw this as a strategic base for his apostolic mission, and why the community so beloved by Paul provided him with so much grief! Paul’s relationship with the community was not always an easy one for either Paul or the community. It was one thing to establish a community and move on to other mission fields; it was another thing entirely to address—by means of visits and letters—the sorts of conflicts and differences of opinion and belief that threatened to tear the Corinthian household churches apart.

1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians written from Ephesus (Approx. 56—57 AD)

The letters written to the Corinthian house churches cover such a wide ranging set of issues that one is confronted by almost too many choices as to where to begin! Corinth was a wealthy and cosmopolitan city in the time of Paul. Having being destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE it was rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. Strategically located on the ancient land trade route to the north and south, and sea traffic from the east and west. Sea travel was dangerous and Corinth provided a short cut through calmer waters for trade and travel to Italy. Ships would be unloaded and their cargo transported across the isthmus, the strip of land between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf, before being reloaded. This provided Corinth with great wealth, and so when we learn in Rom 16:23 that the city treasurer Erastus became a Christian and a co-worker of Paul one can only wonder at Paul’s success. Corinth was a city that was dynamic, polytheistic, successful, and hosting an ancient Olympic-type event—the Isthmian games—every two years.

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians written from Macedonia (Approx. 57 AD)

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1 Corinthians is a letter written in response to advice that had been requested by some members of the community, and also after hearing reports from Chloe’s people about what was happening in the community.(1 Cor 1:11) The first
four chapters address the question of competition based on personal allegiance to Paul, Peter, or Apollos. (1 Cor 1:12) Paul was deeply troubled by this competition that was so destructive of the fabric of the community. The picture that emerges is of various house churches that were aligned with who had baptized them, or whose style of leadership and preaching they preferred. For Paul this was a great scandal, and his response was to remind them of their unity in the Crucified Jesus who showed what was the wisdom and power of God, in contrast with their all too worldly understanding.

1 Cor 1:18 reminds the Corinthians not only of Paul’s mission, but theirs too, namely, ‘to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.’ For a community that prided itself on its new-found spiritual maturity it would have come as a jolt to be told that they were, in fact, just ‘babes in Christ.’ (1 Cor 3:1) Paul reminds them forcefully of just how far they still have to go when he observes: ‘For who sees anything different in you?’ In other words, while they are meant to be God’s Temple (1 Cor 3:16), their division and competition makes them appear no different to anyone else in the world around them. As far as Paul was concerned, the division in the community was both mistaken and misguided. Both Apollos and Paul contributed to God’s enterprise to bring about growth in the community. As he expressed clearly: ‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.’ (1 Cor 3:6)

It seems that some members of the community totally misunderstood the meaning of their baptism as a license to justify immoral behaviour. In 1 Cor 5–6 this was manifested by one man marrying his stepmother, and Paul labels this as immorality of a kind that was not even found among pagans. (1 Cor 5:1) The community was called to bring this person to his senses by temporarily excluding him and sending him back into society. The language that is used is that of delivering the man over to Satan (1 Cor 5:5), that is, back into the world.

To make matters worse, some community members were taking others to court (1 Cor 6:1–8), and others misunderstood their spiritual status to mean they could have intercourse with prostitutes! (1 Cor 6:12–20) We can hear echoes of their slogans in 1 Cor 12:1 where they are saying ‘All things are lawful for me’ to which Paul provides the rejoinder that not all things are helpful. Modern readers may well scratch their heads in horror and amazement wondering how they could get it all so wrong. It needs to be understood that they believed
that the body was just a shell, a container for the spirit, and that at death the soul’s connection with the body was severed so that the spirit would continue. It was not a long step for them to conclude that if the body was irrelevant, that satisfying its urges was also spiritually irrelevant.

This frame of reference in which there was an overly developed focus on the soul at the expense of the whole human person helps us to understand why, in 1 Cor 7, sexual abstinence in marriage was the next problem Paul needed to address. It seems that there were married Christians who wanted to prepare for the return of the Lord by trying to live as angels, devoting themselves totally to prayer. Paul had some sympathy with their position, but reminded them that both husbands and wives have obligations and responsibilities. (1 Cor 7:1–4) The more moderate approach he advocates is to refrain from sexual activity in marriages ‘by agreement, for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through a lack of respect for each other, and for a misplaced sense of the need for competition. Given that the society of the time was one where people naturally competed for honour it is no surprise that when they came to worship they competed for the best seats, argued about whose spiritual gifts were more valuable, and reinforced the differences between the rich and the poor in the community. All of this Paul rightly saw to be destructive, and counters it with a treatise on love in 1 Cor 13, 15:3–4) Paul uses a number of examples to support his case, but in 1 Cor 15:50 he makes his contention clear, ‘What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.’ He goes on to argue in 1 Cor 15:42 that: ‘What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.’ Since they are yet to die it is impossible that they have already gone through the necessary transformation. Whatever the Corinthians may think or believe they are not yet in their resurrected bodies.

As the letter concludes in 1 Cor 16, Paul provides advice regarding the collection that he is administering for the poor Christians of Judea. This was a project that is mentioned in passing in Rom 15:25–28, and most extensively in 2 Cor 8–9. It was a gesture of good will on the part of the Gentile communities in Galatia, Macedonia and Corinth and aimed at material assistance and relief, as well as addressing the fears and concerns the Jewish Christian communities had with regard to the acceptance of Gentiles as fellow Christians. Paul says in Gal 2:10, it was Peter and James in Jerusalem who made the request ‘that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.’

At the time of writing 1 Corinthians Paul’s intention was to visit Corinth, continue on to Macedonia, and then visit Corinth again. As he describes it, ‘I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to

of their bodies would be required. His understanding is that it will happen in a moment of time. (1 Cor 15:52) The headliner of the argument in this chapter is that the tradition that had been handed on by eye-witnesses is that Jesus died (physically), was buried (physically), and was raised (physically). (1 Cor 15:3–4) Paul uses a number of examples to support his case, but in 1 Cor 15:50 he makes his contention clear, ‘What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.’ He goes on to argue in 1 Cor 15:42 that: ‘What is sown is

Temple of Apollo in Ancient Corinth, Greece
Judea.’(2 Cor 1:16) Unfortunately for Paul, and for the community, the first visit did not go well, and it appears that some of the individuals and factions in Corinth were less than pleased with Paul’s position on a number of issues, and opposed him. Angry, disappointed and hurt Paul left the community not returning as intended, but went on to Troas in Asia Minor having written a severe letter that was entrusted to Titus to deliver.(2 Cor 2:12)

This letter achieved a change of heart on the part of the majority of the community, although it must have come at some considerable cost to the relationship because chapters 1–7 of 2 Corinthians are basically a letter of reconciliation, where Paul tries to rebuild his relationship with the Corinthians. In the midst of the confusion, disappointment and hurt, Paul shares with the Corinthians his understanding of his apostolic mission; this provides the context for understanding his reflections on his ministry as a triumphal procession (2 Cor 2:14), and that profoundly personal sharing of himself as a carrying a treasure in earthen vessels.(2 Cor 4:7–12) The tone in this section is clearly conciliatory and this is evident in the call to accept the person who opposed Paul back into the community, asking them to ‘forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.’(2 Cor 2:7)

Having reconciled himself to the community, Paul was now able to return to the administration of the collection for the poor in Jerusalem in 2 Cor 8–9. It is fascinating to see that most of the strategies that are used to increase people’s contribution to their local church community are already used by Paul in these chapters! He plays the Macedonian communities off against the Corinthians (2 Cor 8:1–4), provides scriptural arguments such as God loves a cheerful giver in 2 Cor 9:7, and reminds the Corinthians that future rewards will be connected in some way to present generosity.(2 Cor 9:6)

It is evident that Paul and his opponents are contesting for the honour of being the spiritual leaders of the community. In the midst of what is known as his ‘fool’s speech’, Paul defends his integrity and reflects on the power of God that shines through his weakness. In 2 Cor 12:9 the Corinthians are reminded of what he has learned about the need for humility in dealing with his own thorn in the flesh. God reminded him ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’

**Philippians**

Written in captivity from Ephesus, Ciceria or Rome (Approx. 56 AD)

The letter to the Philippians was written when Paul was in prison. It remains a matter of debate as to whether it was written, with suggestions ranging from Caesarea to Rome. There is mention of the imperial guard in Phil 1:13—and Phil 4:22 makes mention of Christians who are part of the emperor’s household—which indicates that it would have been in a city of some administrative significance, but that leaves open a number of possible locations.

Whatever the outcome of that discussion, it is clear that Paul’s imprisonment provided the opportunity to write this letter of thanksgiving, support and friendship to a community that he describes in Phil 4:1 as ‘his joy and crown.’ It is clear that this community in Macedonia was one that was precious to him, and that he valued them greatly. ‘It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.’(Phil 1:7) Despite his imprisonment Paul was confident that matters would turn out well ‘for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.’(Phil 1:19) Such a phrase may sound likewishful thinking, but it highlights the difference between modern prisons and ancient ones. In the Roman Empire, one was held in prison while waiting for the punishment to be determined, rather than a term in prison itself being the punishment.

As Paul pondered his situation he wrestled with a dilemma: whether it was better to die for the sake of the Gospel, or to remain alive, continuing to support and instruct his communities. ‘I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.’(Phil 1:23–24) The community was encouraged by Paul to remain steadfast in the face of opposition they both shared since ‘you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.’(Phil 1:27)

In a context of opposition, imprisonment and suffering it comes as no surprise that Paul’s mind turns to the sufferings of Jesus as the basis for the life that should characterize the life of Christians—

24 Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. 2 Cor. 11:25—25

Prison in Philippi
in-community. The early Christian hymn preserved in Phil 2:5–11 expresses the values of self-giving service and humility that were exemplified in Jesus, who did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to the point of accepting death on a cross. Whether Paul wrote the hymn or not is not clear, but it is fascinating to see how early in the life of the community the scandalous death of Jesus was not brushed under the carpet but pondered and explored as the model for all Christian living.

In Phil 2:24 Paul expresses his intent to come to visit the Philippians and in the meantime he recommends his trusted co-workers Timothy and Epaphroditus. That Paul valued them is indicated by his praise of Timothy: ‘But Timothy’s worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.’(Phil 2:22) The recommendation of Epaphroditus is similarly strong, describing him as ‘my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need.’(Phil 2:25) Epaphroditus had become gravely ill as a consequence of his missionary activity and the community are called to: ‘Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour such people.’(Phil 2:29)

By chapter three the tone of the letter changes somewhat with Paul addressing the question of how the Philippians should respond to those who have come among the community recommending that Gentile Christians should be circumcised. Paul’s response is characteristically direct in Phil 3:2: ‘Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!’ Paul goes on to reflect on his own experience and suggests that his own example should shed some light on how the Philippians should deal with this issue. He describes himself as one who was: ‘circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, those I have come to regard as lost because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as lost because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.’(Phil 3:5–8)

These verses express very powerfully that his encounter with the Risen Lord called for a radical reassessment of his own tradition that he had so obviously observed with love and devotion. For him now there is a new goal: ‘I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.’(Phil 3:10) But it’s not just the Jewish traditions that Paul wants re-evaluated, but also Roman allegiance. ‘But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.’(Phil 3:20) The community of Philippi had a large number of retired veterans who were given land in Macedonia as a reward for their faithful military service. Situated along the Via Egnatia, it was a road of great strategic significance. In the event of an emergency these veterans were naturally prepared to defend both Rome and their own land holdings. And they would have taken great pride in their citizenship, as Paul himself did, there is now a higher call made on their loyalty as Christians.

As is customary for the latter sections of Paul’s letters, a number of matters are finally touched on, such as expressing thanks for help received, encouragement for good behaviour, recommendations of travelling missionaries, and concluding greetings. In Philippians the community is called to keep their sights on what really matters. It is beautifully summed up in Phil 4:8, ‘Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.’ In this way they will be able to shine like stars in the world, as he calls them to do in Phil 2:15. Since Paul is in prison he is reliant on the assistance of friends, and he takes the opportunity to thank them once again for their unfailing support on a number of occasions. ‘You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone.’(Phil 4:15)
demands of the Jewish law.

Given that Paul’s integrity had been challenged, he would now defend himself. This part of the letter will be devoted to supporting the claim ‘that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin.’ (Gal 1:11) In defending his apostolic call and the integrity of the mission, what follows in Gal 1:12–2:14 is the closest we have to a snapshot of Paul’s early life in Judaism, call and subsequent missionary activity over an extended period: at least fourteen to seventeen years. Paul goes immediately onto the front foot by claiming that he was more zealous for the Jewish tradition than any of his contemporaries, and that this is proven by his persecution of the Christian movement.

All this changed when God revealed his son to him (Gal 1:16) and gave him a mission: not only the personal revelation of God, but also the approval of the leaders of the Jerusalem community. He is proud that ‘they gave to Barnabas and me the right of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and to the circumcised.’ (Gal 2:9)

It would seem that they understood this differently to Paul, who took it that he should preach the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles in Gentile territory, while they understood that he would preach the message only to Gentiles, leaving the Jewish mission to Peter. Matters come to a boiling point some time later when Paul confronted Peter in Antioch for consistency since, as he describes it, ‘for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.’ (Gal 2:12) What this indicates is not only Peter’s basic openness to Gentiles and some leniency in practice, but that he did not feel he had sufficient justification for his practice when challenged by other Jewish Christians.

This was too much for Paul who strongly resisted placing burdens on Gentile Christians that Jewish Christians were not observing themselves. ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’ (Gal 2:14)

Having established his bona fides, Paul then comes to the nub of his argument that salvation comes from believing in Jesus and not by works of the law. ‘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.’ (Gal 2:16)

Paul is not saying that the law does not have a purpose within God’s saving plan, but that it is provisional when compared to the role played by faith in Jesus. Paul argues that the scriptures support the view that God will bless the nations through the faith of Abraham who was considered to be righteous before God prior to the giving of the law on Sinai. ‘And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.”’ (Gal 3:8) As far as Paul is concerned, the covenant and promises to Abraham have not been revoked, and are now being fulfilled through the faith of Christians in Jesus, who is seen to be the seed of Abraham, and the means by which these promises would be fulfilled. The covenant with Sinai is interpreted as being a guardian for the people until the coming of Jesus. ‘Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.’ (Gal 3:14)

Paul continues by marshalling one argument after another, some of it hard to follow for modern readers not familiar with Jewish rhetoric. A good example is that of the section referring to Sarah and Hagar in Gal 4:22–31 that compares in a most unexpected way the two women and their offspring.

For Paul, it is by living a Christian life in kindness and compassion that God’s requirements will be fulfilled. As he puts it beautifully, ‘Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.’ (Gal 6:2)
clearly states his position, that the humanity. As the letter begins Paul God's intentions and plans for all of message he preaches is faithful to fears, and demonstrate that the such a way that he can allay their writes to the Roman Christians in with Jewish customs and laws. In children and walking in accordance to forget about circumcising their living outside of their homeland he was teaching Jewish Christians to including Gentiles as well. As a key tradition so much as place it within his way to Spain in order to spread accepting Jewish and Gentiles—what we cannot do for ourselves. Now, through faith in Jesus, we are brought graciously into right relationship with God, and this is God’s gracious gift. For Paul this is an extremely important part of his presentation to the Jewish Christians of Rome. Whatever they may have heard of him, his message is not intended to diminish the value of the Jewish who, in Jesus, now does for all humanity—both Jews and Gentiles—what we cannot do for ourselves. Now, through faith in Jesus, we are brought graciously into right relationship with God, and this is God’s gracious gift. For Paul this is an extremely important part of his presentation to the Jewish Christians of Rome. Whatever they may have heard of him, his message is not intended to diminish the value of the Jewish tradition so much as place it within the larger saving work of God that includes Gentiles as well. As a key part of his argument, Paul uses the example of Abraham who was declared righteous in Gen 15:6 before he was circumcised. It is an essen-tial part of Paul’s argument to point out that God had promised to Abra-ham that all the nations would be blessed through him. As he argues in Rom 4:11, Abraham is also father of all who believe without having to be circumcised. In Romans, Paul deals with many significant issues: such as the role of the Jewish law now that Jesus has provided the means for all humanity to be saved on the basis of faith. As Paul describes so pow-erfully and graphically his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’ (Rom 5:8) Comparison is made between what had been lost through Adam and what had been gained in Jesus Christ. (Rom 5:15) As the letter pro-ceeds, our old self-under-sin is con-trasted with our new self, destined for eternal life. (Rom 6:23) The struggle to be part of the unfolding of God’s new creation is one that calls for deep faith and, until it is fulfilled, all of creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth (Rom 8:22–23). In the mean-time, Christians are encouraged to patiently endure knowing that nothing ‘will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ (Rom 8:39) In Rom 9–11, Paul provides a theological presentation of how he sees the mysterious saving plan of God at work. He suggests that the rejection of Jesus by his own people is temporary, and that it actually paved the way for the Gentiles. The acceptance of the Gospel message by the Gentiles is argued to provoke the Jewish people to faith in Jesus. Paul makes use of the image of wild branches grafted onto an olive tree in Rom 11:17–25 as a metaphor for the Church now made of both Jews and Gentiles. He believes that just as natural branches were broken off (the Jewish people who have not accepted Jesus), now wild branches have been grafted on (Gentile Christians). The temporary harden-ing of the hearts of some in Israel has opened the way for Gentiles; furthermore, it is part of God’s plan that they will relent and come back. As he states: ‘For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean, but life from the dead?’ (Rom 11:15) His hope is ultimately that ‘all Israel will be saved...’ (Rom 11:26) Paul’s letters are jam-packed with deep and wide-ranging theo-logical reflection, but they are also practical and focused on assisting and challenging the communities to live as Christians with their lives modelled on the example of Jesus. The letter to the Romans challenges the community to live exemplary lives in the world as part of the one body. As the letter continues to unfold in Rom 12:4–8, the people are called on to use their various gifts for the good of the community as a whole, and to base all that they do on love; Rom 12:9–21 is a beautiful reflection on what a life based on love and faith should look like. For Paul, giving practical advice as to how to address a range of problems that the community are consider-ing such as obedience to legitimate authorities (Rom 13:1), the pay-ment of taxes (Rom 13:6), and not judging others who have different ideas about what Christians can legitimately eat (an issue he had already addressed in 1 Cor 8–10). Our behaviour has to be based on a principal expressed in Rom 15:1, that ‘we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves’ and Paul’s hope is that caring for each other in this way all can live in harmony. (Rom 15:5) The letter concludes with a long list of recommendations of travel-ling missionaries, greetings to and from various household churches, and those who have shared in vari-ous ways in the ministry of preach-ing Gospel. While these verses can be quickly overlooked, they provide a glimpse into the dynamism of the early communities and indicate how close the bonds of a shared faith and friendship were for the first generation of Christians.
Some Recommended Reading


