

## **Paul Spreads the Good News**

Saint Paul is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in the history of the Western world. Just a quick look at the headlines of his life are enough to understand his impact; his works are some of the earliest Christian documents that we have, 13 of the 27 books of the bible are written by him, and he's the hero of another, Acts of the Apostles.

Famously converted on the road to Damascus, he travelled tens of thousands of miles around the Mediterranean spreading the word of Jesus, and it was Paul who came up with the doctrine that would turn Christianity from a small sect of Judaism into a worldwide faith that was open to all.

What we know about Paul comes from two extraordinary sources. The first is the Acts of the Apostles, written after Paul's death, almost certainly by the same author who wrote Luke's gospel. There is evidence that Acts was written to pass on the Christian message, but behind the theology lie clues about Paul's life. The author of Acts claims that he knew Paul and even accompanied him on many of his journeys. The second source is Paul's own letters. They represent Paul's own version of events, and it seems reasonable to accept them as the more reliable account.

The one thing most people do know about Paul is that he underwent a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Precisely what happened has been hard to determine as the accounts in Acts and the letters differ on the details. For example, when Paul talks about his conversion he makes no mention of a journey from Jerusalem to Damascus.

But behind the paradoxes and the puzzles, there are fascinating glimpses of the man. Reading Paul's letters and Acts of the Apostles we learn that Paul was born in Tarsus, in modern day Eastern Turkey, he was a tent maker by trade, was an avid student under the top Jewish teacher in Jerusalem and was also a Roman citizen. Here is a man who worked with his hands but wrote with the grace of a Greek philosopher; a Jewish zealot who nevertheless enjoyed the rights of citizenship in the world's greatest empire.

In his letters, we also discover the Paul who writes warmly of his friends, both men and women, the Paul who frets about how the members of his churches are coping without him and who defends their status as true converts and the Paul who appeals for the freedom of a slave. But like all great and charismatic figures there is another side; the Paul who berates his followers for backsliding and doubting; the Paul who tells women to keep silent and condemns homosexuality and the Paul who'll stand up to the Apostle Peter, one of the most senior people in the early church, and call him a hypocrite to his face.

Academics are trying to piece together these scraps of information with a new technique that's rather like a combination of sociology and forensic anthropology. They've come up with a picture of Paul who'd be a man of his time and place; a hot-headed Mediterranean who'd be quick to defend his honour and the honour of his followers, but who'd demand loyalty in return.

Paul wrote some of the most beautiful and important passages in the whole of the Bible, but his works have also been used, among other things, to justify homophobia, slavery and anti-Semitism. He has also been accused of being anti-feminist, although many modern scholars would argue that in fact he championed the cause of women church leaders. In the final

analysis, Paul was the first great Christian theologian, establishing some of the building blocks of the faith that we now take for granted, --though there are those who argue that in laying out these ground rules, Paul has obscured and separated us from the true teachings of Jesus. But perhaps the true sign of Paul's importance is that even nearly 2000 years after his death he still inspires passion; whatever you feel, it's hard to feel neutral about Paul.

However one explains the phenomenon, there is little doubt that the events of the first Easter, sometime in the early 30s of the first century, made a powerful impact on the first followers of Jesus. Yet the utterly bizarre nature of the claims that they were making is easy to miss after two thousand years of familiarity with Christianity. Let us pause to consider for a moment what it was that they were saying.

God has acted decisively, once and for all, by sending his beloved Son to his own people, Israel. This Jesus, whom some acknowledged as Christ, was subjected to an appalling and humiliating death. Everyone in the Roman Empire knew about crucifixion and the fact that Jesus died in this way was not something one would expect anyone to have been proud of. That God's Anointed One could have been so publicly humiliated seemed outrageous. But for these early Jesus people, the public humiliation was conquered through resurrection, God's vindication of Jesus, and this convinced them that Jesus was not a criminal who had died for his own sins; he had died for the sins of others.

### **Paul the Persecutor**

At this stage, it is incorrect to talk about Christianity. These earliest followers of Jesus were devout Jews who continued to offer sacrifice at the Temple and to observe the whole Jewish Law. Essentially, they were a small sect within Judaism. So how would such a sect have been viewed by other Jews who were not members of it? Thankfully, we have a pretty clear answer to this question because one of the most famous converts to the new Messianic sect was a Jew named Paul and before his conversion he was so horrified by the claims of this new movement that, he tells us, he persecuted it violently.

So why did people like Paul persecute Jesus' followers? The problem seems to have focused around the cross. It was simply intolerable to zealous Jews like Paul that God's special envoy could have died a criminal's death. He describes it as a "stumbling block" to Jews, using the Greek word *skandalon* from which we derive our word "scandal". It was unthinkable that the Messiah could have suffered in this way. The problem would have been sharply focused for someone like Paul. He was not from Israel but was born in Tarsus, in modern Turkey. Jews like Paul, who lived outside the Jewish homeland, were called diaspora Jews. Since they lived among pagans, they were particularly conscious of how their religion might appear to those around them. Jews were called to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42.6); this story of a crucified Messiah might have the opposite effect. It could hold Judaism up to ridicule. So Paul attempted to snuff out this fledgling movement before it could do too much damage.

### **Damascus Road**

The importance of Paul's conversion, his turn-around from persecuting Jesus to preaching Jesus, cannot be underestimated. Paul himself finds it difficult to describe what had happened and in a fascinating passage in one of his letters he explains this as a resurrection appearance of Jesus.

### **Paul the Missionary**

The Damascus Road experience was both a conversion and a call. It was a conversion away from his previous life as a zealous persecutor of Jesus' followers and it was a call to a new life advancing the cause of the new movement with even more vigour than he had shown before. Now, with boundless energy Paul preached the gospel of the Christ crucified for the sins of all people far and wide, beginning at Jerusalem and continuing all the way to Rome. His achievement was a matter of some pride for him:

Luke tells us of three enormous missionary journeys, charting Paul's progress from Antioch in Syria and moving westwards through (modern day) Turkey and Greece and finally back to Jerusalem again. For Paul this was a particularly punishing business. Unlike other early Christian missionaries, Paul earned his own living wherever he went. Luke says that he was a tentmaker and Paul often talks about how he combined his preaching of the gospel with working with his hands.

Paul's life was remarkable and there is little doubt that it changed the course of Christianity. He made an impact as apostle, as theologian, and as letter-writer. Paul the apostle had expanded the church far and wide, flinging open the doors to Gentiles, strenuously fighting for his conviction that the gospel was for all people and that no barriers should be put in the way of Gentiles. Paul the theologian was the first to work through many of the intriguing questions that Jesus' life, death and resurrection had thrown up. And Paul the letter-writer gave us not only some of the most profound pieces of early Christian theological reflection, but also some of the finest, most poignant writing in history.

### **Paul's Letters**

The Apostle Paul was better known in his time than Jesus because he preached and wrote the letters that are the primary sources for the New Testament.

The primary impact Paul left on Christianity is through his letters, but in his own time, he saw himself primarily as a prophet to the non-Jews, bringing the message of the crucified Messiah. Paul saw cities as key to the rapid spread of this new message. At one point he wrote to the Roman Christians, 'I have filled up the gospel in the East, I have no more room to work here.' Although there were only a handful of Christians in each of the several major cities in the Eastern Empire, each city was on a major Roman road or a major seaport. They were the great trading centers of the world, the center of migrations of people.

When Paul talked about the message of Jesus Christ and his crucifixion, it was the beginning in the New Testament of the language that would become the hallmark of all the later Christian tradition.

While Paul was in Antioch, a major new development started in the Christian movement. Even though it was coming out of the Jewish social context of the synagogue communities, expansion of the movement was through gentiles, non-Jews. Initially, when people were attracted to the Jesus movement, they first became Jews, going through all

the rituals and rites of conversion. The major issue for a gentile male was circumcision, an obvious distinction in a world where nudity was common in the public gymnasiums, bath houses, etc. Besides circumcision, there were also the complex and strict dietary and purity laws in the Torah to be obeyed.

But Paul and some of his close supporters began to welcome new members to the Christian movement without requiring conversion, sparking a major controversy of the first generation of the Christian movement. Do you have to become a Jew in order to be a follower of Jesus as the Messiah?

Conversion to Judaism was much easier for women, which may explain why there were far more women in Paul's churches in the Greek world.

Paul's thinking stemmed from his own interpretation of the Jewish scriptures, mostly from the prophet Isaiah, specifically that when the kingdom came (upon the arrival of the Messiah) there will be a light to the nations, "a light to the gentiles." Paul viewed the messianic age as arriving with Jesus, and a window of opportunity for bringing the gentiles into the elect status alongside the people of Israel. Paul thus created this apocalyptic message of what the kingdom was about to be, and the arrival of the gentiles, the engrafting or integrating of the gentiles who will come to believe in the true God of Israel into the community of Israel as the elect nation, was one of the hallmarks of the messianic age.

This attitude stimulated controversy both at Antioch among the Jewish communities as well as among the older Christian communities back in Jerusalem. In Paul's view it was now possible to integrate the gentiles, people who didn't keep the proper food laws, into a dining fellowship with Jews, all of whom were followers of Jesus. It was in that mixed community, where fellowship around a common meal and the celebration of the story of Jesus was the center, that Paul brought everyone together. But because it was at a meal, it also ran headlong into Jewish sensitivity about observing the Torah's strict dietary laws about eating certain foods and with whom one could eat.

This tension came to a head after Paul returned from a conference in Jerusalem. He took with him a young gentile convert, Titus, who was his test case. Paul said explicitly that he went to meet with the leaders of the church there: Peter, one of the leading Apostles from all the gospel stories, and James, the brother of Jesus himself. Paul met with them with Titus and some others of the Antioch community who were his supporters in the beginning. They managed to get a rough agreement with the Jerusalem leadership that Paul could convert the gentiles without forcing circumcision.

When Paul returned to Antioch it seemed a major victory in the understanding of what the Christian would be. Shortly after, however, Peter arrived from Jerusalem; initially Peter seemed willing to keep fellowship with Paul and the gentile converts, including eating with them. When others arrived from Jerusalem, however, he backed away, causing Paul to challenge Peter with hypocrisy.

After the Jerusalem conference, Paul preached predominantly to gentiles. Paul said Peter was the one charged to be the missionary to the Jewish communities. As part of this agreement, Paul also decided it would be important to raise funds in support of the poor in Jerusalem, the followers of the Jesus movement who seemed beset with famine or other economic distress. Paul's missionary activity for the rest of his career was raising funds to bring back to Jerusalem.

After the blow up with Peter, Paul left Antioch and probably never returned. From that point on, Paul works almost exclusively within gentile communities.

Paul went to Western Turkey or Asia Minor and Greece, which was the new center of his missionary activity for the next ten years. By the year 49 or 50 Paul was up in Northern Greece, Macedonia, in the cities of Phillipi and Thessalonica. By the year 50 he arrived in Corinth and it was at that juncture that he began to preach his message of Jesus Christ to the region bounded by the Eastern coast of Greece and the Western coast of Turkey and the island in-between.

Within this circuit of the Aegean basin Paul had two or three major cities that served as his mission bases: two cities up in Macedonia, Phillipi and Thessalonica. Corinth was his base in Southern Greece. On the Eastern side of the Aegean in Turkey, his base was the major city of Ephesus.

In about the years 50 to 55 when Paul travelled back and forth from Corinth to Ephesus, the whole Aegean went through a massive growth under Roman expansion.

Ephesus and its immediate area became Paul's most important base of operations. For several years, Paul lived in and around Ephesus, writing letters back and forth to the other congregations. He traveled in a circuit of the congregations around the Aegean rim, or he sent out his helpers and his co-workers, people like Timothy and Titus, to take information to or check on the congregations in Phillipi and elsewhere—perhaps even to help start new congregations. Paul, his co-workers, and other Christians from various cities all travelled back and forth across the Aegean. Most importantly, Paul was doing something new: he wrote letters as a mechanism for further instruction in his understanding of the Christian message. It is Paul who starts the writing of the New Testament by writing letters to these fledgling congregations in the cities of the Greek East.

Paul didn't think of himself as writing scripture, nor had he thought of a New Testament. For Paul the Bible meant the Hebrew Scriptures. When Paul quoted scripture he was quoting from the Hebrew Bible in its Greek form. When Paul wrote letters he wrote everyday, ordinary letters to real people in real cities trying to deal with the circumstances in which they were living. He wanted to deal with theological issues, but Paul wasn't writing theological treatises as much as he was giving advice, and instruction, and encouragement for living.

From Paul's letters, it is apparent that these fledgling congregations were also facing enormous difficulties of social adjustment. Paul very often was trying to mediate disputes or settle the social tensions that cropped up precisely because of the mixture of people that came in to these congregations. For example, Paul wrote at least four or more letters to Corinth, only two of which seem preserved in the New Testament, and there were probably as many as ten different letters that go back and forth between Corinth and Paul during the time that he was living in Ephesus. The letters indicate that there are at least five or six different congregations of Christians in Corinth, each one located in someone's home in some different suburb of the city. We hear of people like Chloe and Gaeas and Stephanus and a very prominent woman by the name of Phoebe who lives in the port city of Cenchreae, all of whom have congregations that gather in their homes. It is this mixed and varied small cell group kind of organization that probably established some of the important social context for Paul's letters, precisely because there were disagreements.

There were differences of opinion on what the message meant. There were differences of behaviour and ethical patterns that these converts would naturally incline toward in their attempt to live the Christian life. It was those differences of opinion that prompted the controversy that Paul himself felt compelled to respond to in his letters. First Corinthians is a very good example: Paul says, "I hear there are disputes among you," and he proceeds then to talk about the difficulties that these disputes create in the life of the Christian communities there.

One of the difficulties was precisely over social differentiation among the members of the community. Rich and poor, Jew and gentile are living side by side and worshipping side by side, and sometimes the tension seemed to want to fragment the entire community. Paul has to say it's really the fellowship of the community, the ability to come together that's the important hallmark of the Christian message, and he has to try to show them the way to get back to that ideal.

Paul's letters are written in a very ordinary kind of prose letter writing style. The discovery of many, many letters from Egypt among the known papyri shows that the practice of letter writing and the forms of letter writing had become very commonplace in the Greco-Roman times; Paul's letters match up with these typical letters from the ancient world. Paul adapted some of the standard stylistic features of letter writing to the particular needs of his own theological concerns and his needs of instruction for these Christian communities. He developed a standard letter form for his style of writing. But within that standard style Paul is also very adaptable: if the Corinthian community was suffering from too much division and strife, he turned it into a letter of instruction on harmony and unity. In the case of the Thessalonian congregation when they were not sure about what's going to happen to them, he turned it into a letter of consolation and comfort. In the case of the Galatian community when they seemed ready to turn their back on Paul entirely and become much more Jewish in their orientation, he turned into a scolding parent and blistered them with purple prose about how they could not turn back on the Gospel of Christ that he had given them.

### **The End of Paul's Agean Career**

By the year 58 or 60, Paul indicated that he had done as much as he could do in the Greek East and was preparing to move on. When Paul wrote the Roman letter, the longest and last of all of his letters, he was preparing to actually *go* to Rome. He was writing to Rome but he himself had never been there. It was his house church patroness, Phoebe, who went ahead to Rome to prepare the way, and who carried the letter.

Paul was going to Rome to get the Christian communities there to support him in a new endeavour to go to Spain, to start a new gentile mission in an area that had never before heard the preaching of Jesus. But before he did that he wanted to fulfill the promise that he made to Peter and James back at the Jerusalem conference. For ten years he'd had his congregations collecting monies to take back to Jerusalem for the poor. Now he gathered it all up, with each congregation sending an emissary with their part of the contribution, and travelled as an entourage to lay it at the feet of James in Jerusalem. (James, the brother of Jesus, was now the leader of the Jerusalem congregation, and it is the direct legacy to Jesus himself through the family members that seems to be very important in this first generation of the Jerusalem congregation.)

Paul apparently never got to Spain, although that also is not known for sure. Apparently, when he returned to Jerusalem with this contribution, he was arrested as some sort of rabble-rouser. This set the stage for his eventual trials, and the traditional belief that he died a martyr's death.

It is not known precisely what happened to either Peter or Paul. Tradition holds that they were both martyred in Rome in around the year 64. This was after the great fire, which the emperor Nero wanted to blame on a variety of groups such as Jews and Christians. By the mid sixties, between 62 and 64, it does appear that both Peter and Paul have died. About the same time [Josephus](#) tells us that James, the brother of Jesus at Jerusalem, has also been killed, all in about the same two or three year period. So by the mid sixties of the First Century CE, the original first generation of leadership of the Christian movement have passed away. Once again, the stage is set for an important shift that will occur within the next few years.

The level of expectation going through the minds of early Christians shouldn't be minimized. With the passing of this first generation, the belief that all of those coming events heralded the end of time increased. Indeed, it must be closer at hand now with Paul and the others dead, and was probably a major concern for a lot of people. At the same time the situation in Jerusalem itself was becoming much more tense...