

Paul of Tarsus and His Importance in Early Christianity

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Introduction

Paul of Tarsus was one of the most influential figures in the development of early Christianity. He was not one of the twelve disciples who followed Jesus during his public ministry, but his letters are among the earliest surviving Christian writings and became part of the New Testament. Paul helped establish communities across the eastern Roman Mediterranean, argued that Gentiles could join the people of God without first becoming Jews, interpreted Jesus's death and resurrection in theological terms, and developed practical teaching about worship, ethics, unity, and leadership. (Sanders, 2015)

Paul's importance should not be exaggerated into the claim that he "invented" Christianity. Jesus, the Jerusalem apostles, Jewish believers, missionaries such as Barnabas, women patrons and leaders, and many unnamed Christians shaped the movement before and alongside him. Paul himself insists that he received traditions from others and remained connected, sometimes tensely, with Jerusalem leaders. His historical importance lies in the scale and durability of his missionary and literary influence.

Early Life and Jewish Identity

Paul was born in Tarsus in Cilicia and is known in Acts initially by the Hebrew name Saul. He was Jewish and identified himself as an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. In Philippians he describes himself as circumcised on the eighth day and a Pharisee with intense zeal for the law.

Acts also presents Paul as a Roman citizen, a status that gave him procedural protections in encounters with local authorities. Scholars distinguish carefully between information in Paul's own letters and the later narrative in Acts because the two sources have different purposes and emphases.

Paul as a Persecutor of the Church

Before becoming a Christian missionary, Paul persecuted the early Jesus movement. His own letters acknowledge that he violently attacked the church of God and attempted to destroy it. Acts provides more narrative detail, associating Saul with the death of Stephen and later arrests of believers.

The reason for Paul's opposition is not explained fully in his letters. His later theology suggests that the Christian claims about a crucified Messiah and the inclusion of Gentiles created serious questions about Jewish identity and law. His transformation therefore involved not merely changing religions in a modern sense but radically reinterpreting Israel's God, Messiah, covenant, and mission.

The Damascus Experience

Acts describes Paul traveling toward Damascus with authority to arrest followers of Jesus when a heavenly light surrounded him and he heard the risen Jesus address him. Paul was blinded temporarily, entered Damascus, and was assisted by Ananias. The event has traditionally been called his conversion.

Paul's own letters describe the experience as a revelation and a call. In Galatians he says that God revealed his Son to him so that he might proclaim him among the Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians he includes himself among those to whom the risen Christ appeared.

Calling the event only a "conversion" may suggest that Paul rejected Judaism entirely, which is more complicated than his writings indicate. He continued to use Israel's scriptures and identify with his people. The experience reoriented his understanding of Jesus and his mission.

Paul's Mission to the Gentiles

Paul became especially associated with mission among Gentiles, people who were not Jewish. The central controversy concerned how Gentile believers should enter the Christian community. Did men need circumcision? Were Gentiles required to adopt the full Mosaic law as a condition of belonging?

Paul argued that Gentiles were justified through faith in Christ and received the Spirit without becoming Jews. This position made the movement more accessible across the Roman world and was central to Christianity's development into a predominantly Gentile religion.

His argument did not mean that moral behavior no longer mattered. Paul condemned idolatry, sexual exploitation, greed, violence, dishonesty, and community division. The controversy concerned covenant identity and the basis of justification rather than whether Christians should live ethically. (Coogan et al., 2018)

The Jerusalem Meeting

Galatians describes a meeting in Jerusalem where Paul discussed his Gentile mission with James, Cephas or Peter, and John. Paul reports that they recognized his mission and asked that he remember the poor. Acts presents a broader council involving debate over circumcision and the law.

The agreement did not eliminate all disagreement. Paul later describes a conflict with Peter at Antioch over eating with Gentile believers. These tensions show that early Christianity was not institutionally uniform. Apostles negotiated the meaning of a movement that remained rooted in Judaism while expanding among Gentiles.

Missionary Travel

Paul traveled through parts of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, establishing or strengthening communities in cities such as Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. Travel in the Roman world was difficult and dangerous. Paul describes beatings, imprisonment, shipwreck, hunger, and other hardships.

He often worked through networks rather than acting alone. Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Priscilla, Aquila, Phoebe, and many others participated in mission, communication, teaching, hospitality, and leadership. The traditional picture of one heroic missionary should therefore be replaced with a network model.

Paul's Letters

Thirteen New Testament letters bear Paul's name, but modern scholars generally distinguish letters widely accepted as authentic from those whose authorship is debated. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon are commonly regarded as undisputed Pauline letters.

Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus have varying levels of scholarly debate concerning authorship. Some may have been written by later followers within Pauline traditions. The question does not determine their religious value, but it matters for historical claims about what Paul personally wrote.

Justification and Faith

Paul's teaching on justification became especially influential during the Protestant Reformation. In Romans and Galatians he argues that people are justified through faith apart from "works of the law." Martin Luther later interpreted these passages within debates about grace and works.

Paul's original context included the status of Jews and Gentiles and the question of whether Torah observance marked membership in God's covenant people. His argument should not be reduced to a universal contrast between bad human effort and good belief. Contemporary scholarship continues to debate how law, grace, faith, and covenant relate in Paul.

Christology

Paul presents Jesus as Messiah, Lord, Son of God, crucified and risen. Philippians includes a famous passage describing Christ's self-emptying, obedience, death, exaltation, and universal acknowledgment. Whether Paul composed the passage or quotes an earlier hymn, it demonstrates an early high view of Christ.

Paul's letters predate the later ecumenical councils that formulated technical language about Christ's divine and human natures. He did not use the mature Trinitarian terminology of Nicaea or Chalcedon, but his writing strongly contributed to later theological reflection.

The Crucifixion and Resurrection

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus stand at the center of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15 he transmits a tradition that Christ died, was buried, was raised, and appeared to witnesses. This passage is especially important historically because Paul states that he received the tradition before passing it on.

The resurrection is not merely proof that Jesus survived death; it is the beginning of a wider resurrection hope. Paul argues that if Christ has not been raised, Christian faith is empty. The event shapes his teaching on salvation, future resurrection, and transformed life.

The Church as the Body of Christ

Paul uses the metaphor of the body to explain Christian community. Different members possess different gifts but belong to one body. The image appears most fully in 1 Corinthians 12.

The metaphor challenges status competition. A visible or powerful gift cannot declare another member unnecessary. The body needs diversity and interdependence. Paul applies this principle to conflicts involving spiritual gifts, wealth, worship, ethnicity, and social status.

Women in Pauline Communities

Paul's letters name women who played important roles. Phoebe is described as a deacon or minister of the church at Cenchreae and a benefactor or patron. Priscilla participates in mission with Aquila. Junia is described in Romans in connection with the apostles. Women prayed and prophesied in Corinth.

Other passages restrict women's speech or teaching, and interpretation is debated, particularly where authorship of the pastoral letters is disputed. Paul's communities should not be presented as

completely egalitarian or completely excluding women. The evidence shows significant female participation alongside ancient patriarchal assumptions.

Slavery and the Letter to Philemon

Philemon concerns Onesimus, an enslaved man connected with Paul and his owner Philemon. Paul sends Onesimus back while asking that he be received as more than a slave, as a beloved brother.

The letter has been interpreted in conflicting ways. It introduces a spiritual equality that could challenge slavery, but Paul does not explicitly demand abolition. Later Christians used Pauline texts both to defend and oppose slavery. Historical interpretation should acknowledge this ambiguity rather than project modern abolitionism directly onto Paul.

Paul and Roman Authority

Romans 13 instructs believers to be subject to governing authorities, stating that authority is instituted by God. This passage has had enormous political influence. It has been used to support obedience to government and has also been debated when governments become unjust.

Paul himself experienced arrest, beating, and imprisonment by authorities, so the text cannot simply mean that every government action is morally correct. Other biblical traditions include prophetic resistance to rulers. Christian political ethics must consider the passage alongside justice, conscience, and the limits of obedience.

Paul's Ethics

Paul's ethics are grounded in the identity of believers "in Christ" and life through the Spirit. Love becomes the central virtue. First Corinthians 13 describes love as patient, kind, and not self-seeking, while Romans 13 states that love fulfills the law.

He also teaches practical obligations concerning sexuality, money, food, conflict, work, family, worship, and care for weaker members. Ethics are communal rather than purely individual because personal actions affect the body of believers.

Collection for Jerusalem

Paul organized a financial collection among Gentile churches for poor believers in Jerusalem. The project had economic and theological importance. Material assistance demonstrated solidarity between Gentile communities and the Jewish center of the movement.

Paul devoted significant travel and correspondence to the collection, showing that theology and social responsibility were connected. Money became a practical sign of unity across geography and ethnicity.

Conflict in Corinth

The Corinthian correspondence reveals a community divided by leadership factions, status, sexual conduct, lawsuits, food, worship, spiritual gifts, and resurrection beliefs. Paul responds pastorally and sometimes sharply.

These letters are valuable because they reveal early Christianity as a contested community rather than an idealized church. Paul's theology often develops in response to specific problems. Understanding the local context helps prevent isolated verses from being treated as timeless slogans without interpretation.

Paul and Judaism

Paul has often been portrayed as rejecting Judaism in favor of Christianity. His writings are more complex. He uses Jewish scripture constantly, identifies with Israel, and grieves over the unbelief of many fellow Jews.

Romans 9–11 argues that God has not rejected Israel and warns Gentile believers against arrogance. The tragic history of Christian antisemitism makes accurate interpretation especially important. Paul's disputes were internal to a first-century Jewish and emerging Christian context and should not be used to justify contempt for Jews.

Paul's Arrest and Journey to Rome

Acts describes Paul being arrested in Jerusalem after conflict concerning his teaching and presence at the temple. As a Roman citizen he appeals to Caesar and is transported to Rome, surviving a shipwreck along the way.

Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome preaching freely. The New Testament does not narrate his death. Later Christian tradition holds that he was executed in Rome during the reign of Nero, often dated to the 60s CE.

Paul and the Formation of Christian Scripture

Paul did not write a "New Testament" as a finished book. His letters addressed real communities.

They were copied, circulated, collected, and eventually recognized as scripture within the developing Christian canon.

Second Peter refers to Paul's letters, indicating that they were already being treated as an important collection in some Christian circles. Their inclusion in the canon ensured that later theology, worship, ethics, and institutional debate would repeatedly return to Paul.

Influence on Augustine and the Reformation

Augustine drew deeply on Paul in debates about grace, sin, and human will. More than a thousand years later, Martin Luther's reading of Romans and Galatians shaped Protestant teaching on justification.

John Calvin and other reformers also developed theological systems through Pauline texts. Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Anabaptist, and modern traditions interpret Paul differently, demonstrating that influence does not produce one uniform conclusion.

Modern Scholarship

Modern scholarship has reconsidered Paul's Jewish identity and the meaning of "works of the law." The so-called New Perspective on Paul challenged interpretations that portrayed first-century Judaism primarily as a religion of earning salvation through works.

Scholars continue to debate justification, participation in Christ, empire, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and apocalyptic expectation. These debates show that Paul remains central not because every verse is simple, but because his letters address fundamental questions about community, identity, grace, and power.

Why Paul Was Historically Important

Paul's importance can be summarized in five areas. First, he expanded mission among Gentiles without requiring full conversion to Judaism. Second, he founded and connected communities across major Roman cities. Third, his letters became foundational Christian texts. Fourth, he offered influential interpretations of the cross, resurrection, Spirit, church, and salvation. Fifth, his writings became central to later debates about theology, ethics, politics, gender, and social order.

These contributions helped Christianity become a transethnic Mediterranean movement capable of adapting beyond its original Judean setting.

Limits of Paul's Influence

Paul should not be treated as the only architect of Christianity. The Jesus traditions preserved in the Gospels, the theology of John, the leadership of James and Peter, Jewish Christian communities, women leaders, martyrs, bishops, theologians, councils, and ordinary believers all shaped the religion.

Some later developments also differ from Paul's immediate expectations. He appears to have anticipated Christ's return relatively soon, while later Christianity developed permanent institutions for a long historical future.

Conclusion

Paul of Tarsus transformed from a persecutor of the Jesus movement into its most influential surviving missionary writer. His revelation of the risen Christ led him to a mission among Gentiles and to communities across the Roman Mediterranean.

Paul's letters addressed real disputes concerning law, ethnicity, worship, morality, status, and resurrection. They developed ideas about justification, life in Christ, the Spirit, the church as a body, and the centrality of the crucifixion and resurrection.

His historical importance is enormous but should remain contextualized. Paul did not create Christianity alone, and some New Testament letters attributed to him are debated. His continuing influence comes from the way his writings connect theology with the practical difficulties of building communities across cultural and social divisions.

References

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