

THE BIBLE TAKE 2: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL

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Last Sunday I spoke about the life philosophy of “both-and,” which invites us to embrace rather than deny the paradoxes and contradictions we encounter in life. Today I would like to apply that same approach to our understanding of one of the most important figures in Christianity: the Apostle Paul. I consider Paul’s influence to be **both the best thing and the worst thing** that ever happened to the Christian faith. He is both **hero and villain** in the development of the Christian tradition. Had it not been for Paul’s tireless campaign to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, the tiny Jewish cult that came to be known as Christianity almost certainly would have vanished with the Romans’ destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. Thanks to Paul, non-Jews were welcomed into leadership roles in the early Christian communities scattered throughout Greece and Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Thanks to Paul, the seeds of a future world religion were sown.

On the other hand, Paul’s unique interpretation of Jesus’ mission is viewed by his critics as a **perversion** of Jesus’ life and teachings. The German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche wrote, “Paul embodies the very opposite type to that of Jesus, the bringer of good news: he is a genius in hatred, in the vision of hate, in the ruthless logic of hate. . . . A god who died for our sins: redemption by faith: resurrection after death—all these things [says Nietzsche] are falsifications of true Christianity, for which that morbid crank must be made responsible.” [quoted in Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 35] Is it possible that both of these views of Paul can be valid? Almost single-handedly, Paul transformed an executed Jewish prophet into a cosmic savior figure—the universal Redeemer of humankind for all time. Thanks to Paul, the religion **of** Jesus became a religion **about** Jesus. As one biblical scholar puts it, “Second only to Jesus in his lasting influence on Christendom, [Paul] is the prism through which Jesus’ image is most commonly viewed.” [Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament* (5th ed.), p. 374]

By virtue of his background and temperament, Paul was well suited to the task of bridging the gap between the Jewish and Greek worlds. He was born and raised in the city of Tarsus in present-day Turkey, the son of parents who were Roman citizens as well as conservative Jews who were sufficiently orthodox—and sufficiently wealthy—that they sent both of their children to Jerusalem: their daughter for her marriage ceremony in the temple and their son to be schooled in the Pharisee tradition. (The Pharisees were a Jewish sect that believed in strict observance of the rules of conduct set forth in the Torah. That’s why they constantly badgered Jesus about his defiance of these rules.) Paul learned to speak both Greek, the elite language of the Roman Empire, and Aramaic, the popular language spoken by Jesus and his followers. As a young man, Paul participated actively in the persecution of the early followers of Jesus, who were viewed by orthodox Jews as betrayers of their tradition—disciples of a false Jewish Messiah.

Paul's sudden conversion from a persecutor of Christians to their most famous champion forms the cornerstone not only of Paul's faith but the faith of millions of Christians ever since. As one historian of Christianity describes it, "Paul insists, repeatedly, that his change of view was instant and complete; it was in fact miraculous; he did not argue himself around but had the truth in all its plenitude revealed to him instantaneously by Jesus himself. Unless we accept Paul's view of how he became a follower of Christ, it is impossible to understand him. He believed in it as passionately and completely as did the disciples who had seen the risen Christ: in fact he drew no distinction between the two types of vision. It was his title to the rank of apostle and his claim to preach the authentic Christian message." [Johnson, p. 36] Paul's sudden conversion experience became the prototype for what it means to become a Christian.

The remaining details about Paul's life must be pieced together through scattered references in his letters and in the Book of Acts, which was written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. Following his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul spent the next 25 years traveling more than 10,000 miles by foot and boat throughout the areas north of the Mediterranean Sea, supporting himself by his craft as a tentmaker as well as occasional contributions from the small Christian communities he established. He traveled to Jerusalem on three different occasions to meet with Jesus' inner circle of Jewish followers. He endured beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks and other hazards of travel in the ancient world. Eventually he was transported to Rome, where he was placed under house arrest and died around the year 62 CE—most likely a violent death ordered by the crazy Roman Emperor Nero.

What we know about Paul's religious beliefs is found in the letters he wrote to members of the struggling little Christian communities scattered around Greece and Turkey. Of the fourteen biblical books attributed to Paul, only about half were actually written by him. As with other books in the Bible, including the four Gospels, anonymous writers would attribute authorship of their works to well-known figures in order to bolster the books' authenticity. These letters were written in the decade between 50 and 60 CE, thus making them the oldest books in the New Testament—written several years before the Gospel of Mark and several decades before the Gospel of John. Paul's interpretation of Jesus helped to shape the *kerygma*—the core message of the Christian faith—even before the Gospels themselves were written. As we puzzle over the long delay in committing the story of Jesus into written form, we need to remember that all of Jesus' earliest followers, including Paul, expected that human history would come to an end with the return of the resurrected Christ **during their lifetime**. Therefore, there was no point in writing down the dramatic story of Jesus as the Messiah for the benefit of future generations. Everything the early Christians did was viewed as temporary until the imminent Second Coming. Paul's letters should be viewed in this light—as short-term advice rather than as timeless truths for centuries to come.

What are the key ingredients of the "Gospel According to Paul"? His teachings are filled with apparent contradictions, and much of the specific advice he offered to his followers is simply unacceptable by today's standards of justice and equality. Even though he wrote that in Christ, "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female" [Galatians, 3:28], he also insisted that women should be subordinate to men in both the home and the church. "As in all congregations of God's people, women should not address the meeting. They should keep their place as the [Jewish] law directs. If there is something they want to

know, they can ask their own husbands at home. It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation.”[1 Corinthians 14:34-35] “Similarly Paul accepted the institution of slavery as one of the facts of life. He made no effort to call slaves into freedom. He expressed a kind of pastoral compassion for the slaves but contented himself with fine-tuning the institution of slavery itself, so that it might be kinder and gentler.” [John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, pp. 101-102] In his letter to the Colossians, Paul enjoined slaves to “obey in everything those who are your earthly masters [3:22] while also admonishing their masters to “treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven.” [4:1]

Paul also held attitudes about sexuality that seem unacceptable to many of us. He viewed marriage as a last-resort solution reserved for those who could not otherwise control their sexual urges. After all, with the end of the world coming at any time, what’s the point in having a family? Likewise, in his letter to the Romans, Paul condemns the “shameful passions” of the wicked. “Their women have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and their men in turn, giving up natural relations with women, burn with lust for one another; males behave indecently with males, and are paid in their own persons the fitting wage of such perversion.” [1:27] This passage, along with a handful of verses extracted from the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew scripture, have been marshaled as a general condemnation of same-sex relations. John Shelby Spong, author of the best-selling book titled *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, believes that Paul may have himself been a gay man. [pp. 140-41]

For me, the most important issue about Paul is not his antiquated ideas about women or slavery or homosexuality. **It is the fact that biblical literalists to this day have used Paul’s writings to justify the oppression of women, gay people, and minorities.** We shouldn’t blame Paul for this. He was, after all, a man of his times: the product of a patriarchal culture. However, what I **do** hold the Apostle Paul responsible for is his radical re-casting of the fundamental meaning of Jesus’ mission. The central theme of Jesus’ life and teachings was the **kingdom (or domain) of God**, in which the conventional wisdom about who is righteous and powerful is turned upside-down. Paul, in contrast, shows almost no interest in the actual life of Jesus and his ministry of healing and reconciliation on earth. Instead, Paul is obsessed with **sin and salvation**. The human Jesus the iconoclast becomes the supernatural Christ the Redeemer. For Paul, the central purpose of Jesus was to liberate humanity from condemnation under the law of Torah. He accomplished this through his sacrificial death and resurrection. To put it bluntly, Paul is far more preoccupied with the meaning of Jesus’ **death and resurrection** rather than with Jesus’ **life**.

Unfortunately, it was Paul’s version of the Christian faith that became enshrined in the subsequent creeds and rituals of the Christian church. The Apostles’ Creed makes no mention whatsoever of the life of Jesus. Communion, the central ritual of the Christian faith, became a celebration not of community life but of sacrificial death. According to the Gospel of Paul, the most important goal of the religious life is to experience conversion and thus become saved by accepting this gift of God’s grace. According to Paul, people are saved by their beliefs rather than by their actions—“justification by faith” rather than justification by works. To me, that is a religion **about** Jesus, but it is not the religion **of** Jesus.