

## Chapter 4.08 Paul

This chapter is optional if you do not worry much about Paul. Please do read the last section on anti-Semitism and making Jesus special. Paul was the biggest figure in Christianity after Jesus. He led Christians to focus on a life of church, devotion, and piety. This chapter cannot cover all his influence so it focuses on his idea of Jesus as the divine Lord Christ and on a problem that centers on the term “justification”. Because of Paul’s writing style and the complexity of his topics, it is dangerous to quote him in small snippets. You have to read large chunks or whole letters. This chapter cannot quote large chunks so it does not quote at all.

### **His Life.**

Most facts about Paul come from the Book of Acts by Luke. Dates for Paul are about 0-5 CE to 62-67 CE, half-a-generation younger than Jesus. Paul was a Diaspora Jew, born or reared in Tarsus, a city now in Turkey near Lebanon and Syria. Originally his name was “Saul”. He said he was a strict Pharisee and a Roman citizen by birth. To be a Roman citizen by birth, his father had to be a Roman citizen, unusual for a Jew. He went to Jerusalem when a young man, where he sought to study with Pharisees but ended up working for the Jewish authorities as a spy, provocateur, and hunter of Christians – work he later regretted. To do that work, he would have had to ally with Sadducees, unusual for a Pharisee, and also unusual because Pharisees and Sadducees did not spend a lot of resources hunting down Christians. Some writers think Paul’s claim to be a strict Pharisee who hunted down Christians is an exaggeration to dramatize his change and to dramatize the situation of Christians.

About three or four years after Jesus died, in the late 30s CE, Saul was on the road in Syria, probably on the way to Damascus, when a light blinded him and he fell. Saul “saw the light”, which is probably how that phrase got into Western idiom. His companions did not see the light. While semi-conscious, a voice spoke to him. The voice identified itself as the Risen Christ, and told Saul to stop hurting Christians. Altogether, Saul had at least two such “out of body” experiences, perhaps more, the matter is not clear. In at least one experience, Saul was taken to a middle level of heaven where he saw some aspect of God-Jesus and learned some of the secrets of existence. In the first experience, on the road, when he was blinded, the voice told him to go to Damascus to stay with a particular Christian, where he would get advice. On later accepting Christ, Saul’s sight returned and he was renamed “Paul”. After a while, Paul went to northern Arabia to study, where he stayed for as long as three years. After returning to Jerusalem and Antioch, he worked tirelessly for the Christian movement. Paul worked almost entirely away from Jerusalem, mostly in Turkey and Greece among Diaspora Jews and God Fearers. He worked from about 42 CE up to his death. He founded some churches and helped many others. His letters are the earliest documents of the New Testament and might be the most influential documents in Christianity, as much as the gospels. He suffered many hardships, including whippings and beatings, and had many adventures.

About 60 CE, the Romans arrested him. The governor had the option to send Paul to Rome for trial, and did. Paul planned to continue to Spain after his trial to work more. Instead, he died in Rome. Legend says he died in a persecution. Legend also says Peter and he were in Rome together, which might be true. True or not, the stories fuel the Roman Catholic argument that the Bishop of Rome

(Pope) represents the truest apostolic succession and thus is the highest authority in Christianity.

Paul did not get along with James the Just and appears not to have gotten along with Peter while they were in Syria together. As related in the Book of Acts, James found out that some Christians in Antioch were not following the dietary laws and sent representatives to inquire and to force compliance if needed. Peter went along with James until Peter had his dream. Eventually James and Peter compromised to allow a dual standard, one for Jewish Christians and one for non-Jews. Paul accused Peter of backing down to James and of forcing Christians to revert to Judaism. The truth is more complicated, and it seems to me that Paul backed down, got run out of town, and then projected his own cowardice onto Peter. How various writers see this case depends on their opinions about the standard Christian package. Writers that sympathize with the divinity of Christ, and with the mission to the Gentiles (non-Jews) based on the divinity of Christ, tend to see it Paul's way.

Paul insisted that non-Jewish Christians are not bound by any Law in the Old Testament (Tanakh). He also insisted that all Christians should follow the Jewish Law and the civil laws anyway as much as possible so as to avoid any confusion or bad feelings.

### **Justified in the Risen Christ.**

Most of Paul's explanations of Christianity were done in the context of fixing squabbles in churches. Paul had a difficult if sometimes beautiful writing style. He was very smart. He was a great theological innovator. If he had not been breaking new ground in theology, and did not have to write in the context of fixing squabbles, he would have been a great systematic theologian. Unfortunately, his ideas about Christ, God, Church, and Law, are in bits and pieces between passages in which he admonishes or encourages congregations. It is important to take him in context but it takes a lot of space to do that properly; so I do not quote here him. It is better just to write about him than to misquote him. Christians anguish over Paul, primarily because of passages that have to do with an idea called "justification". I cannot explain Paul here but I can provide enough so that the reader does not have to anguish and can go on to other reading. Paul sought the answers to "Why did Christ have to die?", "Why did Christ have to be resurrected?", and "How does Christ's death and resurrection work to save?" It helps to stick to a few simple facts and ideas:

-Paul never knew Jesus personally, unless we include the brief episode on the road in which Christ spoke to Paul through the light.

-Paul had that experience. That experience dominated his life and changed his ideas. He had to make sense of that experience in terms of Christ, what he often calls "the Risen Christ". He did not start with a systematic theology. He did not have knowledge of Jesus. First he had an experience and then he shaped available ideas to make sense of that experience. For Paul, experience of the Risen Christ is what makes Christianity special and utterly distinct from Judaism. Nothing else rivals that experience for making Christianity special. To Paul, this experience was the "rock and roll moment"; all the rest is only the "mags" and "fanzines" that follow in the wake of the experience; all the rest is only disco or soft rock.

-We will see that the problems came when Paul opposed that experience to the Jewish Law and when he sought ultimate validation for that experience.

-The key to Christ and to the experience was in his death and resurrection. Christ's death and resurrection does everything. Christ's death and resurrection automatically magically does something special for all believers. Everything else had to be seen in terms of Christ's death and resurrection. It is not clear exactly what they do and how they do it. That was what Paul had to figure out.

-Paul was almost completely uninterested in the facts of Jesus' life or in Jesus as a person. He never mentions anything about Jesus' life that does not have to do with Jesus' death and resurrection. Because of that, in most of this chapter I do not refer to Jesus but to "Christ", "the Christ", or "the Risen Christ".

-Paul was not interested in Jesus' message apart from Jesus' death and resurrection or apart from the experience of the Risen Christ. Paul clearly understood aspects of the message such as the importance of love. One of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament is from Paul on love. But he did not seem to care about other aspects of the message. He almost never mentions parables or lessons from the parables. He mentions divorce only because it is a problem in a church. Likely Paul took for granted that people knew the message of Jesus and was more concerned with how to select from it, interpret it, and live it in light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

-Paul almost never calls Jesus by his name. To Paul, Jesus is almost always and only the "Christ" or especially the "Risen Christ". "Christ" is a technical term, the name of a divinity. "Risen Christ" is the key to the identity of the god.

-Paul probably started out expecting a general resurrection and the restoration of Israel as part of the Kingdom of God but he moved from that to an idea of the Church on earth as the Kingdom of God that matters. He talks little about the general resurrection except as a background matter of doctrine that everybody takes for granted. Jesus' death and resurrection were no longer primarily the prelude to a general resurrection but were something magically effective in and of themselves.

-Paul accepts Christ's divinity, Christ's resurrection, baptism for the removal of sins, and the Lord's Supper as givens of the Church that he got from other Christians. He does not invent these ideas and practices, and he does not modify them as far as I can tell. These ideas and practices predate Paul and they were part of the meaning of Christ that Paul had to work into his ideas. If Liberal Christians now see the deification of Christ as the betrayal of Jesus, that betrayal does not begin with Paul. Paul made sense of ideas that other people had already advanced.

-For Paul, non-Jewish Christians did not have to follow Jewish Law. Partly this was a recruiting stance, partly this stance might have been based on Paul's experience as a Diaspora Jew somewhat apart from other Jews, and partly this stance was how Paul understood the efficacy of the Risen Christ.

-For most Jews other than Paul, just by being a reasonably observant Jew, any Jew was pretty well OK in the eyes of God. Jews did not have to do anything special other than be reasonably observant. To Paul, after Christ, that was no longer true. Being a fairly observant Jew was no longer enough. Now both Jews and non-Jews had to believe in the Risen Christ.

-Why was being a Jew now not enough? Before Jews had the Law, so it must be the Law that is now not

enough. Paul had to do three almost incompatible things: (a) find a lack in the Law now, (b) explain why the Law was enough before, (c) and explain why it had still to be revered. Whatever Christians have now has to make up for whatever the Law lacks. Whatever Christians have now must be non-Law and more-than-Law. We can understand whatever Christians have now by contrasting it with the Jewish Law. This is like understanding true rock-n-roll by contrasting it with pop. Understanding something good by contrasting it with something else is dangerous. It tends to make the other thing (the Law) bad even if you do not mean so. It leads to misunderstanding what we do have. Paul took both missteps with the Law.

-Before, being a reasonably observant Jew insured that you would be resurrected and would participate in the restoration and ascendancy of Israel. Now, being a Christian took the place of that. So what did being a Christian insure you? Belief in a general resurrection coming soon was fading, so Paul could not rely on general resurrection as the goal of Christian life. Paul said that being a Christian gave you salvation. It saved you from death and perhaps something worse, although how was not quite clear. Later generations would say that it allowed you to go to heaven to be with Jesus.

-Before, being a reasonably observant Jew insured that you got whatever reward you deserved. Now, Christians had to do something like being reasonably obedient, but not exactly like being reasonably obedient, so as to get their peculiarly Christian reward. What did Christians have to do be sure that they got the reward that was due to them, salvation from death? What was there about Christian life that was parallel to being reasonably observant yet that contrasted enough so that Christians could be distinct from Jews? What was parallel to the Law but not exactly like the Law and that could bring the particularly Christian reward?

-When a person follows any system of law, including Jewish Law, we say that person is a "just" person. That person is "justified" in the law. Following the law justifies that person. So, even though whatever marks a Christian is not about the Jewish Law, let us borrow the term "justified" to describe what a Christian has that is both like and unlike the Jewish Law. Christianity justifies Christians. A Christian is justified before God. Justification brings a Christian salvation and the reward of eternal life.

-Jews get justified by being reasonably observant. How do Christians get justified? The answer is justification by grace through faith. Justification by grace through faith is the big experience that explains the Christ and that gives Christianity its distinctiveness to the Jewish Law.

### **Continuing: Justification, Faith, and Grace.**

Paul has to find out what Christian justification is, what feature of Christianity brings justification, and how that feature works to bring justification. I do not think Paul is clear about this matter. A lot of what we think is in Paul was put into him by later people such as Augustine and Martin Luther; but we are so used to their later terms and ideas that we now read it into Paul automatically. If you have heard sermons about Paul or read about Paul, likely you got a good dose of Augustine and Luther too without realizing it. I try to explain enough so you can decide for yourself if you ever read more.

-I think Paul did not really care about justification that much. It was only a tool to allow him to validate experience of the Risen Christ, allow a contrast between Jews and Christians, allow him to emphasize

the magic of the death and resurrection of Christ, and emphasize faith in Christ. He never meant justification, faith, or grace to become the technical terms they are now. He never meant faith to stand in contrast to works. Church members needed to know what faith in the death and resurrection gave them, especially in contrast to what Jews used to have. Paul offered them handy terms. Paul said faith opened the door to grace, grace really gave you justification, and justification gave you access to Jesus, God, the Church, and heaven.

-Sometimes Paul is like children who first understand Jesus' message, new Christian converts, or some Taoist idealists. Christian children and "newbies", and simplistic Taoists, cannot see why everybody doesn't just "get it" and be good spontaneously, why the true good nature of people doesn't just well up to overcome the bad, why people continue doing bad, and why people are still hurtful. They cannot see why people need rules. If we get the idea and we become good, then why do we need rules to make us Good? We just are good and act well. Good is bigger than rules. If we have Good, we can forget about rules. This is why Paul had such a difficult time with churches where members acted badly and/or squabbled. It was just nonsensical. To correct those churches, Paul had to invoke both the Law and the good that transcended the Law as revealed in Jesus.

-Jews had the Law to justify them. Now Christians have faith to justify them. Faith in what? And what is faith? Christians have an experience of the Risen Christ, faith that the Christ really did rise, and faith that the Risen Christ saves. Faith is the experience of the Risen Christ and his efficacy to save, the experience that Paul had. If you believe that faith can save, then faith can save. If you believe that faith in the Risen Christ can save, then it can. The experience justifies itself and produces justification automatically. Many modern Christians still feel this way, cultivate this experience, and advise other people to seek this experience.

-How does faith justify? It might make sense to say that faith saves directly but Paul says that faith saves by justifying first. That seems odd.

-Paul needed to sustain his contrast between Jews-with-Law versus Christians-above-the-Law. Here Paul does something odd to save his argument, especially for a Jew, and even for a Pharisee concerned with ritual purity. If Jews could have been justified just by being reasonably observant then the Law would have been enough and there would have been no need for the Risen Christ. If jazz were enough, there would have been no need for rock and roll. Paul had to put down pop so as to raise up rock and roll. Paul had to laugh at Paul McCartney so as to crusade with John Lennon. Paul argues that Jews were not justified by being Jews and by being only reasonably observant but needed to be absolutely completely pure observers of the Law to be justified. Just being a Jew and being pretty good at observance was not enough. Paul knew that neither Jews nor anybody else could ever be good enough and pure enough. So although the Law held out the promise of justification, it never really justified. The Law could never be enough because nobody could live up to it. In fact, by pointing out the inability of humans to be perfect, the Law in effect accused us all and condemned us all to death. The Law promised justification but really produced condemnation. We need to be above this trap. We need to have faith in Jesus. Only faith in Christ justifies and brings eternal life despite the Law.

Based on what I have seen among all the normal Jews I have ever known, based on my meager knowledge, even allowing for legendary Jewish guilt, this argument about needing to be perfect in the

Law is really odd. Jews do not feel trapped by the Law. Many Jews feel liberated by the guidance of the Law. No sane Jew expects to be absolutely perfect. That is why the Law allows for absolving and purifying. That is why God is merciful. That is why the Law can be summarized as "Love God, and Love Your Neighbor". When Paul overlooks the fullness of the Law including forgiveness and love, he steps out of Judaism into an artificial hyper-logical world designed to validate his arguments. Paul forced Western Christians into the duality of bad system versus good intuition-faith-grace, from which they have both suffered and benefited ever since.

-(Paul elaborates on the relation between the Law, death, Original Sin, and innate evil in the human soul, but it would take too long to go into those issues here. Augustine used this aspect of Paul heavily. Paul's elaborations are useful to show how any system might lead to confusion and stultification, especially that of Augustine, but that is not the main point in this chapter.)

-Ultimately the Law does not justify even though we need the Law to understand the idea of justification. Faith does justify, but how? Faith cannot justify by itself or we would have anarchy. People could say they believe and are justified by their belief, and then do anything they wanted. In fact, some Christians came to exactly this conclusion and began to fornicate and break the Roman law. Paul had to argue vigorously against Christians that abused faith. So faith does not justify by itself.

-Instead faith opens the door to God's grace. God sees particular people that sincerely believe, and he chooses from among the sincere believers the special people to whom he will give the gift of justification, salvation, and eternal life.

-Nothing we do, including believing really hard, can induce God to save us. We have to have faith first, but faith is not enough. Even if we have that experience of the Risen Christ, that experience is not enough. Even demons know that Jesus is the Christ who will rise. God chooses among the faithful who will be saved. God alone chooses who is to be saved and who is to be damned. If God has criteria for choosing some people rather than others, we cannot know those criteria because then we could follow them mechanically to induce God to save us, and that kind of procedure would be the Law and would not be faith.

-How do we tell sincere faith, real faith, from faith that is not strong enough, fake faith, or faith in the wrong things? This part of the argument is sad: Even though we started from the special experience of the Risen Christ, that experience alone is not enough. There can be guidelines but there can be no ultimate objective criteria that humans can know because, if there were, we would have the Law again. Only God can tell real faith from substandard faith.

-Depending absolutely on God opens the door to the issue of predestination. Some people are designated from before time to be saved or to be damned regardless of what they do. Predestination was a horrendous bad step allowed by the artificial argument of Paul, but I will not go into that question here.

-Again Paul is in an odd position. Rather than doing what Jesus wants, salvation is now the goal. For salvation, Christians must have faith. But a declaration of faith is not enough. Even having the experience is not enough. There can be no objective criteria for faith. So how do Christians know if they

have real faith and are saved? They cannot. By seeking to explain how the Risen Christ saves in opposition to the Jewish Law, Paul actually undermined hope in the Risen Christ. This dilemma opened the way for other abuses, such as using wealth and status as indicators of God's favor and of correct faith, and using poverty as indicators of God's disfavor and of bad faith. To Paul, the Law promised justification but produced condemnation. Paul then substituted a faith that promises comfort and salvation but produces anxiety and damnation. These problems plague everybody even now when rich and middle class Christians look down on the poor, an inversion of Jesus' message.

**Comments So Far.** Paul condemns systematization when he accuses the Law. He raises faith and grace to a kind of anti-logic. Yet he forces a logical system onto ideas about the Risen Christ, Law, justification, faith, salvation, life, death, and grace. We have to be careful when we use logic to condemn the Law (to condemn logic) and use logic to extol escaping logic. It can be done, but not as Paul did it, and not as did later elaborators such as Augustine.

I understand the need to encourage faith and the need to point out that a set of external rules is not enough. We need inspiration too. We stress that jump of inspiration all the time with athletes and children. Even mathematicians rely on faith to be creative, and we encourage business people to "think outside the box". I understand how a belief in a risen God would lead Paul to put faith on the side of life and to put any firm system on the side of death. I have trouble with Paul in general because I disagree with him in some basic points about Jesus and Christ. Paul erred in focusing entirely on the divinity of Christ while overlooking the message of Jesus. He erred in thinking that the magic of the death and resurrection was enough. He erred in focusing on the Risen God Christ while overlooking the living prophet Jesus. He compounded his errors by deliberately mistaking how Jewish Law worked so that he could bolster his experience of the Risen Christ and his belief in the efficacy of faith. He did not originate emphasis on the divinity of Christ but he did give it the kind of systematization, like the Law, that he condemned. We do not need to follow him in his errors.

Standard Christians get caught in a trap of seeking an "out of body" experience, not being sure it is true or enough, trying to make the experience even more intense to make sure, never being sure, falling back on ritual and points of dogma, arguing about when to get baptized and whether sprinkling is enough or if you have to get dunked, and so on – somewhat like drugs, fashions, gadgets, success, or New Age. Particular groups develop criteria for a true experience versus a false one, and for true faith versus false faith, but nobody trusts their criteria other than themselves. The Roman Catholic Church has Confirmation. Many "born again" Protestant groups look for a particular shining moment such as when Paul "saw the light" - without that particular moment, you cannot be a real Christian no matter what you do or what you say; lifelong study of Jesus is not enough; going to church is not enough; Confirmation is not enough. They want to be able to heal people, do miracles, or experience abundant life to be sure they have had a true experience and really are saved. For people who should just believe in Christ and get on with it, a lot of Protestants spend a lot of time worrying about what they have to do (acts) to get into heaven. Rather than freeing Christians from Law, Paul enslaved them to worry.

The best antidote to Paul's bad arguments is not to get involved. Do not worry about strong experiences, the divinity of Jesus, justification, faith, Law, being saved, grace, what it takes to be saved, and damnation. Instead follow the message of Jesus and be useful. If you want a "kick-ass" religious experience to go along with being useful, to make sure you are abundantly alive, then volunteer for

“Doctors Without Frontiers”, a good non-religious group, or something similar.

### **Faith and Works.**

Paul’s contrast of faith versus the Law established another parallel contrast of faith versus works. This contrast too is misleading and has caused a lot of damage. My advice also is to ignore it. You will run into it if you read more, it is a keystone of Protestantism, and it bothers a lot of Americans even now, so I briefly describe it here.

As we have seen, already by the time of Paul, some Christians got the idea that they were above the Jewish Law and above all law; they could do whatever they wanted as long as they believed in the Christ. Paul correctly said, “no”, and reminded them that a true believer could never do anything immoral. It seems the solution to this dilemma is to have people also do acts of faith such as help the poor, especially since they had to go through rituals of faith such as baptism that are clearly acts. Paul did not allow that option because to do so would be to allow the Jewish Law back, especially if we take the Law according to its best version, which blends intent (faith) and works. Some Church Fathers, in the four centuries after Paul, such as Augustine, also insisted on faith above works, even though they were strict about rituals such as baptism and strict about the need not to succumb to persecution. After them, the problem became unimportant for a thousand years as the Church found a balance between faith and works.

As the Roman Catholic Church aged, it slipped into some bad practices. The infamous selling of “indulgences” is a bad practice that helped spark Protestantism in the 1500s and after. The details are not important. Essentially, the Roman Catholic Church said: “If you do this, then we guarantee you will go to heaven eventually. Of course, you have to have faith first, and you must be sincerely contrite about any wrong you might have done, but we assume you already do have faith and are sincerely contrite, or you would not be inquiring of the Church; so that issue does not come up.” In effect, the Church put works before faith, and provided a list of specific works that would guarantee salvation.

Luther and Calvin were outraged. Their response was a vigorous return to Paul, Augustine, and the primacy of faith. In their turn, they overdid it. To get a sense of how far they overdid it, think of Luther’s reaction to the Epistle of James. James advocates balance between faith and works. We need both. In my terms, James says both to have faith and to be useful. In a beautiful phrase, James says that faith without works is empty. Luther prepared a new version of the Bible just for Protestants. He wanted to omit the letter of James from his new Bible because it disagreed with him on this issue, and so it must be wrong, not of the Holy Spirit, and not canonical. Luckily, better people prevailed and James remains in the Bible.

I am not sure why Protestants remain so agitated over the question of faith and works. They use this issue to keep up a contrast to the Roman Catholic Church and this issue gives them a point that they can use as a test of commitment. I think their version of Roman Catholic thought on this issue is just wrong, and they maintain a wrong view primarily to sustain a contrast between institutions. Once you think in these terms, it is hard to get out, and you want everybody else to think like this and share your dilemma. This way of thinking hurts people. People that get lost in this mindset are susceptible to other odd points of doctrine. Often people that are already in this mindset make other people lost in this way too so they

can control the other people. If you begin to think in terms of this dilemma, you will get lost, and will be susceptible. Again, the best tactic is to avoid the trap.

### **The Paradox of Faith, Law, and Institutions.**

It seems as if an emphasis on faith coupled with arguments about the insufficiency of Law would undermine the authority of institutions, including the Church. Some Christians did take it that way, and Paul sternly corrects them. Romantic rebels still take it that way. In fact, for most people, a reliance on faith alone without corresponding actions leads to the paradoxical opposite: it makes them depend on institutions; it strengthens the power of institutions over people. Faith alone is ethereal and a little weird. Most people cannot live with that. They want more structure and security. The less structure and security they get from faith alone, the more they need it from an institution. The more they hear that they have to rely on faith alone, the more they want to rely on the institution that tells them they have to rely on faith alone and tells them what faith to rely on. The closest parallel to this I have seen with my own eyes are New Age, Asian religious, and Christian groups that stress belief and that live apart from mainstream society, that is cults. Any sports team that says, "you gotta believe" is a little like that. The early Church was a little like that - maybe all new groups are- but I do not want to paint the early Church as a weirdo cult to make this point because, on the whole, it was not a weirdo cult.

Did Paul stress faith alone as a way to break down connections with other beliefs and institutions, weld people into the Church, and strengthen the Church? Was Paul something of a cult leader? Probably, yes; but he was not Charles Manson and he did not hand out any poison. He was a strong leader who knew how to use ideas to build a strong institution.

### **The Epistles.**

We do not know Paul's native language. Probably it was Greek. He also knew Aramaic from growing up in Tarsus and knew Hebrew as a student. In any case, the epistles were written in Greek. As was common then, he did not write the epistles himself but dictated them to a secretary. The secretary edited for clarity before sending the letters. For having been dictated, the letters have good overall structure. They also sometimes ramble and they often read as if they are recorded speech. Most epistles were edited again even after the secretary edited them. Scholars argue about the extent of editing and the identity of possible additional editors.

Traditionally, Paul had credit for fourteen epistles, as below. Of the fourteen, scholars accept seven epistles as coming largely from Paul, as below. Of the seven disputed letters, some are likely not from Paul while some are unclear. I do not divide the seven disputed letters into "definitely no" and "maybe", except for one. It is better to find the latest ideas by going on the Internet. The epistle called "Hebrews" definitely was not from Paul. It was passed about as if from Paul; we would call this practice "forgery" today but that word is too strong for ancient practice. The ideas in this letter about the Law have been incredibly influential in Christian history and, tragically, this letter is also biased against Hebrews, including especially Jews, and the bias helped form the basis for later persecution of Jews. The epistle has to be read carefully. I disagree with much of it. If Christians accept all of the New Testament as coming from the Holy Spirit regardless of who wrote or edited any piece, then they can accept Hebrews as from the Holy Spirit; but they should not continue to give it the weight of Paul's authority and they

should think about just what kind of stuff can come out of the Holy Spirit.

*Pauline Epistles.* The seven accepted epistles are listed first.

Romans 1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians Galatians

Philippians 1

Thessalonians Philemon

Colossians Ephesians 2 Thessalonians Titus Hebrews 1 Timothy 2 Timothy

### **Misconceptions.**

Both standard and non-standard Christians have misconceptions about Paul. It is a good idea to clear up a few.

-“Paul introduced radically new ideas into Christianity, such as the divinity of Jesus”. No, he did not. He, along with others such as the John who wrote the gospel and many thinkers around Antioch, stressed new ideas and systematized new ideas, but the ideas were around before Paul and came from people other than Paul. Paul originated some ideas, promoted new ideas, and was important in the success of some new ideas over competing ideas; but he did not originate them alone.

-“Paul’s ideas were all non-Jewish and all purely Greek. Paul Hellenized Jesus.” That is not true. Some of Paul’s ideas were Jewish and some were Greek. It is hard to say which are which. Jewish and Greek ideas were well mixed well before Jesus and Paul, so the distinction might not make full sense. To me, Paul seems more a mediocre Greek philosopher than a good Jewish prophet but I am not a competent judge. Paul did promote a general shift in worldview from Jewish to Greek, and Paul did promote some ideas that went better with the Greek worldview, such as the divinity of Jesus. But Paul did not originate these ideas and he did not accomplish the shift single-handed.

-“Paul founded all the churches outside the Holy Land. When the Jerusalem Church fell, the remaining Christian churches had all been founded by Paul, and thus the Church was Paul’s Church.” No, he did not. Churches existed in many cities where Paul had never gone. Paul is clear that he never went to Rome until the end of his life, yet Rome already had a large thriving Christian community, probably made up of Diaspora Jews. Neither Peter nor Paul founded that community originally. Nobody knows who founded that community originally. A thriving Christian community developed all over Egypt, and Paul had nothing to do with Egypt. Whether or not people wish to see Paul as the real founder of Church communities depends on whether people like Paul and whether they like the original Church after Jesus. If you like both, you want to see him as the founder of it all, of course continuing in the spirit of Jesus. If you like neither, you blame him for it all, of course betraying the spirit of Jesus.

-“Paul returned women to a subservient role”. No, he did not. After Jesus lifted women out of subservience, the Church in general returned them. Paul was both following and promoting the reactionary trend. Paul wanted peace in churches. If suppressing women could give superficial peace, he, as a man, was willing to pay that price without worrying too much about what price women paid.

This return to subservience for women violates the teachings of Jesus but Paul is not alone to blame.

-“Paul condemned homosexuality and thus began the Church tradition of condemning any non-stereotyped gender roles”. It is not that simple. Jews and early Christians both were uncomfortable with non-stereotypical gender roles including homosexuality, promiscuity (sex outside of marriage), and prostitution. People then were probably not as squeamish about homosexuality as people now but that does not mean all people openly accepted it. Paul condemned promiscuity and prostitution most. He condemned homosexual promiscuity and homosexual prostitution. He probably did not think about homosexuality as such very much but saw it as promiscuity because it was sexual activity outside of marriage. Neither Jews nor early Christians would have understood homosexual marriage even though (I think) it did sometimes happen in that world. I do not know if Paul would have condemned homosexuality if done tastefully as in marriage, done without a sense of promiscuity or prostitution, and done so as not to hurt any existing marriage. He seemed to condemn any sex outside of heterosexual marriage. I do not know if Paul was more fervently against non-stereotypical gender roles than the average early Christian but I doubt it. Whether or not you agree with the view of Paul and early Christians is up to you but this view did not originate with Paul. Whether or not you think the view of Paul and early Christians is against the spirit of Jesus’ message is also up to you. Bishop John Shelby Spong thinks Paul was a repressed gay man and that Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality comes out of self-dislike. Paul might have been gay and he might have been repressed, but his advice against promiscuity, gay or straight, did not have to come from there.

In our time, we think of promiscuity as sex that is not aimed at a relationship, is not aimed at gaining beneficial experience, does not make up for loneliness, or hurts an existing relationship. We condemn promiscuity, gay or straight. Allowing for these small differences, we are not far off the view of Paul and early Christians.

-“Paul changed the direction of Christianity away from the social service of Jesus’ message and away from expecting a change of the world towards Church membership and towards inner piety.” Again, Paul did not do this alone. He was part of a general trend among followers of Jesus that happened because Jesus was crucified, Israel was not restored, and there was no general resurrection. The new idea of Christianity that focused on piety within a strong institution was congenial to Paul’s personal outlook, he did promote it, and he likely speeded it up quite a bit; but he did not start it. This kind of shift toward institutions and to inner attitude in the context of an institution happens all the time to all kinds of movements. Moreover, Christians did not stop social action and did not stop following the message of Jesus’ just because they became pious members of a church. The leaders did not write about that kind of beneficial external activity so we do not see it as much in the historical record but that kind of activity was still probably the most important aspect of following Jesus for the average member.

-“Paul was a Jew-hating Jew and a powerful instigator of anti-Semitism.” See below. Paul might or might not have come to dislike Jews as he battled with them over Christ and Christianity. I doubt that he did. That is not as important as the fact that he had to “put down” Judaism in order to “raise up” Christ. I do not think that Paul intended to put down Judaism in the modern sense of denigrating it or demonizing it. He needed to show it was less than Christianity, and so he had to put it down in that sense. He takes pains to show that Jews were the darlings of God, and to show the virtue and sensibility of the Law, at least until Christ came and until faith in Christ superseded the Law. I do not think he was an anti-Semite

of the sort that plagued the West. Unfortunately, his ideas could be used to denigrate and demonize Jews and the Law, and have been used that way. When reading him, try to think of how Americans sometimes laugh at the English, or how the English think about their overseas cousins, or how Americans or the English sometimes feel about the French or the Germans. Then think about the Irish and the English, or sometimes the French and Germans. What starts out as a contrast can get out of hand and can serve other ends.

Paul was the right man, at the right time, to push the Church along toward becoming a strong institution, serving a particular range of people, whose members had the right attitude for life in an institution in a male-dominated family-dominated Empire, including the paradoxical emphasis on faith. He created a convincing theory of the right attitude based on ideas that were available at the time. He did not create the problems.

### **Paul, Special Jesus, Anti-Semitism, and Us.**

If you respect Jesus, it is natural to want to make him and his message special. Jesus developed out of Judaism. If you want to make Jesus special, you have to contrast him with Judaism. You have to find something about Jesus that Judaism was not. As much as we do not want to put down Judaism, in order to make Jesus special by contrasting him with Judaism, we imply that Judaism was inadequate. That was what Paul did. We all become Paul when we want to make Jesus special. Unfortunately, that way does lead to anti-Semitism. At the same time, when Jews think, even without saying it, that Judaism is superior to other religions, and Jews are superior to other peoples, they do the same. Most ethnic groups, religious groups, and countries do the same. That does not excuse the practice. We have to be careful about what we do to extol our leaders.

Probably there is no good way to handle the situation but the best I can think of follows. If we read Paul with an open mind and do not look for anti-Semitism, what follows in this paragraph is similar to what Paul did in his work. Judaism is as good as any system can be that is based on laws. It is as good as Indian Shastras, Chinese state piety, Greek philosophy, English case law, or French rationalism. It is as good as most constitutions of most nations. Judaism is an excellent representation of the Silver Rule and of how far the Silver Rule can be taken as the basis for government, society, and life. But we need something more than the Silver Rule. We need something more than constitutions or law books. We need something clearly positive. That is what Jesus gave us. Other people might have stated the Golden Rule before him but Jesus made the Golden Rule a mission. He made it above and beyond the state and the laws. It is not a denigration of Judaism that Jesus came out of Judaism, and pushed Judaism to its spiritual peak, but an honor to both Jesus and Judaism. Jesus does not put down Jewish Law or any other system because he does not offer another system. There is nothing wrong with good systems such as Judaism as far as they go; but we need more. To appreciate that we need something more, we have to contrast Jesus with what came before. That is all. This explanation does not distinguish Jesus from some other trans-rule religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and some strains of Hinduism, and it does hold in high regard the many good deeds that Jews and other peoples do on top of their Law; but those are other topics. This version of Jesus is not metaphysically special but hopefully it is special enough.