

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

PAUL

**CHRISTOPHER J.
MONAGHAN**



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INTRODUCTION

YOU CAN LOVE OR LOATHE PAUL, BUT IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE FIRST DECADES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT BEFORE THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN, YOU CANNOT IGNORE HIM. FOR SOME HE IS A HEROIC FIGURE WHO LOOMS LIKE A COLOSSUS ON THE HORIZON, COURAGEOUSLY ESTABLISHING COMMUNITIES, GOING WHERE NO ONE HAD GONE BEFORE, SKETCHING OUT FOR THE FIRST TIME A DISTINCTIVE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN A WAY THAT WOULD SHAPE CHRISTIAN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE DOWN TO THE PRESENT DAY. FOR OTHERS HE WAS, AND CONTINUES TO BE, A FIGURE OF CONTROVERSY ON MANY FRONTS, SOMEONE WHO WAS ALL TOO PREPARED TO CAST HIS COMMUNITIES ADrift FROM THEIR MOORINGS IN JEWISH THOUGHT AND PRACTICE, TO CLAIM HIS OWN AUTHORITY IN HIS MANY CONFLICTS WITH OTHERS—EITHER WITHIN HIS DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, OR WITH THE ALREADY RECOGNIZED FIGURES OF JAMES AND PETER IN JERUSALEM.



¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^e but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 COR 13:1–13

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

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

There are a number of reasons why the modern reader should experience some perplexity when reading the letters of Paul, and they are worth outlining. For a start, these letters were not written in English, but a dialect of Greek current in the Roman empire of Paul's time called Koine. Paul, like his writings, are works of a particular time; written from, and addressed to, a religious and social context that is not our own. It almost seems too simple a point to make, but it is one that our constant exposure to the

letters of Paul as Christians tends to obscure. There is the danger of thinking just because we have heard or read these letters from childhood we should have some natural capacity to follow their logic, understand the concepts, and then be moved to implement Paul's instructions. To be sure, there is a great deal in these letters that transcend the boundaries of time and place and culture. 1 Cor 13:1–13, with its description of love, is but one sublime example. On the other hand, there are many texts that demand a great deal more work on the part of the reader and for a number of reasons.

The ways that Paul expresses himself have been shaped by his context. In particular, he expresses himself in the categories of a first century diaspora Jew who grows up immersed in Greek culture and living in the context of the Roman Empire.

So far so good, and I can hear some of you thinking, 'What's the big deal?' Without wanting to labour the point: this is but the tip of the iceberg. Unless we understand something of the world of Paul we are not actually listening to Paul at all, but some other 'construct' of him.

We learn best by examples, so let's begin with the claim that Paul says some very unflattering things about his various opponents from time to time. In Corinth there was a group of Christians who had come to Corinth after Paul and his co-workers had established this predominately Gentile community that gathered in various household churches. They claimed that they had letters of recommendation from Jerusalem. It seems



they claimed that they were more authentically Jewish Christians than Paul himself. Responding to them, Paul claims that they are ‘... *false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.*’ (2 Cor 11:13)

From our perspective it is understandable that we cringe at the way these probably well-intentioned disciples are caricatured and their reputation maligned by Paul. From a cultural perspective we need to appreciate that Paul and his contemporaries lived in an honour and shame society in which every challenge to one’s honour was expected to be defended; otherwise, one would be conceding the claims of one’s opponents. His honour

had been challenged, and he was within his rights—his honour in fact demanded that he defend himself by doubting the true motivations of his accusers.

This one example has many applications: Paul’s world is not our world, and his letters are not written for us, even though our Christian life has been shaped by them. There is a famous cartoon of Charles Shultz where Linus reflects on Paul’s letters after returning from Sunday school: ‘I MUST ADMIT, IT MAKES ME FEEL A LITTLE GUILTY.... I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE I’M READING SOMEONE’S MAIL!’ This is exactly the point. It is someone else’s mail; we are listening in on a conversation between Paul and his converts that

was never intended for us. One cannot help but wonder what Paul would have thought knowing that two thousand years later his letters addressed to the communities of Corinth, Galatia, Macedonia and Rome would still be closely read and examined.

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

A colonnaded street in Turkey





Pauline communities

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

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

the person entrusted to challenge those Corinthians who were supporting a fellow Christian involved in an incestuous relationship (1 Cor 5), or those rich members who saw no problem with being drunk when the poorer members of the community came to partake in the Eucharistic celebration! (1 Cor 11:21)

Paul's letters were often written in response to problems that either Paul or members within the various communities had identified. For instance, Philemon was written to help a Christian slave (Onesimus) who had fled to Paul during one of his imprisonments. Its aim is ensuring a fraternal homecoming from his Christian master, Philemon. In order to understand such a letter, background information regarding the period is needed on such matters as the rights of slaves and masters, the ways in which Christian households were organised, the rights of Paul as friend and apostle to demand anything of Philemon, and the rights of a master over his slave.

We are fortunate indeed that the house churches in Corinth were at odds with each other and with Paul, otherwise Paul's teaching on the scandal of the cross in 1 Cor 1-2 might have been lost to us: not because he would not have had the understanding, but that it would not have been preserved in a written form. If they had not been so caught up in competition with one another in terms of how the gift of tongues was to be used and appreciated within the community then his great commentary on love in 1 Cor 13 might never have been written.

Our communication is always shaped by our context and Paul

is no exception. Paul's patterns of speech, the examples he uses, the ways that his arguments are expressed have all been shaped by his religious upbringing as a devout Pharisaic Jew, and by the religious and philosophical thought of the Greco-Roman world. Again, this might seem self-evident but I continue to be amazed at how quickly this is forgotten when people start to read Paul's letters. He uses the normal and well-known rhetorical practices of his time to convince his readers of a certain attitude or course of action.

These practices included: *deliberative rhetoric*, which was concerned with convincing people to choose a certain course of action; *forensic rhetoric*, the rhetoric of the law courts determining a person's guilt or innocence; and *ceremonial rhetoric*, used to honour people in life or in death. In Paul's letters these kinds of rhetoric abound, and are further enriched by Paul's use of Jewish forms of rhetoric, particularly in his use of the scriptures. The point being made here is that modern readers often have difficulty in following Paul's line of argument in certain passages, or letters e.g. The letter to the Galatians. This should not surprise us because we are listening to a style of persuasive communication that first century Christians of the Greco-Roman world were familiar with—the customary ways of communicating they all understood. So if we wish to understand Paul better, we need to take some time to become familiar with them to.

PAUL'S BACKGROUND

ONE OF THE REASONS UNDERLYING THE SUCCESS OF PAUL'S MISSIONARY ACTIVITY WAS THAT HE WAS A DEVOUT AND JEALOUS PHARISAIC JEW WHO GREW UP IN TARSUS IN THE ROMAN PROVINCE OF CILICIA. HIS MISSION IN SYRIA, ASIA MINOR, MACEDONIA, ACHAIA AND ROME WOULD RELY FOR ITS SUCCESS NOT ONLY ON HIS CONVICTION, COMMITMENT AND ENTHUSIASM, BUT ALSO ON THE FACT THAT HE WAS A PERSON IN WHICH WORLDS AND CULTURES MET. THE GREEK DIALECT THAT HE SPOKE FUNCTIONED MUCH AS ENGLISH DOES TODAY. GEOGRAPHICALLY HE WAS NOT FROM THE HEART OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS A CITIZEN, AND FROM A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE HE WAS NOT FROM JERUSALEM, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS A DEVOUT PHARISEE.



THE CITIES OF PAUL

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

The letters attest to a missionary strategy that involved going to as many major cities as possible, by sea and by foot—making use of the well-established system of Roman roads. Paul and his co-workers targeted major population centres, especially those that were strategi-

cally placed to serve as a base for ongoing missionary endeavours. Cities such as Philippi and Thessalonica were situated on the *Via Egnatia*, the major link between the Adriatic and Byzantium (later Constantinople).

Corinth's location was such that this cosmopolitan city controlled trade and travel between southern and northern Greece by sea or road. Ephesus was the capital for Asia Minor and was accessible by sea or road. Even at the time of writing Romans, Paul's intention is to move on to new mission opportunities in Spain. (Rom 15:24) Because he is so committed to establish new communities, he expresses great frustration with those who seem to take advantage of the communities

he has already established, without taking the risk of starting their own. His aim is to keep moving on 'so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else's sphere of action.' (2 Cor 10:16)

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

An ancient chapel in Crete





THE JOURNEYS OF PAUL

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

This doesn't mean that Paul didn't undertake many journeys as an apostle—far from it—it is more a matter of knowing that our picture is always going to be incomplete. It is incomplete because Paul saw no reason to keep a diary of his travels. In 2 Cor 11:22–29 there is a catalogue of the many dangers Paul faced on the road, such as shipwrecks, beatings, robbery, imprisonment, Jewish and Roman punishments. Galatians 1–2 provides a picture written after some seventeen years of ministry in which certain elements are well outlined: his initial ministry in Damascus, going to Jerusalem after three years to meet Peter, returning to Jerusalem after fourteen years of ministry, and confronting Peter in Antioch. The letters indicate that there was an intense period of activity when he was involved in not only preaching the Gospel and the care of communities, but also the collection for

the poor in Jerusalem that involved the churches of Corinth, Macedonia and Rome. When Paul writes to the community of Rome he intends to receive assistance from them and extend his mission as far as Spain. Paul mentions in Rom 15:19 that he had preached the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum! There is a clearly expressed sense of pride that he has not spared any effort to preach the Gospel and establish as many communities as possible before the return of the Lord.(cf. Romans 10:15)

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

The letters of Paul attest the fact that there was a considerable amount of movement, and that it was not isolated to Paul and his co-workers. Letters were sent by Paul to his communities with trusted co-workers like Timothy and Titus. Community members such as Chloe's people (1 Cor 1:11), who came from Corinth to Ephesus, creatively combined their business travel with opportunities to pass on news and ask Paul's advice. The letters witness to Paul's efforts to ensure that wandering missionaries would receive a warm welcome as they moved from one community to another. (cf. 1 Cor 16:10; Rom 16:1–2)



DID YOU KNOW?

Paul was shipwrecked, scourged, beaten, and stoned

(2 Cor 11:24–25):

'Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea.'



CHRONOLOGY

Our picture of Paul is a composite one, pieced together from Luke's portrayal of Paul's life and ministry in Acts of the Apostles—written some twenty years after Paul's death—and what we can learn from his letters themselves. As a rule of thumb, whenever there is any conflict between the two sets of information, precedence has to be given to Paul's own words, especially the sequence he provides in Gal 1:11–2:14. Much as we would like it, we have no indication from the letters as to his age when converted, although Acts 7:58 introduces Paul into the narrative as a young man named Saul at the death of Stephen. There

is probably no reason to doubt this particular detail, though it is itself imprecise.

As far as external dates are concerned, there is the reference in 2 Cor 11:32 to King Aretas of Damascus who tried to capture him. This would have occurred somewhere around 37–39 CE. This means that the latest that Paul can have begun his apostolic mission is within ten years of the death of Jesus. When writing his letters, Paul was not concerned with giving a blow-by-blow description of his ministry, he was living his life rather than describing it for posterity. As a consequence there will always be gaps in the information that can

be gleaned from the letters. Acts makes mention of certain details that can be of assistance in placing Paul's ministry within a framework of external events and people. Acts mentions the time of Gallio as proconsul in Corinth 51–52 CE (Acts 18:12), a famine in Judea (Acts 7:11), Festus' arrival in Caesaria (Acts 25:1,6,13,23) around 55–60 CE, and the edict of Claudius in around 40–49 CE. (Acts 18:2) These details have to be used carefully, but they clearly show Luke's efforts to place Paul within his contemporary world.

John Knox suggested the following chronology:

An ancient road in Philippi

