Chapter Eleven

Pauline Letters

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles introduced us to Paul, the Jewish Christian convert whose writings would become profoundly influential to the development of Christian thought and doctrine. These writings, a series of letters at the philosophical core of the New Testament, fed in powerful ways the spiritual and intellectual growth of the early Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth and early fifth century CE. Together, Paul’s and Augustine’s thinking, along with the teaching and example of Jesus, form the foundation of what we know as Christianity today.

Paul’s influence is not limited to religious philosophy alone, however. As is true of many biblical ideas, Paul’s writing helped to shape more generally what we consider now Western thought. Take this linguistic example offered by scholar Kyle Keefer: “The English language has borrowed certain words from Paul – grace, faith, justification, atonement, redemption – and our understanding of such words is distinctively colored by his employment of them” (Keefer 53). What Keefer is pointing to here is the fact that even secular interactions with this vocabulary are only understood through the connotations offered by Paul. It is hard to overestimate Paul’s influence on the subsequent course of Western thought.

Despite their placement in the Bible following the Gospels and Acts, Paul’s letters, or epistles, are actually the earliest documents written for the New Testament. In fact, the book of 1 Thessalonians is dated by some to before 50 CE, well before Mark the Evangelist recorded his gospel. The historical Paul lived at the same time as Jesus, though no record exists of them having met. Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded by the Roman emperor Nero in 64 CE (Keefer 54).

As you noticed in the book of Acts, the work of the New Testament after the Gospels makes a similar shift to the Torah’s work in the Hebrew Bible: establishing the rules that would govern the new religion. Professor Howard Clark Kee explains that there were essentially two questions that needed addressing in the Greco-Roman era of early Christianity: “(1) whether regarding Jesus’ unique relationship with God involved one in polytheism, and (2) whether his having died by a pagan, bloody mode of execution meant that he should be considered accursed of God” (Kee 222). This shift was necessary as the
Jesus movement needed clarification in order to secure its own place following Jesus’ death in the Greco-Roman era already swirling with the worship of Greek gods, Roman gods, secular philosophy, and Judaism.

**The Letter Genre in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras**

You might be wondering why letters? Where’s the narrative bent or poetic urgency that fuels much of biblical literature? On the surface, letters may seem to lack the literary qualities of biblical poetry or narrative. A closer look, however, reveals artistic and rhetorical depth to as well as the historical reasons for Paul’s literary choices. Letter writing was the most common form of communication in the Greco-Roman period, both in terms of personal communication and in the service of public intellectualism. Indeed, “Intellectual figures envisioned that their letters might be published in the future, so the distinction between public correspondence and private was often obscured” (Keefer 52). The letter-writing practice persisted well into the future, though perhaps the advent of electronic communication has stifled such habits for many in the current century.

We readers have seen letters function in the service of narrative before, most recently in the apostolic letter from the council at Jerusalem in the book of Acts:

The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 23b-29)

You might recall that this letter marks the last time we see the original 12 disciples-turned-apostles in that text as the story of Saul-turned-Paul takes over and a new set of characters become important. We return to the letter now because it follows the structure common to most of Paul’s letters, with the exception of the thanksgiving (which is most likely due to the narrative function of the letter, as it does not form the basis of an entire text), seen here in Fig. 18:
While we might be used to the writer’s signature at the end of a letter, in this style that information opens the message in order to immediately establish the connection between writer and reader. For most of the Pauline letters, the reader is a congregation at a specific location, as you can see in the example.

Such readers corresponded with Paul, and other apostles, in their search to understand what their lived experience as new Christians should look like. If they were Jewish, should they continue to follow Jewish dietary laws, for example, or the practice of circumcision? These are the types of topics addressed in the New Testament letters and they presuppose an ongoing conversation among early believers and early church leaders.

Further, the geographic expansion of the time created the need for letter writers to indicate their travel plans. From book of Acts you learned that as the Jerusalem church was being developed as the foundational church, apostles such as Paul, Barnabas, and Silas set off on missionary journeys in order to spread the gospel, and we can imagine the anticipation for authoritative voices of those newly formed congregations.

A courteous, and often warmly affectionate, closing greeting signals the end of the message.

**Pauline Letters**

Of the twenty-one epistolary books in the New Testament, thirteen of them are thought to have been written by Paul or in the Pauline School. Of those thirteen epistles, scholars believe that seven of them were undoubtedly written by Paul himself. These seven letters, often referred to as the major letters, include:

- 1 Thessalonians
- Galatians
- 1 & 2 Corinthians
- Romans
- Philippians
- Philemon

For the sake of time and space, but also focus and convenience, this chapter will emphasize these seven major letters. The other canonical letters are nevertheless very important.

Paul’s personal authorship of these other six is a subject of scholarly dispute. Some scholars refer to these six letters not as Paul’s directly, but as letters belonging to the Pauline School or as the Deutero-Pauline epistles:

- 2 Thessalonians
- Colossians
- Ephesians
- 1 & 2 Timothy
- Titus

The debates around three of these letters—2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians—have generated interesting and powerful arguments for and against Paul’s personal authorship. (For more on these arguments, see Meeks and Fitzgerald, The Writings of St. Paul, 99-122.) The remaining three—1 & 2 Timothy and Titus—are widely thought to be pseudonymous. Known as the Pastoral letters, they share a future-oriented thematic focus rather than the contemporary lens of the major letters. Moreover, as several scholars have noted, the style and language and diction are markedly different from the letters we are certain were written by Paul.

We also have five still existing Pseu...
The New Testament also includes eight non-Pauline letters, known as the Catholic, or General, Letters, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

**Paul and/in His Letters**

As you read both the Pauline letters and the epistles belonging to the Pauline School, keep in mind that there may be, from a literary perspective, multiple Pauls here: the historical Paul, the author Paul, the persona or personality adopted in the letter, the figure of Paul referred to in the text, not to mention pseudonymous attributions and misattributions. Moreover, it seems clear that Paul adopts different tones and different personalities, when addressing different churches, or even different issues within the same church.

It can be easy to think sometimes that, because we are reading the actual correspondence between the historical figure Paul and his historical congregants, we are reading for the purpose of understanding fully the real Paul. Keefer reminds us that these biblical books are not biographies: “We should always remember that the Paul of the letters, just like Paul in Acts, is a literary character. He is, to be sure, a historical person as well, but we do not have the advantage of a modern biographer to construct ‘the real

![Fig. 20. Rembrandt, St. Paul in Prison, 1627, private collection.](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_in_prison_by_Rembrandt.jpg)
Paul,’ any more than we could discover the ‘real Jesus,’ as opposed to the literary character” (Keefer 55).

There is also no way for us to know the “real” readers of these letters—partly because their conversations are represented one-sidedly through Paul’s words and partly because there was an intentional lack of focus on the individual.

Further, as part of our guide, we should note that:

Of primary importance is the evidence that, in spite of the radical revision of the covenant community that Paul believed Jesus to have accomplished, he repeatedly emphasized the importance and the dynamic of the Jewish heritage in terms of which the role of Jesus was to be perceived. Especially significant is Paul’s fidelity to that tradition as embodied in the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom writings. (Kee 218)

Moreover, Paul seems at points in his writings to be quite aware of (perhaps even proud of) his rhetorical skill and adeptness. In 1 Corinthians, for example, he writes:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. (1 Cor. 9:20-22)

On the one hand, this may mean that the real Paul is rather elusive in his letters. On the other hand, ultimately, his letters demonstrate that Paul remains highly attuned to the needs of each epistle’s readership. He demonstrates so well his rhetorical skill at managing the relationship between messenger and message that his words have never yet lost their power or their influence.

**Settings**

We know from Acts that Paul travelled extensively throughout the Mediterranean world of the Greco-Roman era, focusing on urban centers such as Thessalonica (in the Roman province of Macedonia) and Corinth. Such centers were supported by land and sea routes
and would have seen a tremendous variety of people and customs, goods and services, etc.

1 Thessalonians

This first letter written by Paul (around 50 CE) corresponds with Acts 17-18, and it is addressed to the Thessalonians. Because of the newness of the religion, believers, under the eschatological teaching of the times, were concerned with death: “Consequently the first generation of converts had to face the question of why some of their number had died before the day of salvation had arrived” (Horrell 2075).

Paul speaks to this concern a number of times, and here are two key examples:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. (4:15)

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (5:1-2).

From this, we can glean a couple of important and interesting stylistic details. Even though Paul is engaging in philosophical discourse, the writing is clear and direct, unlike, say, the abstractions of John’s gospel from later decades in the first century. The directness and clarity of the language along with the sense of urgency or immediacy in Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians reminds many readers of the language and style of the Gospel of Mark.

The other major themes for the Thessalonians involve instructions for Christian living:

- **Show sexual restraint.** “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.” (4:3-5)
- **Show love for others as brothers and sisters.** “[Y]ou yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.” (4:9b)
- **Live modestly.** “[A]spire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands.” (4:11)
Be hardworking and brave. “And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.” (5:14)

**Galatians**

More than the preceding books, Galatians focuses on Paul’s evolving thought regarding Christian law as a separate entity from Jewish law. In this way, it reads similar to the book of Romans, and it is thus a type of precursor to Paul’s later works. Though no composition date is confirmed, scholars think that it was likely written during the late 40s to mid 50s. Meeks and Fitzgerald, for example, date it ca. 54 CE (10).

A specific question underscoring Galatians is a concern over whether or not Gentile Christian converts should also become Jewish converts in the process. Mediating the law of Moses is thus a central purpose to Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

You will see this clearly through the discourse around Abraham and musings about inheritance; for example, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:28-29). The promise created for the Jewish covenant community is thus extended to the new covenant community of Christ.

Some key passages from Galatians to note include the following:

- Paul is chosen and separate among the apostles (1:15-17)
- Faith is separate from the law (2:15-19; 3:17-29)
- Cosmological worldview: dualism (2:19-21) and elemental spirits (4:1-7)
- The allegory of Hagar and Sarah (4:21-5:1)
- Christian ethics (5:13-6:10)

**1 Corinthians**

The cosmopolitan city of Corinth, whose residents included Jews, Ethiopians, Syrians, Greeks, among others, is the audience for two of Paul’s letters. We contemporary readers might forget just how radical this developing Christian message was: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1:26); “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized
into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13).

Some of the key divisions or sections in 1 Corinthians include the following:

- Wisdom is a cultural trap (1:18-2:5)
- On the call to serve (ch. 3-4)
- Paul considers himself to be “the last of all” (9:1, 15:3-4,8-9)
- On the church body (9:19-23)
- In (presumed) dialogue with Plato over the nature of love (ch. 13)
- On speaking in tongues (ch. 14)
- On the unbaptized dead (ch. 15)

2 Corinthians

That Paul has violated Corinth’s social order is key to understanding the book of 2 Corinthians. He has refused to participate in the system of patronage which would have funded his ministry at the expense of being beholden to a Corinthian benefactor. He has, though, accepted financial support from Macedonia – “...for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia” (11:9b) – as well as participated in collections for the Jerusalem church (8:1-9:15).

Tension between writer and reader is evident, then, as Paul seeks to assert his apostolic authority more directly than in other letters. As he documents the exchanges of three separate visits, he offers evidence of his own suffering and explains it necessary to the development of churches like that in Corinth. Scholar Sze-kar Wan characterizes this tension as “the paradox of power in weakness” (2025).

Some of the key divisions or sections in 2 Corinthians include the following:

- The veil of Moses (3:1-4:6)
- A ministry of reconciliation (5:11-6:10)
- Metaphor of the fool (ch. 11-12)

Romans

Paul probably wrote Romans, the longest of his New Testament letters, from Corinth during his three months there in about 56 or 57 CE (see Acts 20:2-3 and Meeks and...
Fitzgerald 61). He is writing to a group of Christians he has not yet met, but hopes to meet soon, a mostly Gentile audience of Roman Christians, though there seems to be a Jewish minority within the church at Rome as well.

This letter is one of the most important single statements of Christian theology, and N.T. Wright considers it Paul’s “masterpiece” (395). It often reads more like an essay or argument or sermon than as a personal letter, and it includes relatively less advice and guidance for Christian living (though he does include this in the later sections of the letter) and more sublime, sometimes inscrutable philosophical theology.

In Romans, Paul attempts above all to outline a doctrine of salvation through faith alone. One approach to this often-challenging text is to follow the thread of Paul’s thinking through an outline of the letter itself. After an opening that includes a traditional salutation (1:1-7) and prayer of thanksgiving (1:8-15), Paul commences his argument that salvation from sin comes through Christ.

- The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (1:16-17).
- Human beings, Gentiles and Jews, are sinful and wicked, however, which will bring upon them the wrath of God (1:18-3:20).
- But salvation from this wrath is available to all who believe, Jews and Gentiles, through the death and sacrifice of Jesus (3:21-31).
- Abraham, the patriarch from Genesis, is the model of a person who is justified by faith (ch. 4).
- Faith in Christ brings deliverance from sin, God’s wrath, and death (chs. 5-8).

This core argument raises two big, important, and seemingly complex questions, which Paul then tries to address.

- The first, which is addressed in chapters 9 through 11, is about Israel as God’s chosen people. If God’s salvation through Christ is available to Gentiles through their faith, wouldn’t this be an abandonment of the LORD’s promise to the Jews? Paul reiterates his commitment to salvation through faith in Christ, and he believes that the Jews “have stumbled over the stumbling stone” of the Law as the
path to salvation and righteousness (Rom. 9:32). Yet, he ends this section by saying that God will bring the Jews back to salvation and faith (ch. 11).

- The second, which is addressed in 12:1 through 15:13, is about a (mis)perceived tension between salvation by faith (not by adhering to the strictures of good behavior and righteousness as outlined in the Law) and ethical behavior and good works. Does salvation by faith (apart from the Law) lead to lawless or immoral behavior? Paul says no. Instead, he argues that faith in Jesus and his redemption transforms believers, allowing them to lead lives of love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and good works. Paul then asks these transformed believers to obey civil laws, to live moral and loving lives, and to avoid judgment and also behavior that might offend others or cause those weak in faith to struggle.

In the letter’s conclusion (15:14-16:27), Paul explains his purposes for writing—his belief in his audience’s “goodness” (15:14) and his desire to remind them of these key ideas about salvation through faith. He goes on, as is the form of these letters, to outline his future travel plans and to offer his greetings to a long list of specific members of the church.

The other undoubted or major letters of Paul are significantly shorter.

**Philippians**

In Philippians (authored around 62 CE), Paul is writing to a Greco-Roman church that he and Timothy had founded about a decade earlier (see Acts 16:11-40). His tone is full of warmth and gratitude, even though he is writing from his imprisonment in Rome. Accordingly, the letter is considered valuable for the ways it offers biographical and historical insight into this part of Paul’s life.

Chapter 2 includes a section that is known as the Christ Hymn or Hymn to Christ, a poetic section that presents Jesus as a model for living with humility and love. It also explores the nature of Jesus Christ as one who is human and divine. Paul goes to explain how Christ provides us with a model of how to live a life of humble service to others.

In the subsequent chapter, the tone seems to change and a feistier Paul (familiar from the earlier letters) emerges as he criticizes those in the church who are insisting on circumcision of believers. He wants instead, it seems, to focus his audience on the bigger issues: righteousness through faith (not practicing the law) and the resurrection and heaven.
In another abrupt shift in tone, he ends the letter with exhortations to rejoice and with words of thanksgiving and gratitude.

**Philemon**

Of the major letters, Philemon is the only one addressed to an individual, not a church. It is in this way a private and intimate letter, rather than public one, though there seems to be some evidence that Paul intended the message of the letter to reach readers beyond just Philemon himself, who appears to be the leader of a church that met in his home (1:1-2).

Beyond the greetings and conventions of the epistles that frame the letter, the main issue introduced here is about accepting an escaped slave named Onesimus, who is being returned, into their Christian fellowship as a “brother” and not a “slave” (1:16). The ideas here are consistent with Paul’s ideas elsewhere that belief in Christ should eliminate social, economic, and cultural divisions for a trans-personal unity that emerges from spiritual transformation and love.

**The Deutero-Pauline Letters**

The disputed Pauline letters—2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, along with the Pastoral and more personal letters known as 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus—have become essential parts of the New Testament canon. They may not have been authored by Paul himself, though the debates about 2 Thessalonians and Colossians seem to have strong arguments on both sides, but all six letters communicate Pauline ideas. They also attempt to honor and sustain the power of Paul’s ministry and thinking about the transformative power of Christ’s salvation.

As you read these letters, it is worthwhile to consider for yourselves whether or not Paul would have been the author of these letters. Does 2 Thessalonians continue the urgent apocalyptic thinking about Christ’s return found in 1 Thessalonians, or does it take off in new directions? Does the absence of Paul’s usual theological concerns (salvation by faith, Christ’s imminent return) in Ephesians suggest pseudonymous authorship or just some development or expansion of Paul’s thinking?

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**
1. Note the repetition of phrases such as “my beloved” and “imitators” in 1 Thessalonians. What is the rhetorical effect of such repetition and what can we learn about the sender/receiver relationship from it?

2. Keefer notes that, “When Paul writes to the Galatians, he presents both himself and his audience in a diametrically opposed manner to the Thessalonian interchange” (Keefer 74). As you read, look for clues to support, or refute, that claim.

3. Perform a close reading on Galatians 4:1-7. What are the elemental spirits? What experience is Paul describing? How does that help us contextualize his work even further?

4. What point is Paul trying to make about wisdom in 1 Corinthians? In what ways is that point similar to and/or different from the Jewish wisdom tradition? How about the veil of Moses from 2 Corinthians?

5. How does Paul characterize the significance of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians?

6. Find 2-3 examples that help you understand the “paradox of power in weakness” in 2 Corinthians. Are there examples from other books that you would add as well?

7. What is Paul’s relationship to the Jews and Judaism throughout his letters? Explain.

8. How does Paul understand sin in Romans? How does he understand salvation? What is the place of the law in Paul’s new vision?

9. How does Paul’s imprisonment shape how and what he writes in Philippians?

10. What does Jesus’s humility teach us, according to Paul in Philippians?

11. What does Paul’s attitude toward slavery in Philemon tell us about his theology or his relationship to the actual institution of slavery in his era?

12. What is Paul like? What is his personality like? Describe him as a character.

13. How would you describe his writings and his writing style?
14. Choose your favorite letter, so far, and draft a letter either in response to Paul or imagining the letter that preceded his. Be sure to use the Pauline letter structure described earlier in this chapter (Fig. 19).

**Works Cited and Further Reading**


