

Paul

St. Paul: Turning the world upside down

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You might enjoy the fact that Paul was a real, historical person.

Paul, no doubt, was the chief architect of the Christianity; second to Jesus of course, but nevertheless, without him, I am not so sure that the followers of the Jesus movement would have survived.

We meet him for the first time in Luke's Acts (the one truly historical book of the NT). He is present at the stoning of one very controversial follower of Jesus - Stephen - but not as an innocent bystander.

Known as Saul (name means destroyer) of Tarsus, he is the zealous Pharisee and persecutor of these Jesus' followers.

He supported the stoning. He watched over the garments of the executioners so they could have their hands free to throw more stones.

So who was this man? What turned him from a hater of the Jesus movement to its most ardent propagator? And why should we actually take the heart of his message very seriously?

Beginnings: Saul

Saul was born around 10 AD in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. He was born a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, and at the same time he was a Roman citizen which was very unusual.

His status was inherited or he had done a very meritorious service to the Roman Empire that granted him this honor.

Being born a Jew meant that by age 6 he would have attended school in the synagogue, been drilled in the scriptures and learned Hebrew.

Paul was educated in Jerusalem and studied under Gamaliel, the leading Rabbi of the time. He was noted for his wisdom and tolerance and called for a moderate response to this new movement within Judaism which would probably die out on its own.

But he was also educated in the ways a Roman citizen would be: well versed in poetry and philosophy of the Greek and Roman world. He spoke Greek. He was a man of two worlds.

Saul was also bi-vocational. He was a tent-maker, working with leather which was his primary means of support, and he trained as a Pharisee, the law-observant division of Judaism. This group made sure that the Jewish faith with all its rules and laws were kept by the people. The Jesus movement was a movement within the Jewish faith – they were not yet called ‘Christians.’ That happens for the first time in Acts 13.

Anyone who would deviate from the Jewish faith would find themselves in prison or punished. That Jesus movement was a particular thorn in his eye. He was ruthless in his persecution.

Conversion:

So, the unthinkable happened; on the way to Damascus, a light from heaven flashed around him. He was knocked off his horse and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” It was Jesus talking to Saul.

The experience left him blind for three days, and after being led into the city, he regained his sight. He was baptized by Ananias. This is the point when his eyes are opened to a whole new life.

The former persecutor of the faith now became its greatest proponent. The road from Damascus would take him far beyond the social and religious boundaries he once guarded to the death. In fact, the heart of his message was just as radical as Jesus’ message was.

New Life: Paul (name means “small” or “humble”)

Most of what we know about Paul we can piece together by reading the book of Acts written by Luke as well as the 13 letters that are ascribed to Paul.

The Jesus’ followers were leery of this new convert to the faith. But they took him under their wings, with Barnabas being his greatest champion and teacher.

From then on Paul lived the life of a missionary which lasted some 25 years. He went to all the major cities and capitals of the Roman Empire provinces and Greece. There he started house churches and grew to the communities around them.

It is estimated that he traveled thousands of miles by foot to get to his destinations. In some places, he stayed for a year or two, always supporting himself, and at times being subjected to great suffering – physical punishment and, at times, prison.

The initial idea of this Jesus movement through the apostles (the sent ones) was to bring the message of Christ to the Jews but after a time they turned their attention to the Gentiles. That is one of the big changes and challenges Paul brought into the movement.

We don't really know when, where, and how he died. All we can make is an educational and scholarly guess. Paul had made it to Rome somehow. In 64 AD a terrible fire broke out and Cesar Nero blamed the Christians for the destruction (the *Annals* of Tacitus). It is believed that Peter as well as Paul were executed with many other Christians in Nero's scapegoat roundup persecution.

All in all, Paul was a remarkable man:

- He spent 25 years as an itinerant apostle and community organizer
- His life was arduous, and his descriptions of his labors and trials leaves one breathless
- He is the first Jewish mystic from whom we have a firsthand account of his mystical experience (2 Cor 12: 1-4)
- He was brilliant: his arguments are intricate and his Greek eloquent
- Charismatic and successful
- He died a martyr
- He was a prolific writer; almost half of the 27 books of the NT are attributed to him

Paul's message:

Reading Paul does come with its challenges. I myself have shortchanged my understanding of the heart of his message because of some of the other things that he supposedly said and wrote down, which I find appalling:

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6:5) we read: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart as you obey Christ". Justification of slavery by the church.

Anti-Semitism was long justified by passages like this one from I Thessalonians: the Jews "killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets."

And the subjugation of women had its foundation in I Timothy: "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches ... If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." There are still some Christian denominations out there that will not ordain or call women into church leadership because of these words.

These are a few of passages from Paul's letters that have been and still are incredibly harmful to all kinds of groups within the church and all of humanity.

These harmful passages stand in blazing contrast to some of the most beautiful passages, some of the best that Christianity has to offer, written by Paul.

Galatian 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 2: 3-4: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others".

1 Cor. 16:14: "Let all that you do be done in love."

You can't but wonder what is going on here? There are two books have been very helpful to me in thinking this through. One by Borg and Crossan, *The First Paul* (which I think we should all read together!) And the other one is a chapter on Paul in *A Dangerous Dozen - 12 Christians who threatened the Status Quo but taught us to live like Jesus*.

How are we to understand these discrepancies?

13 books/letters of the NT are ascribed to Paul. Scholars are certain that 7 are authentic letters written by Paul (In this I have to trust their research and linguistic knowledge.)

These are Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon. They represent the original/genuine/ authentic/radical Paul. Written around 50 AD, earliest documents we have, written before the gospels.

There is scholarly consensus that 3 of the letters are **not** written by Paul: 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, also called the pastoral letters; non-Pauline letter (reactionary Paul - making points to counter opinions)

Three of the letter are disputed; scholars have found no consensus: Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians; post Pauline letters (conservative Paul - represent the taming, domestication of Paul as these communities lived and had their being in the Roman imperial world.)

These letters were either written by someone else who then used Paul's authorship and authority, or the letters were edited so the message was in line with what they needed and wanted it to be.

It is interesting that the 6 letters – non-Pauline and disputed ones, are the ones that have most of the harmful scripture passages in them. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

This is all a bit complicated and would take too much time that I don't have this morning to go into all the details.

The Heart of his Message:

Maybe what is more helpful is trying to answer the question: What then is at the heart of Paul's message? What makes him the amazing architect of our faith, and why should we continue to wrestle with his writings although with a keen and careful mind?

At the heart of his message stands the complete breakdown of all the boundaries and social divisions that he himself had previously guarded. Galatian 3:28 is that message: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ." It boils down to this.

It is almost impossible for us, today, living in the US, to appreciate and understand how radical this message was to people who lived in the Mediterranean world of the first century. The whole notion of individualism would have been incomprehensible to any of the social groups and classes. As one ancient Roman wrote, "That which is not in the interest of the hive cannot be in the interest of the bee."

Belonging was what gave someone an identity and purpose. First century people lived in relational networks – associations, clubs, professional guilds, some were based on political and religious ties, or informal connections between patrons and clients, servants and masters.

Paul understood that. He himself was part of that system as a Jew, as a Roman citizen, as a tent maker, and then as an apostle within this Jesus' movement.

Yet his message was, that "all are one in Christ," was mind-blowing, and the beginning of a whole new reality. Old relationships and networks became secondary and even obsolete. Being all one in Christ would allow master and slave, men and women, Jews, Greeks, Gentiles eat, live, pray together as equals.

To make these communities boundary free, Paul set up communities the same way: in homes, rather than in public buildings; he used the word *ecclesia* for the group with was a political term for the gathering of free citizens of a city, peers that were equal under the law. He also used family terminology – brothers and sisters, addressing each members of the community, and he put an emphasis on diversity within the group, calling it the "Body of Christ".

This was a message solely for the inside of these communities. Paul was not a social activist who would take this message outside the Christian system and fight for equal rights for all. But he certainly offered a different way of life and into new relationships to the ones who were called to this new faith. To them, it made all the difference. For them, he turned the world upside down all for the better.

Christian Unity. That is really what it comes down to. We still work on it, don't we?

We meet people who are different from us every day. We accept those differences.

We are, I think, often most challenged by our fellow Christians – how to do faith, how to read the Bible, how to run the church, how to make decisions, what to teach in confirmation class and Sunday school, how to be more liberal or more conservative, etc. These differences make us uncomfortable, or at worst, we discredit them and disassociate with them. We let our differences divide us.

We forget that although we look and act and think differently, we are already united by the water of baptism and by the loving mercy of God in Christ.

Our unity does not mean uniformity. Our oneness is spiritual. We're all alike in that way: a forgiven and born-from-above people; we are Christians.

And when we are able to see Christ in each other, we should be able to build bridges and friendships, overcome divisions that are often so painful.

It might be the hardest thing we attempt to do, but it might be the most important and rewarding step we can take to live out our faith.

Amen.