

Paul Found: In His Letters

Chapter 1 Introduction

“Because of the entrenched nature of the traditional paradigm, it is very difficult to see Paul with a new set of eyes.”
Pamela Eisenbaum¹

“Too much of Paul’s life is completely hidden from us...for any of us who have worked, or are working, in this field to be overconfident.”
John Knox²

For almost 2,000 years people have been asking questions about St. Paul. One of the first could have been a prison guard charged with censoring outgoing letters from the prison in which he was being held. Four of the letters that bear Paul’s name came from times when he was imprisoned: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon.³

What did this guard think about Paul who mentioned the loyal women who worked beside him in his letter to the Philippians? Men in authority and power didn’t consult with women or have them at their side during their work. Not in Caesar’s world. Woman as co-workers? It was totally at odds with the way most men in Rome saw themselves. The censor reading Paul’s prison letter sent to the Philippians had think the man is crazy. Paul had written that Euodia and Syntyche were his coworkers, and he said their names were written “... in the book of life.” (Philippians 4:3)

Did this same guard happen to read Paul’s shortest letter, the one sent to Philemon? If so he must have surely wondered about Paul’s sanity in using kinship language describing a runaway slave—Onesimus—as his own child. Paul wished that Philemon would receive him back not as a slave “...but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” (Philemon 16) The world in which prison guards lived was *vertically shaped* in terms of power and authority. Clearly slaves could never be *the equal* of their owner. What a crazy idea Paul had! That a slave and his owner could somehow see each other as brothers?⁴ My hypothetical guard charged with censoring prison letters had to be thinking Onesimus deserves death or at least a very severe beating at the hands of Philemon.

Romans, which is Paul’s longest letter, was not sent from a jail cell, and presumably the last one of his letters, but it would have been equally puzzling to any Roman in authority. Paul began that letter with the totally unexpected claim of being a “slave.” The

¹ Pamela Eisenbaum, 2009, 216.

² John Knox, 1983, 364.

³ Credit for the way this book starts belongs to Elizabeth Tamez who wondered how the letter to the Phillipians could have possibly passed unnoticed by a prison censor. Tamez. “*Author’s Introduction to Philippians*”, 2016, 78.

⁴ Horrell (2016: 126) who notes that Paul’s language implies “equal-regard”...that (in some sense) supervenes over their (former) relationship as owner and slave.

Greek word is “*doulos*,” which is sometimes *weakly* translated as “servant”⁵—a term in our world fitting with the concept of helping one another. Paul knew, however, that a slave wasn’t free to serve—they just had to help and were always under orders. They were the possession (*just property*) of someone else. Paul’s consistent reference to himself as a “slave” was not how he started out in life. Why on earth would any man or woman in that world willingly adopt that personal identity?

Even more puzzling to a man in 1st century Rome would have been the last chapter of Romans where we find the longest set of personal greetings found in any of Paul’s letters. The chapter begins with Paul commending Phoebe who is “...a deacon of the church at Cenchrae.” (Romans 16:1). She holds an office of leadership! Next Paul mentioned Prisca and Aquila. They are a couple to be sure, but why would Paul mention Prisca first?

There is a reference to another couple, Andronicus and Junia, who were in prison at one point with Paul. Then he added an astounding detail “...they are prominent among the apostles and they were in in Christ before I was.” (Romans 16: 7) The reference to this couple obviously troubled some unnamed scribe, or maybe more than one, making a new copy of Romans in the centuries prior to the Renaissance. No one knows if it was intentional to turn Junia into Junias—the name of a man, but beginning with translations starting in the 13th century the masculine name, Junias frequently appears. Luther, for example, “opted for ‘den Juniam’, and continental translations have since then mostly followed this masculine interpretation.”⁶

Junia would be Junias in many translations in the past 500 years.⁷ *She* had been turned into a *he*! A few scribes, perhaps independently, with tattered copies of Romans may have decided Paul couldn’t have meant that there was a woman who was an apostle. But he did.

From Paul’s letters, especially the seven certain to have come from his hand, we have a picture of communities of faith struggling with a variety of issues and challenges. What is fascinating are the many personal details that reveal surprising aspects about Paul inside those letters—seemingly lost or ignored for the past 1900 years. These include Paul’s amazing openness to working alongside women in ministry and what had to be his story of shaping his life around the least respected and most subjugated people in his world. As we will see communities of faith shaped from his preaching and missionary work were not reinforcing standard social practices of the ancient world. There is evidence that some of these assemblies continuing into the 2nd and 3rd centuries still practiced an unusual

⁵ “Servant” is in the *NRSV*. Peterson’s translation *The Message* translates *doulos* as “a devoted slave.” Most of the well-known translations use the word “servant,” but the *Disciples’ Literal New Testament* uses “slave.”

⁶ Thorley, 1996, 18. See also Cervin (1994) for translations that use Junias (masculine) like the Revised Standard Version and the New International Version and those that retain Junia (feminine) such as the King James Version and the Latin Vulgate.

⁷ The *NRSV* puts *her name* back in the text at Rom. 16:7 and then offers as an alternative the masculine name Junias.

egalitarian set of values which they traced back to the teaching of Paul. Such values were also being contested by others in their time. The memory of Paul was being reconstructed, by some, at least in such a way that Paul would *not* have recognized himself. There are places where this story of rewriting Paul must be told alongside of our recovery of Paul from his own letters.

1. 1 Preliminary Concerns about the Historicity of Acts

The one document that is the most troubling for this particular enterprise, with regard to its historicity, is “The Acts of the Apostles.” I will refer to it simply as Acts. For most of us, including this author for a good part of my ministry, Acts was, at best, the most reliable account regarding Paul because it filled in the blank spaces with questions unanswered from his letters. Its eye-witness accounts, from the earliest days after the resurrection, presumably pre-dated Paul’s letters.

For the last 1,900 years, when preachers and biblical scholars wanted to share something about Paul, in *biographical* terms, they nearly always began with Acts for most details regarding Paul’s story. There we find the dramatic account of his call to follow Jesus when Paul was on the road to Damascus. He was going to Damascus to continue his persecution of followers of Jesus. The same story, with a few variations, is told *three times* in Acts. Ever since this is *the story* most Christians tell. Paul who had been the one persecuting followers of Jesus suddenly and dramatically became a “Christian.”⁸

Each account of Paul meeting Jesus, in Acts, involved the question of the Lord, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). The repetition of someone called to serve God fits a pattern from the Scriptures. (ADD FOOTNOTE) Further on in this book we will examine Paul’s own account of his call and suggest that should be the one to trust. At least with Acts we have what might have been Paul’s former Jewish name, before he went by Paulus as a follower of Christ. Acts did not explain Paul’s name change but simply reported that Saul was also called Paul. (Acts 13:9) That becomes the name used for the rest of his account.⁹

Did Paul ever had such a distinguished name as Saul? Was Paul ever “Saul” but didn’t want any of his letter recipients to know his old name? That’s highly unlikely. In Galatians 2:13-14 Paul tells of his own past deeply rooted in protecting the Jewish faith and practice. Why not use his Hebraic name there as a frame of reference. The same argument applies to Philippians 3: 4-6 where he emphasized his Jewish credentials.

⁸ The word “Christian” appears in quotes because it wasn’t a term that Paul used for himself in any of his letters. Acts (11:26) makes the reference to this term. The only other time it appears is in 1 Peter 4:16.

⁹ The name “Saul” does reappear in later chapters when the Damascus road story is repeated, albeit with variations, at the end of Acts. (Acts 22:6-16 and 26:12-19).

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:4-6, NRSV)

You would think Paul would have added, to that account, his most Jewish name “Saul” if he had such. There is much more to be said about Paul’s name! The third chapter, “What’s in a Name?” will make the case that Paul’s name (*Paulus* in Latin) *is the story* of his life. In some kind of ironic twist the author of Acts knew this to be the case even as he turned Paul into the hero of his account.¹⁰

Acts, written most likely in the 2nd century, is a carefully framed narrative by an author able to construct a compelling story. The work itself has been important within the life of the Christian community ever since, but it is *not* a reliable historical source, particularly with regard to Paul. For centuries, however, nearly all scholars thought, at least in terms of its source material, that Acts *predated* knowledge of Paul’s letters. Acts is a carefully structured account of heroes of the faith in the early church with Paul getting top billing. Fascinating and exciting stories are there about Paul’s travels, miracles, escapes, imprisonments, and speeches, but a not a single mention about Paul ever writing letters.¹¹ Perhaps those *collections* of Paul’s letters came later.¹²

As noted earlier the scholarly consensus for most of Christian history was that Acts offered eye-witnesses to the early church in its birth. The author of Acts also seemed to write as a co-worker of Paul. In one account the author said that he met up with Paul in Troas. “On the first day of the week, when *we* met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them...” (Acts. 20:7). A number of other passages follow in the later chapters of Acts where there is a reference to “we,” especially with regard to traveling to new places. (Acts. 21:1-8, 15-17; 27:1-8; 28:1, 11-16). Those accounts were taken at face value. Acts became *the way* to tell Paul’s story. It continues to be the main source for many with regard to the life of the early church.

As I proceed with the focus on what Paul seemed to say about himself, there will be occasions to consider some critical biblical research from the past fifty years raising some serious questions about the veracity of Acts. I believe it is equally important to frame those questions in way that still respects the way that Acts has been deeply ingrained part of the overall story of Christianity.

¹⁰ In Smith & Tyson, ed.[2013; 148] the suggestion is made that giving Paul the Jewish name Saul was a kind of literary device. I disagree, explaining more in Chapter 3.

¹¹ Further on in this book there is evidence that the author of Luke knew at least one of Paul’s letters, but choose not to mention that Paul wrote any letters.

¹² Trobisch (1994: 70) thinks Paul, himself, saw four of his letters as a collection. It is the four letters speaking directly about a collection for the poor in Jerusalem (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Galatians.) Collections were formed early in the 2nd century about the time Acts was composed.

For the most part this account of “Paul Found: In His Letters” concentrates on the biographical details in the seven letters Paul wrote, while keeping Acts out of the picture as much as possible, even though it is impossible to ignore it’s account. It is the proverbial *elephant in the room*. Actually it isn’t the only elephant, because the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) also paint a different picture. It is of a heroic Paul who isn’t connected with other apostles since he is essentially considered *the Apostle*. By writing in Paul’s name, and even it is suspected re-writing parts of Paul’s letters, there is clear evidence that the identity of Paul was already in dispute among early Christians. The Paul speaking in the Pastoral Epistles in a number of important ways sounds different than the Paul in the seven generally accepted letters. Consider the observation of Dennis MacDonald:

“With all due respect to the author of the Pastoral Epistles, when we read the *Acts of Paul* we recognize that not all Christians in the Pauline circle would have silenced women from teaching, trimmed the order of widows, exhorted slaves contain servitude, and commanded obedience to Roman authority. We can in short, no longer assume that the Pastoral Epistles were the rightful second century heirs of the Pauline legacy.”¹³

In recent church history with regard to the issues of the ordination of women we have continued that historic debate regarding the question of who are the rightful “heirs of the Pauline legacy.” The issue still isn’t resolved since some more traditional “heirs believe only men can be ordained. They read read as gospel the statement, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” (1 Tim 2:12). As the debate took place in the Episcopal church, however, in the 1970s that passage of scripture was weighed against the clear evidence that Paul had women working alongside him including Phoebe (a deacon¹⁴) and Junia¹⁵ (an apostle). The General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1976 , after much discussion and many tears on both sides of the question, approved a change in its Constitution and Canons to permit women to be ordained both as priests and as bishops.¹⁶ We were debating the legacy of Paul.

Benjamin White in *Remembering Paul* extends the arguments regarding Paul’s legacy because the Pastorals and Acts were hardly unique in writings from the 2nd and 3rd centuries giving us false pictures of Paul—clearly at times contrary to what Paul said about himself. To be sure we will never have all the facts to discern the truth regarding Paul’s identity, and that’s in part because we only have a portion of what he wrote, and we do not have accurate eye witness accounts from his contemporaries. There is evidence of strong oral traditions from early communities which kept their stories about Paul while facing their own challenges in living their faith in Jesus, but we can only guess at time with regard to what they were saying.¹⁷ We need to consider the possibility that some of

¹³ MacDonald, 1983, 15.

¹⁴ Romans 16:1

¹⁵ Romans 16:7

¹⁶ In 1973 approval had been given for women to be ordained as Deacons.

¹⁷ White, 2014, 6, 13-14

the oral traditions might have carried more truth about Paul than the written records from the same period, but that isn't verifiable. We're left with his seven letters.

In the chapter on "Paul's Letters" one of topics I'll cover regards the collection or rather "collections" of his letters that finally took shape later in the 2nd century. There is evidence that some second-century writers knew Paul's letters, while others emphasized the legendary Paul. White frames the questions this way: "Which Paul? then, is the first question we must ask of each invocation of the Apostle. Is it the legendary Paul? If so, which legend? It is the epistolary Paul? If so, which epistle(s)?"¹⁸

In a sense Paul beyond his letters, encased in the contested memories, and the struggles of various Christian communities is multi-faced. Once more White summarizes a number of different images of Paul¹⁹:

- the heresy fighter and caretaker of the household of God in the Pastorals
- the great Martyr in Ignatius
- the writer to the fractious Corinthians in 1 Clement
- the wise teacher for Polycarp
- the challenger of traditional society in the Acts of Paul and Thecla
- the public speaker and missionary for Luke (Acts)

For the average person in churches where the epistles and the gospels accounts in worship are read it is *unlikely* that when there's a lesson from 1 or 2 Timothy a statement will be made to the effect that this document may *not* have actually be written by Paul. There is rarely, if ever, such a preface to explain that this letter came from a community that treasured Paul, but which disagreed with some of the things that Paul had written. It probably won't help, in that worship, to say this reading reflects a community, maybe 50 or more years after he died, honoring the "legendary" Paul. It must be said, however, in the context of this book.

To take this account of the early contested images of the Apostle Paul just a little further it helps if we see that whoever was writing in Paul's name, as if it was a letter from Paul, was, in a sense, doing the work of a historian. In a changed and changing world they were reaching back and bringing Paul forward. The historian Edward Carr emphasized that each historian "mirrors the society in which he (*sic*) works."²⁰ Reading the Pastorals we find a far more organized church, but one facing a set of heretical challenges most likely from the early second century.²¹ As noted earlier in this introduction there are three other letters that are seriously debated with regard to their authenticity: 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Colossians. Each may reflect a different set of circumstances and issues than those common to the other seven. Those three epistles, as it were, may reflect or mirror a different time.

¹⁸ Ibid, 55.

¹⁹ Ibid. 63.

²⁰ Carr, 1961, 51.

²¹ Pervo, 2010, 83.

There is another much longer story to be told about Paul's identity as derived from his letters. So many scholars in Christian history seemingly have concentrated on his brain—on what Paul believed. Paul's letters, especially in the Reformation and the centuries since, have been mined for their wisdom regarding Christian theology and doctrine. A nineteenth-century biblical scholar, Ferdinand Christian Baur is a particularly important figure in this story.

Baur came out of the school focused on Paul's theology. After giving credit to Paul for basically being the founder of Christianity, Baur maintained that there were only four legitimate letters from Paul: Romans, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians. He dismissed all the others for their presumed tendencies to present a more "Catholic Paul."²² Baur, essentially, set the pattern, still dominant at times in parts of the Protestant world, which in his case meant using the basic four letters as "...polemical weapons against both the Catholic Church and Judaism..."²³ N.T. Wright laid the same charge against Baur, but in a slightly different way: "F. C. Baur forced upon the material his rigid and anachronistic analysis of the two 'isms', Judaism and Hellenism, the latter to be preferred over the former."

Paul for Baur, and many since, is the great architect of Christian dogmatics. The pursuit of Paul is really to understand "his theology" and not so much the man himself. One quite significant Pauline scholar is James D.G. Dunn. In his *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, he singles out just one letter as the quintessential way to discover Paul's theology. "In short, Romans is still far removed from a dogmatic or systematic treatise on theology, but it nevertheless is the most sustained and reflective statement of Paul's own theology by Paul himself."²⁴

It isn't as if this journey into the story of Paul will ever ignore what Paul thought and believed, but this is *not* another book on Paul's theology, except as it relates to his story, and the churches he founded and visited. The bookshelves of our seminary libraries are filled with a history of debates about what Paul believed, but rare are the books seeking to let Paul tell his own story. I hope this is where my readers find this book is helpful.

There is one more reality regarding Paul's place in history, especially as it relates to Christianity, and that *what might have been*, at the time, his *minor*, seemingly insignificant role as a leader. He wasn't as he admitted even a significant or key witness to the resurrection. Peter was the first witness and Paul was the last. "Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Cor 15:8).

When we encounter the reality of many legends about Paul, we can see how they were shaping the early Christian communities in the 2nd century, but also how they were

²² White, *Ibid.* 21-23.

²³ *Ibid.* 24.

²⁴ James D. G. Dunn, 1998, 25.

divided by theological quarrels and debates. That is the period in history when we find Paul taking on a much more significant role than he had in his own time. Paul Gray has observed, “It is uncertain whether Paul was as significant during his lifetime as he came to be in later centuries.”²⁵ To be sure, with regard to the communities that received his letters he was important, but we have no way of ascertaining how far his actual reputation spread in those early days. By his own admission there were divided opinions about him in Jerusalem. In that setting some opposed him, others like Peter were favorable because Paul was sent to the Gentiles. Even though there were “false believers” in Jerusalem (Paul’s report in Gal. 2:4) both he and Barnabas had the “right hand of fellowship” extended to them by James, Cephas and John, as they were sent on their way to “go to the Gentiles.” (Gal. Gal. 2:9) Sadly, the Jesus people in Jerusalem, along with the first apostles, had died out or were wiped out with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E..

In a very real sense the controversial Paul will always be in view in this analysis of his letters, but he may not be the “larger than life Paul” of some accounts such as we find in Acts and the Pastorals, or even in some of the 2nd and 3rd century legends about him. More likely we can find a complex man, with a deep faith, and an extraordinary constitution able to handle all kinds of adversity who happens to be very conscious of the historical significance of what “God has done in Christ.”

In what follows neither Acts nor the Pastoral Epistles will be ignored. Nor should it be. A more detailed analysis of the complicated issues with regard to these particular documents, however, will be covered in in what is called an *excusus* at the end of this opening introduction. An excusus is a literary device which is a digression from the main topic, but which, nonetheless, offers relevant information.

1. 2 The Focus on Paul’s Seven Letters

What is important to discovering Paul’s identity is that we *have* letters he clearly wrote. In those letters he was *present* to those who received them. This concept of presence may be hard to grasp, given our desire to hear and see someone as the way in which they are present to us. The actual process of sharing the stories of our lives no longer takes place in writing letters. We live in a world of emails, text messages, and twitter statements, all of which can be lost in an electronic blizzard. We are blessed with the letters of the past. My worry is that with all our digital and screen technology we are may not be passing on to the future the letters of our lives. Paul’s letters allow us to hear him, and to gather a better picture of the man himself.

There are 13 letters in the New Testament with Paul’s name attached. Not all of them, however, were written by Paul. One or two may actually catch Paul’s voice, perhaps by those who knew him and worked along side of him. Other letters seem to paint a totally different picture of Paul. Consequently there are three different categories differentiating the degrees of certainty with regard to authenticity.

²⁵ Paul Gray, 2016, 24.

The seven letters that nearly all scholars agree were written by Paul are:

Romans
 1 Corinthians
 2 Corinthians
 Galatians
 Philippians
 1 Thessalonians
 Philemon

There are three other letters that Paul might have written.

2 Thessalonians
 Colossians
 Ephesians

The Pastoral Epistles carry Paul's name but this particular designation can be rightly questioned because they are so different in many respects from the other ten letters.

1 Timothy
 2 Timothy
 Titus

In the early days of television there was a game show called "What's My Line?". There were three contestants all pretending to be someone with a particularly unique job or skill. They would all be introduced with the same name. Each might say "My name is Joe Adagio. I repair expensive violins." Questions of the contestants followed, but then the judges needed to vote. After the judges cast their ballots for the one they thought was the real person, the host would say "Will the real Joe Adagio please stand."

The example of the game show is relevant to this work because we have three different kinds of letters in the New Testament, and the narrative of Acts makes a forth candidate for whoever is to be called the *real Paul*. At one time I imagined Paul as a contestant on this game show and heard the Game show host ask "Will the real Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, please stand up?" Now I'm not so sure there is a "Real Paul." But I'm convinced there are aspects to Paul's story sometimes ignored or forgotten.

Further on in the chapter "Paul the Letter Writer" we will look more closely at the six contested letters that bear Paul's name. There are biblical scholars, with some convincing arguments for keeping 2 Thessalonians, and especially Colossians and Ephesians in the corpus of authentic letters of Paul. For the purposes of discovering more of Paul's story, given the premises of this account, we have an abundance of material in the seven letters clearly bearing Paul's imprint. Looking closely at those seven letters is my strategy to let Paul tell us who he really is, even though in his own time, others saw him in their own way. In the years that followed there were other legends and stories of Paul continued in

the oral world of the early Jesus communities. Some of them may actually be part of the legendary Paul, or even inside those contested letters.

The Pastoral Epistles present a different problem, because of the different voice of Paul emerging from what clearly are letters written decades after Paul. The situation of these early followers of Jesus had certainly changed as they faced issues of securing a stable position of acceptance for the practice of their faith in the Roman world.²⁶ The Paul in the Pastoral Epistles stands alone, not in the context of the other early apostles. “Paul is the *sole* apostle, a person who enjoys indisputable authority and whose gospel is the sole norm of Christian truth.”²⁷ It may or may not trouble us, but it seems these *later* documents were written to make Christianity more respectable. “Now Paul was sufficiently domesticated to serve the needs of a church increasingly eager to gain social acceptability.”²⁸

In contrast to the Pastoral Epistles marginalizing the ministry of women we can find considerable evidence on the positive role that women played in the ministry of the communities founded by Paul *in* those seven letters. The evidence of Paul’s positive views on shared leadership stands in stark contrast to some particularly difficult passages coming from 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus which present a Paul who cannot support women in leadership. It is important to consider a few examples.

Could Paul really have written the following? “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” (1 Tim 2:11-12). What a contrast this statement is to the reality that women were allowed to pray or prophecy just as men were doing in public worship in the Corinthian assemblies²⁹. (1 Cor. 11:405)

With regard to the prohibition of women having authority didn’t Paul call Junia an apostle? (Romans 16:7) Didn’t he entrust the delivery of the letter to the Romans in the hands of Phoebe? (Romans 16:1-2) To be sure there is another passage in 1 Corinthians 14:24-36 that declared that women should be silent in church. *Most scholars are quite confident that Paul didn’t write those words.*³⁰ They are what are considered an “interpolation”, meaning that some scribe, reflecting a later time in the church, gave these words to Paul in making a copy of this letter.

Paul *found in his own letters* is really quite different from most of other men in the first century when it comes to his view of women. In some surprising passages he uses metaphors that only a woman would be expected to use. So many of his co-workers were

²⁶ Zetterholm, 2009, 44.

²⁷ Ibid. 47 (Italics in original.)

²⁸ MacDonald, 1983, 89.

²⁹ K. Ehresperger, 2009, 172. “Paul and his co-senders apparently see no problem with women praying and prophesying during a worship meeting in 1 Cor. 11.5, thus participating in an active role in the assemblies...”

³⁰ MacDonald, 1983, 86-88.

women as well. The patriarchal Paul is certainly present in the non-Pauline letters, while a *less manly man* emerges in the seven letters we are confident he wrote. There will be a dialogue in what follows with documents coming after Paul, but greater confidence will be placed in what Paul actually said, rather than the words put into his mouth by others who came after him.

In summary, *Paul tells much of his own story in his letters*. When there is information from other sources that can confirm or substantiate something about Paul it clearly will be helpful to this enterprise. Acts, for example, is not always at odds with what Paul wrote. The other side of this process, of course, is the premise that any stories or facts that contravene something Paul said must be treated with great suspicion.³¹

1. 3 Paul isn't at his desk writing theology

The Paul met in these pages is not some kind of dour pipe-smoking theologian tucked away in a book-filled office writing systematic theology. To this day so many of the books about Paul focus on what was in his head, instead of the kind of man he was. Beker's observation is relevant, because this is not the Paul that I see in his letters. He wrote "...we continue to treat Paul as an abstract-propositional, dogmatic thinker.... Most of us perpetuate the custom of reading Paul in a historical manner by universalizing some of his theological ideas while ignoring its socio-historical setting."³²

In this account I can assure my readers that Paul emerges as a fascinating man in the midst of conflict but also in the context of unique emerging communities of equals living together in a way that few could have thought possible. He was a passionate man. He had strong feelings and opinions. He was also surprisingly gracious, forgiving (at times) and tender. The one thing lacking, at least from our limited point of view, may have been a sense of humor.³³ He certainly lived with a sense of purpose and direction, and was not afraid of challenges. In the end he left a legacy that I doubt he never even worried about having.

Paul knew one thing would happen when he writing those letters and sending them off

³¹ My intent isn't to trash Acts or to have it removed from the New Testament canon. We can bring historical criticism to this account and still admire the creative narrative handed down to us by the author of Acts, while questioning its historicity. I would hope the readers of my book appreciate that I am taking Acts as an important account of the emergence of early Christian communities, and I am treating it in a serious manner. I would wish for the same assessment accorded to an earlier Biblical scholar, John Knox, who questioned the historicity of Acts. It was said of him that he did "...indeed take Acts with the utmost seriousness; instead of *assuming* its reliability he subjected it to the rigorous cross-examination that is required in good historiography." [J.A. Hare, "Introduction" in John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, p. xl]

³² Beker, 1991, 28.

³³ Knox, 1987, 87.

with co-workers who would represent him well. It was that *his presence* would be felt as those letters were shared. We have to stop thinking that the letters were read by individuals. They weren't read as we do with books like this. They were performed. They were embodied in a performance. They were voiced by those who carried them, not just in scrolls, but in their memory. Readings of Paul's letters were more like a theatrical event in the context of worship, and it is highly likely that letter performances would be repeated in the same way that some of us watch the same movie more than once.

This Paul is still with us. We may have to blow the dust off of him when we find him on some long forgotten theology books in a seminary library. We know we must be suspicious of reports about Paul that came later. But we can read his letters with fresh eyes.

1. 4 The Structure of this Picture of Paul

This book is divided into three main sections. It begins with "*Finding Paul.*" Even without knowing when he was born some reasonable guesses can be made regarding *when* Paul began his ministry as Apostle to the Gentiles. It is also possible to offer a rough course of his ministry based on information found in his letters, without relying on Acts. Paul's revelation from God that Jesus was the Messiah may have happened within three years of the crucifixion—maybe within a year! The two were most likely close in age, with Jesus being perhaps a few years older.

This section begins with the story of Paul going to Arabia after his revelation that Jesus was the Christ—the expected Messiah. In a fascinating conjunction of two passages of scripture and with the help of a few historical detectives its possible to even determine an approximate date when Paul probably first went to Arabia. There is not a single clue in any of the other letters ascribed to Paul's hand, where it possible to ascertain a particular date in the first century with regard to any of Paul's travels or letters. The one clue we have though is sufficient.

Finding Paul means seeing the ways in which he remained a Jew who developed a focus and passion inviting *gentiles* (non-Jews) to know the story of God culminating in the resurrection of Jesus. Once called by God to know Jesus as Messiah, the ministry of Paul was focused on non-Jews learning the monotheistic faith now more clearly defined through Jesus Christ. Paul did this because he was a storyteller who *lived* the very story he shared as he founded one new Jesus community after another. What emerges is a story of downward mobility on Paul's part that mirrors, as he tells us, the story of Jesus.

"*Paul and Friends*" is the title of second set of chapters. Here you'll find Paul writing to communities of faith and commending a way of living the story of Christ. Each community was to demonstrate to the world what life in Christ was all about. Paul did not go about his ministry on his own. He had various teams engaged in ministry with him, Many were women. This gives me a chance to partly right the ship that for too long has labeled Paul a misogynist. There are also some fascinating things to learn about how Paul

composed his letters and saved them. Thankfully, those letters serve two thousand years later to be our source for seeing more of Paul the man.

Though always Jewish Paul lived as a gentile among gentiles³⁴. By his own admission, and without telling us what exactly he did, he worked with his hands. Chances are he special tools that he carried, and probably dressed like others in the same trade. He would have been hard to pick out in a crowd from others seeking to survive from one day to the next. Behind the story of assuming that trade—which had to come after his call—is where we find more evidence for that story of downward mobility. He shaped that story around his faith in Christ, and asked others, over and over, to follow his example.

A major question regards what kind of man was Paul? It seems he wasn't always a "manly man." He was even willing to consider himself a "fool for Christ" and called for others to think in the same way. (1 Cor. 3:18) There may be much more lying behind Paul's condemnation of worldly wisdom. It is a piece of the story highly relevant to our times.

The last section is titled "*Inside Paul's World.*" Even though it is impossible to construct a true biography for Paul we can read between the lines of Paul's letters and ask some "wonder questions." I wonder if Paul had a watch. He certainly had a clear view about the meaning of time in reference to what God had done and what was coming next. There's much to consider with regard to Paul's expectations regarding the second coming of Jesus—a return seemingly and problematically delayed.

Other questions covered in this past part of the book discuss a number of topics. I wonder if Paul paid much attention to politics of his day? What was it like for Paul to be in prison and why was he arrested so often? What about those who seemed to have been patrons who offered housing and sent him gifts? Did Paul have just one spiritual encounter of Jesus? Was Paul, perhaps, a Jewish mystic and someone who had frequent dreams and visions?

Finally, what about the journeys of Paul to Jerusalem? What was the first meeting like with Peter and James? What was the agreement Paul reached at the Jerusalem Conference? Did he ever return to Jerusalem with a collection for the poor? Did he ever reach Spain? There are, at least, some provisional answers to all these questions that can help fill in some of empty spaces in Paul's story.

In the "Conclusion" of the book I offer a brief review of the aspects of Paul uncovered in my research. I will add some thoughts about the things that would perplex and trouble Paul about Christianity as we know it. If Paul started visiting Christian communities with all our differences and divisions would he even want to call himself a Christian?

³⁴ It wasn't actually that unusual as I'll explain in the chapter "Paul Apostle to the Gentiles", with one very important difference regarding the people who shared Paul's life.

There was something quite distinctive about the vision that Paul had for those who had been baptized and who were being shaped into a common life in the context of communities with an unusual common life. It isn't a stretch to claim that the life these early Jesus people were sharing was quite distinctive and unique. To be in the Jesus community, seen through eyes of your Romans neighbors meant having them wondering about your civic loyalty. Paul's Jewish cousins and friends, knowing about Paul's ministry to Gentiles, had to be questioning the welcome extended to non-Jews. These same communities of faith were calling people away from national, ethnic, tribal, and even dare we say, religious loyalties of the past. What would Paul say about some of the ways we make compromises with some of those same loyalties while also claiming a Christian identity?

One other detail that must be discussed before heading into the main chapters of this book regards my reluctance to use the words "Christian" and "church." The focus is on Paul's ministry in the years 30 to 60 in the first century. We have the terms "Christian"³⁵ twice in Acts (11:26; 28:28) and once in 1 Peter (4:16)

Scholars believe the term was first used to condemn these strange people worshipping a crucified messiah.³⁶ The label "Christian" was first used *against* the followers of Jesus, and only adopted as a distinctive, more positive, label in the second century.³⁷ I will use the terms "followers of Jesus" or the "Jesus movement" as a way to distinguish these early followers who came from both Jewish and gentile backgrounds.

The other term that can be confusing is *church*. What we call church isn't at all a good translation of the Greek word "*ekklesia*." Church in our world implies an institution, and it can mean some kind of distinctive building. It is also the term that separates Jews (with their institutions of synagogue and temple) from Christians who gather in churches. Paul's *ekklesia* were united—Jew and Gentile together "in Christ." As N.T. Wright so wisely has observed "...nothing that we would even begin to recognize as 'the church' of today's western world was thinkable in Paul's day."³⁸

It is important in understanding Paul to realize that his Bible was the Greek version known to us as the Septuagint. The translation of the Hebrew word for "assembly" became *ekklesia*, which in the Greek world meant a citizen assembly. It was a word with political overtones. Richard Horsley believes Paul's word for these communities grounded "in Christ" should be understood as "...the political assembly of the people "in

³⁵ Actually the term is *Chrstianos*.

³⁶ Haenchen, 1971, 368 In a footnote he suggests that the term "Christianos" may have originally been used by Roman authorities to designate a sect of political conspirators. If Luke, however, had know of the origin of this term, if it was so, it would have undermined the main theme of Acts regarding the friendly treatment offered the followers of Jesus.

³⁷ Smith, ed, 2013, 136

³⁸ Wright, 2014, 1414

Christ” in pointed juxtaposition and “competition” with the official city assembly.”³⁹

Exploring what it meant to belong to Christ Paul used coded language. There’s little doubt that Paul opposed the dominant ideology of the Roman Empire, but not in a blatant attacking mode. When writing to the Philippians Paul “...tells them his own story, the story of how he had abandoned his status and privileges in order to find the true status and privilege of one in Christ, and he encourages them to imitate him.”⁴⁰ Obviously Paul has a vision of community quite different from the vertical and hierarchal world of the Roman Empire.

One problem that must be recognized when using the NRSV translation for most of the quotations from the New Testament is its choice of translating the Greek word *ekklesia* with the English word “*church*.” For example in the beginning of Galatians it is a letter addressed “To the churches of Galatia.” (NRSV). I think it is wise to consider the counsel of Anders Runneson,

“In light of this ancient terminological and sociopolitical context it becomes quite clear that the English translation “church” is inappropriate and misleading, since it conjures up not only a (modern) religious non-civic, non-political setting, but more importantly, imposes on the ancients a separate non-Jewish institutional identity for those who claimed Jesus to be the Messiah.”⁴¹

In what follows, when thinking about those assemblies of early Jesus followers, I will more often use Paul’s term *ekklesia*. At times I will also talk about “assemblies” because the practice of gathering for worship on the 8th day of the week was a critical marker for membership in the *ekklesia*. This book concludes, however, with the implications of Paul’s story for who treasure the word *church*.

Excursus 1: Can the Historical Paul Ever Be Found?

An honest appraisal of doing history involves all that we don’t know and what we may never discover. The historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote “Much about the behavior of people *of all classes* today, is in fact, as unknown and undocumented as was much in the lives of common people in the past.”⁴² What may set apart Paul’s letters and all that was written in his name and about him in the centuries following his death, is that many honoring Paul were living *undocumented* lives. They even wrote letters in his name, and didn’t want to be remembered. They were pseudopigraphers, which sounds to our ears, like they were criminals. What mattered in the issues of their time, years after Paul, however, was to let him speak to their time and their issues, and what better way than to write in Paul’s name.

³⁹ Horsley, 1997, Note 67 Page????

⁴⁰ Wright, 2000, 182

⁴¹ Runneson, A., 2015, 72.

⁴² Hobsbawm, 1997, 215 (From a lecture “On History From Below” 1985) Italics in original.

There were different ways to hear Paul voice and teaching in the years after he was martyred. Certainly different communities had copies of some of his correspondence, and read them in worship. As those documents started to wear out, or when other communities wanted a copy, then copies were made. At that point discrepancies in the texts took place—some unintentional, and others to correct something Paul might have said, but which no longer applied. At other times some took the liberty to write in Paul’s name, and in a few cases it might even have been someone close to Paul in his ministry. (Sometimes it is suggested that Paul was not the author of Colossians and Ephesians, but rather they were written by followers close to Paul.⁴³) In other instances there were oral stories and legends about Paul which in a few instances were eventually written down and passed around from one community to another. The goal in all these different ways of continuing Paul’s voice was to “...make the apostle useful and relevant for later times, as well as the theological perspectives that informed them.”⁴⁴

A question that we can never answer from our 2nd and 3rd century church documents is “Who got Paul right...?”⁴⁵ It would also be presumptuous to lead my readers astray to think that getting “Paul right” is the way this account ends. Whoever takes a stab at “finding Paul” will have to be honest about their own social location in history in the first place, and their place in the theological issues of their own time. The historical task with regard to the 2nd century, for example, is to understand Christians struggling in a pagan world in which they were often seen as a threat to a more traditional way of life. Christians, after all, weren’t showing up for the gladiatorial games and other public celebrations of civil life.

Another way to be realistic about the different “Pauls” in early church history comes from Wayne Meeks who mentioned the great divergence in those who were identifying Paul as the “most holy apostle” while others called him the “apostle of the heretics.”⁴⁶ He went on to note the many “inconsistencies” in Paul (i.e. in his letters) and said “Paul is the Christian Proteus.” In the *Odyssey* of Homer “Proteus was a *daimon* of the sea who could assume any form he choose.”⁴⁷ It was Paul, of course, who boldly declared that he “I have become all things to all people.” (1 Cor. 9:22)

Those early legends about Paul outside of his letters are examples of different communities of faith finding Paul’s voice for their issues of living the Jesus story. Paul didn’t live to see the way his teachings and his story would continue, but that is true for

⁴³ Pervo (2010) thinks Colossians could have been written by an immediate follower of Paul (66) but describes the author of Ephesians as a “stranger” to Paul (72). At the opposite extreme is Douglas Campbell (*Framing Paul*, 2014) who maintains Paul as the author of Colossians and Ephesians, the latter which Campbell argues is the lost letter to the Laodiceans. Pp. 252-338).

⁴⁴ Pervo, 2010, 38.

⁴⁵ White, 174.

⁴⁶ Meeks, 1972, 435.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

each of us. We all step into a past that begins to shape us, but we don't have the benefit of knowing what the future will do with our memory when we are past.

Paul was raised up in the Pharisaic traditions of Judaism in a Hellenistic world. Then he came across communities of Jesus followers with a storytelling practice regarding Jesus, especially in terms of his crucifixion and resurrection. At first he considered them a threat, those to be persecuted, but then he became one with them. We really don't know who baptized him or broke bread with him for the first time, but Paul certainly didn't invent baptism or the Eucharist.⁴⁸ These were traditions he would accept as important practices for all those who would follow him into this Jesus story. (It is a tradition to this day in most Christian communities!) His particular *call* was to be a missionary, but his *legacy* was as a teacher and that is what he became in the context of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

While Paul may have wondered about the various adversaries who arose in communities he founded little could he image how diverse Christianity would become in the immediate centuries to follow, and how many opposed to each other would each claim him for their own arguments regarding Christianity. There would also be large segments of developing Christian communities *without* any stories or legends of Paul. The amazing travels of Paul extending from Arabia going West toward Rome (hoping for Spain), nonetheless, left large parts of the Mediterranean world untouched by his ministry or his letters. "...one must overlook the fact that there is ample evidence for the early spread of Christianity to Rome, North Africa, Syria, Cyprus, and other areas untouched by the Pauline Mission network."⁴⁹

The "historical" Paul is a kind of fiction. Who he *is* depends on *who* is seeking him, and *what* is their historical context. My own story is that for a long time I was usually avoiding Paul, rarely preaching on his letters, for example. When I first became more interested in Paul it was in pursuit of understanding a particular doctrine of his that in the context of the Protestant Reformation was definitive of Paul: namely the "doctrine of justification by faith." Talk about a contested area of among Pauline scholars! I found it. What I also learned is that there was much more to Paul than a particular theology or doctrine.

So if we error in reading Paul through the different pictures from the early legends and the pseudopigrapha bearing Paul's name, do we not equally fail if we cannot see how others in our times influence our view of Paul? N.T. Wright has observed, "... There are plenty of serious-minded people in the world today who read Paul through a series of lenses bequeathed by Luther, Kant, Bultmann and others, and then interrogate Paul as to his perceived inconsistencies and aporiae as though these were there in his writings rather than in the cross-eyed effect produced by the lenses."⁵⁰ The danger in reading Paul is that we do so through the issues affecting us or those who study Paul with a particular worldview that seems amenable to us.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 440

⁴⁹ Gray, 204.

⁵⁰ Wright, 2013, 67.

What if we take a step back, however, and let Paul speak for himself? That's the question I found framed in a couple of scholars that have informed this effort. Going back to his letters we can find a consistency in Paul that seeks to model the story of Jesus which rather boldly (or so it can seem) involves Paul's claim to follow my example as he was following Jesus. In a more colloquial way Wright translates an assertion of Paul in 1 Cor. 11:1 this way: "Copy me, just as I'm copying the Messiah." The short sentence that follows suggests this is a statement that helps us *find Paul*. "With that we are touching bedrock."⁵¹

The example of Paul is what we will be looking for in this account. We will leave the issues of his contested identity for others to study, while we listen for Paul's frequent autobiographical statements.

⁵¹ Ibid. 1510.