

# Paul's Cultural Context

Karen M. Elliott, CPPS

That phrase “all things to all” hints at the diversity Paul encountered in his missionary travels. Paul’s world was far from homogeneous. Paul, a Jew born and raised in Tarsus and a Roman citizen, was immersed in a multicultural, multireligious world. His education and travels exposed him to diverse cultures, philosophies, and peoples. The philosophical, religious, social, and personal perspectives of Paul, because of his life experiences, are interwoven into a complex whole. The reality of Christ crucified and the redemption that Jesus brought about dramatically and profoundly reshaped Paul’s thought, preaching, and way of living.

First-century Tarsus was not unusual in having a community of Jews living there, far from their ancestral homeland. There were Jewish communities in most cities of the Roman Empire, usually composed of merchants or tradesmen. Paul’s circle of fellow-laborers for the gospel included Jewish men such as Barnabas (Acts 4:36, 9:27, 11:22, 30, 13:46, 50, 14:12, 20, 15:2, 12, 22, 25, 35–37, 39; 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13).

Most of the people Paul encountered were, nonetheless, Gentiles. In Paul’s upbringing, the most fundamental distinction among human beings was that between Gentiles and Jews, for only the latter were the chosen people, entrusted with a special covenantal relationship with God. The distinction between men and women was trivial compared to that between Jews and Gentiles. From an early date, complaints were raised within the Jewish community that the followers of Jesus were blurring this all-important distinction by accepting Gentiles as full members of the Christian community; indeed, it may have been this very point that prompted Paul at first to oppose the Christians. But as a result of his conversion, Paul understood himself as called by God specifically to proclaim the gospel of Christ to Gentiles—his position had reversed completely. Most of the members of the churches Paul founded were Gentiles, and, in keeping with Paul’s principle that all who receive Christ are endowed by the Holy Spirit with gifts for ministry, we find a number of Gentiles in positions of prominence in those churches. They include Titus (2 Corinthians 2:13, 7:6, 13–14, 8:6, 16, 23, 12:18; Galatians 2:1, 3) and Timothy (Acts 16:1, 17:14–15, 18:5, 19:22, 20:4; Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 19; Philippians 1:1, 2:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 3:1–2, 6).

The members of Paul’s congregations came from all walks of life. Some were obviously well off, for they owned houses large enough to accommodate the early Christian congregations gathered for worship (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Philemon 2). Most were at the lower end of society, including a number of slaves (1 Corinthians 1:26). One of these, Onesimus, figures prominently in Paul’s letter to Philemon (Philemon 10–11). Paul is sometimes faulted for his failure to condemn the institution of slavery. The fact is, Paul was a man of his time, and it seems never to have occurred to him that there could be a world without masters and slaves. Nevertheless, Paul insists that in Christ new realities have come into existence, realities that transcend the existing order of society. He calls upon Philemon to recognize a slave, Onesimus, as his brother (Philemon 16). In effect, the new, Christian realities have relativized the social structure so as to negate it almost completely. Non-Christians saw such disregard for traditional hierarchical relationships as shocking and subversive to the very fabric of society. Not surprisingly, Paul was accused of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6 NRSV).

In much the same way, Paul is a man of his day with regard to the family. In Greco-Roman society, the family was the most basic and, in many ways, most important institution. Whereas the modern democratic system is centered on the individual, both in regard to personal rights and freedom, the Roman



view held that the basic organizational structure of government was founded upon the family, headed by a *paterfamilias*. Relationships were elaborately ordered and extremely hierarchical, rooted in reason. The prevailing philosophies taught that men have the highest form of reason, women possess reason to a much less developed extent, and children possess the potential to develop reason. Family hierarchy was essential because the Romans used it to legitimate and justify their dominance over all other people.<sup>1</sup>

Paul seems never to have imagined that a household could be organized any other way than that with which he was familiar; at one point he actually refers to the husband as the wife's "head" (1 Corinthians 11:3). But here too he sees the new realities in Christ superseding existing social structures. He insists that, before God, there is a reciprocity between husband and wife, a mutuality of respect and responsibility (1 Corinthians 7:3–4; 11:11–12) that would have sounded shocking and subversive in his day. Because the patriarchal family undergirded the social and political structure in the Roman world, any ideology or praxis that challenged or threatened the hierarchical structure of the family was perceived as an imminent danger to the Roman Empire. In light of this, one can see why any patriotic Roman citizen would object to Paul's assertion, in his letter to the Galatians, that in Christ the differences between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free persons, and men and women (3:28), have been abolished. Such countercultural views undermined the fundamental structures of society, and ultimately threatened the rationale by which Rome and its citizens justified domination of the first-century Mediterranean world. Christians who held such views would have been liable to a charge of treason.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's writings show that his understanding of the Christian community is intimately interconnected with the workings of the Holy Spirit,<sup>3</sup> as he views the diversity and unity in the community as Spirit-filled. For Paul, the manifestations of the Spirit are witnessed in the charisms of each believer in the communities of faith (1 Corinthians 12). Paul clearly exhorts the Christian community to remember that diversity, not uniformity, is essential for a healthy church, that the one God who is characterized by diversity within unity has decreed the same for the Church.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Paul recognizes that God does not give such charisms to men only. Women, too, receive such gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:5), which Paul prizes as the foremost of the spiritual gifts because of its usefulness in the ministry of the Church (1 Corinthians 14:1–5). Paul was particularly close to a husband and wife team, Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2, 18; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:3); there is good reason to believe that Priscilla was the dominant member of this ministry team, not her husband, Aquila. A number of single women also appear, such as Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2–3) and Phoebe (Romans 16:1). . . .

## Religion and Philosophy

The modern prevailing worldview is almost a polar opposite of that of Paul's era. The predominant worldview today highly touts the latest technological advances, whatever is "new and improved." The Mediterranean world in the first century CE was quite different. What was old was considered to be of great value, and new or recent ideas were suspect.<sup>5</sup> For the people of the first century, the present was not an age of enlightenment or improvement, but rather a direct link to the treasures of past wisdom. Ancestors were considered noble and were held in high esteem. Because of this suspicion of things new, if Christianity had proclaimed itself a "new religion" it would have been met, at best, with suspicion and, at worst, with absolute rejection.<sup>6</sup> In the Roman Empire, it was understood that all cultures and nations had their own traditional gods, goddesses, and religious practices. Rome did not interfere with the religious practices of those it conquered or who were otherwise part of their empire, unless the "foreign religion" or its practices were thought to encourage rebellion against Rome and its dominance.<sup>7</sup> The Christian communities of Paul's time were tolerated because Rome regarded them as members of a Jewish sect. However, when the followers of Jesus separated from Judaism, Christianity did not look like a legitimate



religion, because it no longer appeared to be the traditional beliefs and practices of a particular ethnic group: the only thing that all members of the Christian community had in common was their faith in and allegiance to Christ. Religion was an essential part of public life, and it would have been unthinkable for any public activity not to include a religious dimension.<sup>8</sup> All public activity of the first century included prayer and worship of local gods and goddesses. Christians were reluctant to participate in these normative social activities, resulting in their persecution.<sup>9</sup> A further obstacle to early Christians was the fact that in Greco-Roman culture members of a household were not permitted to engage in religious practices that their paterfamilias did not approve of. Consequently, for a woman, child, or slave to practice Christianity in defiance of the will of the paterfamilias was perceived as highly subversive to the good order of the family.

Paul used Greek philosophy and thought in order to connect with Gentiles. In fact, Christianity, like Judaism, had more in common with Greco-Roman philosophy than Greco-Roman religion. Religion was concerned primarily with performing the rites required by the gods: it was a civic duty, even a patriotic duty, but had little to do with the way people lived their daily lives. Philosophy was more interested in a comprehensive system of belief that had a bearing upon every aspect of life. One major difference between philosophy and Christianity was that, among the Greeks and Romans, philosophy was almost exclusively limited to men, primarily because it was widely assumed that women lacked the requisite intellectual capacity. In contrast, women play an active role in the Pauline churches. . . .

Paul understood flesh (*sarx*) and spirit (*pneuma*) in much the same way as his philosophically minded contemporaries. However, Paul focused on the individual's relationship to God and to the community of faith. Paul asserted that the sinfulness of the human person was rooted in the arrogance of autonomy, which results in a rupture in relationship due to a loss of the understanding of interconnectedness. A person is justified before God, according to Paul, by the utterly gratuitous mercy of God. Therefore, flesh and spirit are not merely philosophical constructs (the component parts of a human being) but, in fact, alternate ways of relating to others and to God.<sup>10</sup> For Paul, living according to the flesh means putting oneself ahead of all others, God included, resulting in disrupted relationships; living according to the spirit means acknowledging one's human sinfulness and depending upon God's grace, mending one's severed relationship with God and others.

Paul's emphasis on relationship is embedded in the individual's belonging to Christ and, by extension, to the Christian community of faith. The driving force in Paul's personal life, as well as his experience of social interactions and commitment in relationships, is focused on the dying and rising of Christ. For Paul the struggle inherent in every human life was a common experience that was deeply personal and relational, not merely academic. Paul radically challenged the arrogant and prevailing intellectual understanding of his day and instead asserted the prominence of love over precision and conformity.<sup>11</sup>

Paul was experienced in the Roman philosophical and intellectual understanding as well as the variety of social norms of his time. He understood the perception of the majority, which held the importance of reason and nature, the mystery surrounding the gods and goddesses, the expectations for religious worship, and the idealism of moral rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Influenced by these varied perspectives, Paul acquiesced to the prevailing view of his day in some areas, while at other times, he was critical and original in his teaching. His thinking and preaching were creative, especially his foundational focus on the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and in the Spirit. Paul did not argue for reason against faith, and challenged the arrogant intellectualism of the majority (1 Corinthians 4:18–21).<sup>13</sup>

As a consummate missionary, Paul could reach out to and connect with dissimilar people precisely because he was adaptable, flexible, and willing to accommodate the needs of others. Christ's gospel, the message of the cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, motivated Paul's willingness to become "all things to all":



Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God's law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some.

All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

Paul expresses his purpose in utilizing this pastoral approach as to “save” and “win” others “for the sake of the gospel.” He encourages those in the community to act responsibly and nurture the one body of Christ.<sup>14</sup> His belief that the end of time would occur in his lifetime, a belief commonly held in the early Christian community, encouraged his sense of urgency. Paul felt compelled to win as many converts as possible before the return of the resurrected Christ.

## Legacy and Influence

The fervent missionary ministry of Paul was essential to the survival of the nascent Christian community of the first century. Paul wrote many of his letters to address crises that threatened the unity and life of the fledgling communities of faith. He established his authority by insisting that his position was equal to that of the other apostles based upon his vision of the resurrected Christ (Galatians 1:11–12, 15–17).

In order to appreciate the intensity of Paul's zeal for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is imperative to recognize that Paul anticipated and fully expected to experience the *parousia*, Christ's return in glory, in his lifetime (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17). It is precisely because of this expectation that Paul found societal and religious issues such as slavery (e.g., Onesimus in Philemon) and the equality of women in society secondary to preaching the gospel. The urgency of Paul's travels, the intensity of his emotions, and the passion of his writing were founded in his belief that the eschatological reign of God was imminent. This divine imperative to preach the gospel of Jesus consumed Paul because he was utterly convinced that God had achieved salvation for the world in the person and mission of Jesus Christ. For Paul, Jesus Christ is the glory of God the Father who graces his followers with the Holy Spirit and who utterly changes the relationship between God and humanity. In Jesus Christ, suffering, sin, and death have been overcome. For Paul, God's utterly gratuitous love and compassion (*xaris*, which corresponds to the Hebrew *hesed*) grace all humanity, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, with freedom from the law and with salvation in Christ.

The impact of Paul and his ministry in the early Church is unmistakably documented in his own writings, in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the disputed Pauline letters that are attributed to his authorship and extol his example as a model pastor. Paul's missionary journeys provided him with the challenge of communicating the gospel message to peoples of diverse cultural and religious milieus. Significantly, Paul's words of praise, admiration, thanksgiving, admonition, and challenge, addressed to the early Christian communities of the first century CE, are equally relevant and applicable for Christians today.

This article is excerpted from *Women in Ministry and the Writings of Paul*, by Karen M. Elliott (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2010). Copyright © 2010 by Karen M. Elliott, CPPS. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.



---

<sup>1</sup> Gordon, D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 288.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4–11; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 3:3, 6, 8, 17–18; 5:5; Philippians 1:19; 2:1; 3:3.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 159.

<sup>5</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 284.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 286–87.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 94.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 576–77.

