

Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Letters

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Of twenty-seven New Testament books, twenty-one are letters, a form of communication commonly used in the first-century Hellenistic world. Some letters were personal correspondence to a named person or persons; frequently, they were addressed and read aloud to an assembled group. Letters intended for public reading usually were written by a scribe; the sender either dictated contents or gave main ideas to a scribe who then composed the actual wording.

Early Christians adapted an established literary genre, using it to inform, encourage, or correct local churches as they spread from Jerusalem into various parts of the Roman Empire. When a Christian community gathered for worship, letters from a church leader or missionary were read aloud in one sitting. Typical structure of this literary genre, including specifically Christian additions, included four main parts: salutation, naming sender and addressee; thanksgiving, perhaps with a prayer or blessing; body or main message, often focused on ethical instruction; and closing wishes of peace and blessing, sometimes with greetings to or from specific persons.

Like all letters, those of early Christian leaders are occasional; that is, they address a particular community in specific circumstances. Sometimes a letter discusses reports about activities and situations in a local church; sometimes the writer responds to questions from an individual or community. Therefore, New Testament letters sometimes leave unanswered questions; persons or situations known to the sender of a first-century letter often remain a mystery to twenty-first-century readers. Further, the letters do not present an organized, systematic discussion of early Christian thought and activity. Still much of the early Church's struggles, beliefs, and organization can be deduced from New Testament letters, written ca. AD 50–140.

Several concerns arise repeatedly in this literature. Tensions between Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those who remained in Judaism merit repeated discussion. Additional conflict arose for Jewish Christians on two fronts: Christian "Judaizers" insisted that Gentiles who joined the Jesus movement must first accept Jewish belief and practice. In addition, the presence of Gentiles, traditionally avoided by Jews as unclean unbelievers, met with resistance from Jewish Christians for decades. These struggles appear frequently in Paul's correspondence, as we shall see. As the Church included more and more Gentile converts, Christian missionaries needed to craft new ways to explain the meaning of Jesus. As seen in many of the letters, the Christian message began to include Hellenistic vocabulary, thought patterns, and modes of communication.

New Testament letters also indicate challenge and change in early Christians' expectations regarding the eschaton. Jesus had proclaimed that God's rule of the final age was at hand, and his Resurrection confirmed this belief. First generation Christians expected that Jesus would soon return in full glory, completing God's final Reign. *Parousia*, a Greek word for "coming," refers to this expectation. When the anticipated Parousia did not occur, later generations had to deal with this delay of Jesus' "Second Coming."

Rethinking expectations involved increasingly organized Christian life, worship, and ministries, and New Testament correspondence also reflects this situation. At first, believers in Jesus as Messiah had little need for large-scale structure or clearly defined ministries. Local communities gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper in private homes as "house churches." Ministries and forms of ministry were varied and fluid; men and women used their gifts to meet the needs of their particular community. Those who owned a house where Christians met often served as community leader or pastor. Other ministries mentioned in the



letters include apostles, teachers, preachers, elders, deacons, and missionaries, though the precise duties of each form of ministry are not always clear. As seen below, Paul's letters reveal that women, as well as men, carried out these ministries in the early decades of Christianity. Later letters indicate that toward the end of the first century, the cultural norm of male leadership reemerged and predominated. In addition, by this time the Parousia seemed even more distant, so Church structures became more organized and particular ministries more specifically defined and regulated.

Though the infant Church grappled with many challenges, its central concern remained the same: accurate understanding of Jesus as the Christ of God and faithfully living the transformed life available through him. New Testament letters indicate continuous attention to the *kerygma*, the proclamation of faith in Jesus received from earliest witnesses and apostles, faithfully passed on by the faith community. Within twenty-five years after Jesus' Death and Resurrection, Paul strongly warned Christians in Galatia that they must accept only the teaching about Jesus that he proclaimed: "If anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed!" (Galatians 1:9). A half century later, the need to preserve authentic teaching continued; another letter declares that anyone who denies the full humanity of Christ is in fact "antichrist" (1 John 2:18).

Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles

An important figure in the early days of Jewish resistance to proclamation of Jesus as Messiah was Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. The story of Paul's conversion appears no less than four times in the New Testament, three times in Acts (9:1–19; 22:1–21; 26:1–22) and once in Paul's own letter to the Galatians (1:11–24). At first Saul was a committed Pharisee, extremely zealous in keeping the Law of Moses. When he first heard the new teaching about Jesus, he vigorously opposed it as false and damaging to true Judaism. On his way to Damascus with arrest warrants for Jews found following the new "way," he experienced a revelation of the risen Christ that totally changed his life. Saul, zealous Pharisee, became Paul, apostle of the Good News of Jesus Christ. As part of his revelation experience, Paul became convinced that he was sent to proclaim Jesus as Savior of not only Jews but Gentiles as well. Many have remarked that except for Jesus himself, no one is more important in the spread of Christianity than Paul.

After his conversion, which probably took place only a few years after the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, Paul withdrew for an undetermined time to Syria. When he emerged again, he began his career as apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. About AD 47–58 he made several missionary tours through the Greek and Roman world of the Mediterranean, establishing Christian communities in one place after another. Paul first brought the Gospel to Asia Minor (the area of modern Turkey), then undertook a missionary trip to Greece. His third missionary journey revisited churches established earlier, ending in Ephesus, a large port city. When Paul returned to Jerusalem, Jews who resisted his mission to the Gentiles charged him with crimes against the Mosaic Law, and he was imprisoned for two years. Then demanding his rights as a Roman citizen, Paul appealed for a trial in a Roman court. After a difficult sea journey, Paul arrived in Rome, where he was eventually martyred ca. 62.

Paul's mission to the Gentiles caused a great deal of controversy among Jewish followers of Jesus. Contrary to the practice of the Jerusalem church, led by Peter, James, and John, Paul and some of his associates taught that new converts to Jesus were not required to keep all commandments of the Torah. Bitter arguments erupted over whether Gentiles who joined the Christian community must be circumcised and required to follow Jewish dietary laws. Matters came to a crisis point at the so-called Council of Jerusalem (ca. AD 50). In the end, Paul's approach won out; the emerging Christian community came to believe that Jesus had brought salvation that went beyond the Law of Moses: "the old things have passed



away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). For Paul, among those baptized into Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27–28).

[...]

Thirteen New Testament letters bear the name of Paul, but most likely six were written by other authors. Following the practice of their day, early Christians sometimes composed documents in the name of a highly regarded authority, drawing on knowledge of that person's thought and perspectives. Most scholars regard these letters as originating from Paul himself: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The exact order of writing is debated, but 1 Thessalonians is generally regarded as Paul's earliest letter, Romans or Philippians his last.

Other letters are attributed to Paul, but their authenticity is questioned by some scholars: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews. (Hebrews is a special case because it does not name Paul as sender; reference to one of his coworkers, Timothy, has prompted some to attribute it to Paul.) Among reasons for doubt that these documents were written by Paul are considerable differences in theology, vocabulary, and style and reference to historical structures and situations that arose only after the apostle's death ca. 62. Some scholars accept 2 Thessalonians and Colossians as Paul's, while the majority doubt that Ephesians came from his hand. Of the remaining letters bearing his name, the historical circumstances of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus suggest a dating of ca. AD 100 or later, long after Paul's death. Consequently, few believe Paul wrote them and few, if any, Western scholars today accept Hebrews as genuinely Pauline. Although New Testament letters attributed to Paul seem to be arranged in order of length, beginning with the longest (Romans), they are discussed here in a more likely order of writing, beginning with the undisputed letters of Paul.

Authentic Letters of Paul

The oldest known Christian document is 1 Thessalonians, apparently composed ca. 49–50. This letter reflects the early Church's expectation that Christ would quickly return, completing the eschaton. Paul compliments the Thessalonians as a model for other churches, because they turned from idols toward the true God and await "his Son from heaven, whom he raised from [the] dead" (1:10). He urges them to continue turning away from their former immorality, living in mutual love as they eagerly anticipate Christ's coming and the resurrection of believers, those still alive and those who have died. While Paul expects Jesus to reappear soon, he discourages speculation about the exact time, which must remain in God's hands.

Correspondence to the church at Corinth points to several challenges in Paul's missionary work among Gentiles. Corinth, where the apostle stayed for approximately eighteen months, was a large, wealthy port city well known in ancient times for numerous kinds of immorality. First Corinthians, composed ca. AD 56, indicates a church still struggling to shed former divisions of class and wealth, as well as sexual behaviors approved by the culture but incompatible with life in Christ. In this letter, Paul responds to reports received from other Christians and questions from the Corinthian church. The most important topics include distinguishing divine wisdom, revealed in the cross and Resurrection of Christ, from merely human wisdom; several ethical issues; community divisions threatening the authenticity of the Lord's Supper; proper use of spiritual gifts; and the Resurrection of Christ and of believers.

Second Corinthians in its present form seems to be a composite of several letters or fragments written on different occasions perhaps a year after 1 Corinthians. Chapters 10–13 appear to precede chapters 1–9. Viewing the contents of this letter in this order, it appears that after he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul and the church at Corinth experienced serious conflict. A major source of tension apparently



originated with Jewish Christian preachers who proclaimed “another Jesus” and questioned Paul’s authority and effectiveness in proclaiming the Gospel. Chapters 10–13 are fiery and even sarcastic in tone, defending the Gospel Paul preached and his apostolic credentials, both rooted in his revelatory experience of Christ. Earlier chapters, much milder in tone, indicate reconciliation between the apostle and the Corinthians. Paul reminds them that their transformed life in Christ is the most important letter of recommendation for the genuineness of Paul as apostle and the Gospel he proclaims.

Galatians, probably written in the middle of Paul’s missionary career, reflects ongoing conflict between the Apostle to the Gentiles and other Christian preachers, described as opponents. In this letter, Paul again vigorously defends his view of the *kerygma* and his own authority as apostle. The most important content of Galatians presents both a cornerstone of Paul’s Gospel and a major reason for opposition from “Judaizers”: Paul states that no one is justified by obedience to the Torah, but only by faith (trust) in God’s gift of new life through Christ. With this teaching, Paul in effect wiped away Torah requirements such as circumcision and dietary restrictions for Gentiles, fully opening the Christian community to them.

Some scholars place the composition of Philemon before Romans, some after, but precise dating does not affect its main message. This shortest Pauline letter deals with the significant issue of slavery among Christians. Paul insists that the converted slave, Onesimus, should be treated as a Christian brother (v. 16), but to the disappointment of many modern readers, he does not question the institution of slavery. In this the apostle follows established biblical tradition and social practice of the Roman Empire, where approximately one third of the population were slaves. The Hebrew Scriptures regulated slavery and treatment of slaves, and Paul, who had never known a world without slavery, apparently accepts such practice as a given. Christian questioning and overturning of institutional slavery would have to wait many centuries.

Romans, Paul’s longest composition, reads more like a sermon or essay than a letter and presents his most mature, reasoned theology. In Romans, the apostle wrote ca. AD 58 to a church he had not yet visited, seeking to introduce himself and his message. Here Paul constructs a systematic reflection on salvation freely offered by God through Christ as an unearned gift, not achieved by human effort or accomplishment. Paul had faithfully and rigorously followed the Torah, but the transformed life in Christ convinced him that, though Mosaic Law served to make people aware of sin, Torah observance could not bring about a right relationship between sinners and God. Only God’s undeserved, unearned love offered in Christ and accepted in trusting faith reconciles God and humankind. In the spirit of Christ, all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, find power to resist sin and live a new life of oneness with God.

Paul was aware that if his position were to gain acceptance by Jewish Christians he would have to root it in the Hebrew Scriptures. Using Jewish modes of interpretation, Paul states that God’s plan for justifying sinners through faith began with Abraham. Quoting Genesis 15:6, the apostle points out that the patriarch was not justified on the basis of works; rather, God counted Abraham’s unflinching faith (trust) as righteousness. Because Abraham was uncircumcised at that time, he is not only father of all Jews but also “father of all the uncircumcised who believe” (Romans 4:11). Thus Paul proposes that through Abraham, God laid the foundation for two of the apostle’s major theological convictions: human beings are not made righteous by works, but faith; God’s salvation through Christ embraces Gentiles, as well as Jews.

Most scholars view Romans, chapter 16, which greets by name more than two dozen people, as a fragment of a separate letter. This chapter is remarkable, however, in documenting various leadership roles of women in the early Christian movement. Ten of Paul’s associates addressed here are clearly female: Phoebe, Prisca (or Priscilla), Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, the mother of Rufus, and the sister of Nereus. Contrary to usual cultural practice, these women are described not in relation to males but in terms of their service to the Christian mission. In some cases their precise function cannot be determined (for example, “workers in the Lord,” v. 12).



Other roles are more defined. Describing Phoebe, the writer uses the Greek word *diakonos*, applied elsewhere to both men and women deacons, and *prostatis*, which at the time meant “patron,” “benefactor,” or “presider.” Prisca and her husband, Aquila, are also mentioned for their dedication to the Gentile mission in 1 Corinthians (16:19) and Acts (18:2,18,26). Romans, chapter 16, and two other passages name the woman before her husband, suggesting that she held higher status or was highly regarded for her missionary labors. The writer also greets Andronicus and Junia, “prominent among the apostles” (v. 7). Until recently, many interpreters translated the feminine Junia as Junias, making it a man’s name, certain that no woman could have been called an apostle. However, there is no ancient written evidence for Junias as a masculine name, whereas numerous women in ancient documents are named Junia.

According to Christian tradition, the last genuine Pauline letter, Philippians, was one of four that Paul wrote while imprisoned in Rome. Though the place of writing cannot be established beyond doubt, the apostle does describe his situation as “imprisonment” (1:13–14). Highly personal in part, the letter contains autobiographical elements, above all the effect of his encounter with the risen Christ:

I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8–11)

Making the most important theological point in Philippians, Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, perhaps using an early Christian hymn. Though the first Adam grasped at divine status, Christ as New Adam (or Second Adam) “emptied himself” in complete obedience to God, who therefore raised him to glory (see Philippians 2:6–11). In Genesis, humankind (Adam) participates in the basic sin underlying all other sin: overstepping human limits, seeking equality with God. In Philippians, Christ begins the new eschatological humanity; as New Adam, he is what God intended from the beginning: humanity totally open and responsive to God.

Disputed Letters of Paul

Though 2 Thessalonians names Paul as the sender, many scholars doubt that he actually wrote this letter, partly because it repeats much of 1 Thessalonians and partly because it reinterprets the first letter’s view of the Parousia. This work challenges those who seem to think the “day of the Lord” has already occurred and elaborates a number of “signs” that must appear first. Bearing several other earmarks of apocalyptic thought, including dualism and images of final conflict between good and evil, this letter projects the Parousia further into the future. The author cautions that while waiting and praying for Christ’s return, the Church must attend to its earthly obligations.

Colossians bears Paul’s name and claims to have been written while he was in prison, but actual authorship is uncertain. Like genuine Pauline correspondence, Colossians focuses on the meaning of Christ and life in union with him. The writer seems to use an earlier Christian hymn to present Christ as divine wisdom in the flesh: the power and presence of God through whom all things were created is now



fully revealed in Christ. Believers united to him, in whom “dwells the whole fullness of deity bodily,” are thereby also united to one another, for “Christ is all and in all” (2:9; 3:11).

Though in many ways similar to Colossians, most scholars do not regard Ephesians as authentically Pauline, citing numerous differences in style, vocabulary, and theology. In addition, several historical references place this letter toward the end of the first century, a generation or two after Paul. Possibly the writer was a later disciple who adapted the apostle’s thought to his own time, when Church membership was mostly urban and Gentile. Ephesians focuses on unity of the church as “body of Christ,” reflecting the oneness of the entire universe in Christ. God’s age-old plan of salvation is accomplished in the mystery of Christ, who makes Gentiles and Jews coequal members of one body. The author no longer expects Christ to return soon, and advises Christians how to live in the present struggle with demonic powers. He likens Christians armed for conflict with evil to Roman soldiers dressed for battle: Christians should put on “the armor of God” and clothe themselves with truth, righteousness, and faith, taking up the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (6:10–17).

The three “Pastoral Letters,” 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, are almost always regarded as post-Pauline. Referring to Church organizations and ministries that probably did not exist in Paul’s time, these letters probably date to ca. AD 100–140. In the Pastorals (as these letters are called), leadership of men and women sharing gifts as needed is replaced by structures and qualifications of ministries that reflect the prevailing culture. These letters describe established roles and qualities of bishops or overseers, deacons, elders, and other ministries in a controlled structure of male leadership. Inclusion of women seen in Romans, chapter 16, gives way to restricted roles that mirror the subordinate place of women in much of the Hellenistic world. False doctrines circulating at the time (1 Timothy 1:3–7) could be a major reason for increasingly regulated Church organization and leadership. The letters do not provide enough information to determine the precise content of inaccurate teachings, but evidently the writer found it necessary to protect the community from “profane babbling and the absurdities of so-called knowledge” (1 Timothy 6:20).

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