

West Branch Friends Meeting  
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Who Was Paul, Exactly? Part I

Paul is second only to Jesus as the most important person in the history of Christianity. Yet today, some believers do not always regard him in positive terms. Some find him appealing, some appalling. Many attribute Paul's passages to the support of slavery, misogyny (defined as dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women), and heterosexism. On the other hand, Paul is often noted as being chiefly responsible for the expansion of Christianity to include Gentiles. So who *is* this main player in our foundational scriptures, and who was Paul, exactly?

Much of the study of Paul that I'd like to share these next few weeks comes from the scholarly work of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, both highly respected historical theologians.

But before we begin, there are three things we need to understand before trying to get to the bottom of exactly who Paul was. First of all, not all letters attributed to Paul were actually written by him. According to massive scholarly consensus, of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul, only seven are considered to be 'genuine' – written by Paul himself or dictated by him to a scribe. These include the three longer ones, Romans and I and II Corinthians, and four shorter ones: I Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. These were all written in the 50's and are the earliest documents in the New Testament, written well before the four gospels. This means that these were the first written records of what was to eventually become Christianity.

It is also almost certain three books were NOT written by Paul: I and II Timothy, and Titus, commonly called the pastoral letters, even though the opening verses state they are letters from Paul. So why the disbelief? There are several reasons. First of all, these three were not written in the same historical context, or in Paul's style of writing, as the genuine letters were. Also, from a historical perspective, these three were probably written several decades after Paul's death.

It was a common practice during this time for a future evangelist to write a letter representing an earlier, well respected church planter such as Paul on the assumption that this new letter, written in Paul's name, would carry a good deal of authority for those in the receiving church.

There are also three other disputed letters: Ephesians, Colossians, and II Thessalonians that most feel were also not written by Paul, seemingly written post Paul, somewhere between the genuine letters and the much later letters. And again, it was not unusual to write in someone else's name during this period of literary history, including in Jerusalem.

Secondly, another thing to help in understanding who Paul was, is understanding that it is essential to place Paul's letters in their historical context. So what was going on at the time of Paul's writings? What were the circumstances he was addressing? And what did Paul's words and allusions mean in the ancient historical and literary setting? Try and take your mind back to Paul's day....there was no form of mass communication: no newspapers, telephones, telegraphs, fast mail delivery, Internet or smart phones. Your knowledge was going to come from gathering in the synagogues, talking to friends in the town square, or the occasional letter that might arrive months after it was written. So that is the setting for Paul's letters. Also, Paul's writings were composed within the circle of the early Jesus movement that is set within the context of Judaism, which is set within the context of the Roman Empire.

Remember; Paul was passionately Jewish, just as Jesus was passionately Jewish. In fact, until the end of his life Paul thought of himself as Jewish, not as having converted to some new religion. And Paul was not writing to cities, but to small communities of early followers of Jesus within these communities. The one genuine letter addressed to an individual, Philemon, was also meant for a wider group and was to be read to the believers gathering together for worship.

With the exception of Rome, Paul had been active in these communities and knew the people he was writing to. He was addressing questions and problems that had arisen since his previous visits. And it is important to remember that Paul and all of these communities lived under Roman rule. This matters, because Roman rule was legitimized by an imperial theology that proclaimed that a Roman ruler was the Son of God, Lord, Savior of the World, and the one who had brought peace on earth. It also proclaimed, that peace and justice came through military victory and imperial order. So when Paul proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God, Lord, and Savior, it directly countered Roman imperial theology.

And finally, Paul's message – his teaching and his gospel – are grounded in his own life changing and sustaining experience of the risen Christ; Paul may be best understood as a Jewish Christ mystic.

First, let's talk about the meaning of the word 'mystic.' In this discussion of Paul, I'll use the definition Borg and Crossan use, that a mystic is someone in union with God. It's a connection with the sacred that is deep, close, and intimate. Many mystics have ecstatic experiences in which there is a vivid sense of the presence of God, or the sacred, that is deep, close, and intimate. These experiences often involve seeing light, or seeing the world as radiant, full of light. One phrase in the hymn "Amazing Grace" speaks to this light: "Once I was blind, but now I can see, the Light of the world is Jesus." From this broad sense of the word 'Mystic' the texts in both Acts and Paul's letters show that Paul was indeed a Jewish Christ mystic. His mystical experience on the road to Damascus changed him from Saul, persecutor of Jesus, to Paul, the proclaimer of Jesus. Paul was always religious; but his conversion took him from being a Pharisaic Jew to being a Christian Jew.

So having established that not all letters attributed to Paul were actually written by him, that we need to understand the historical context of Paul and his writings, and that Paul was a Jewish Christ Mystic, let's take a look at one of his letters, the controversial letter to Philemon.

First, it's important to remember that this is a letter. I can think of some of the letters I've written as a young adult, and someone reading them centuries later would probably not understand some of the nuances that I would have included, because they were from that specific time period. I might have talked about playing songs on my eight track tape player – definitely a thing of the past!

It's also interesting to note that by the middle of the second century, a good portion of the Christian worship services involved the public reading of letters, such as Paul's to Philemon, because only around ten percent of those in any church gathering could actually read. So here we go.

Verses one and two: ***“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to (A fee uh) Apphia, our sister, to (R kip us) Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”***

First to note that the phrase ‘and Timothy’ indicates that Timothy is the scribe-secretary to whom Paul is dictating the letter. From secular writings of others during this time, it can be determined that Paul was writing from a prison in Ephesus, capital of the Roman province.

After names of sender and recipient, the protocols of an ancient letter required a greeting: So Paul says, ***“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*** The ‘you’ in this greeting is plural, and the words “Grace and peace” appear in all seven of Paul's authentic letters.

Then Paul continues with his usual thanksgiving element in verses 4-7: ***“When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.”***

But then Paul hits Philemon with this, in vs. 8 and 9: ***“For this reason, though, I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”***

Whatever it is, Philemon is to do it because it's his duty, but also because Paul is commanding him to do it. Then Paul continues in vs. 10 and 11:

***"I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me."***

So who is this Onesimus? The terms 'child' and 'father' are metaphors for convert and apostle. It seems Onesimus has come to Paul without Philemon's permission and he is clearly a runaway slave guilty of a crime against Philemon. Why? When severe punishment or even death was imminent, Roman law allowed a slave to flee not only to certain temples, but also 'to a friend' of the owner to beg for intercession and mercy. So under Roman law, Onesimus was in trouble with his owner, Philemon, and had fled – legally – to Paul for intercession, Paul being the somewhat 'superior' friend of his master. So what is Paul asking Philemon to do?

Verses 12-14 give the answer. ***"I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."***

This is a major part of Paul's theology: faith with works vs. works without faith. Philemon must free Onesimus because of Philemon's faith, and not as some forced obedience to Paul. Then Paul continues in the next two verses:

***"Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother- especially to me- but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."***

And he continues in vs. 17-19: ***"So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self."***

There's even a hint of sarcasm in Paul's words...he writes this last verse in his own hand as if to say, "Maybe, dear Philemon, you require a signature to make this all legal?" And remember, this is a public letter, not just a personal one to Philemon. And then Paul continues, just as forcefully, in vs. 20-22: ***"Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. One thing more – prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping, through your prayers, to be restored to you."***

And Paul is also suggesting that Philemon not assume Paul will be in prison forever and not see him again; so Philemon cannot just ignore Paul's command. Paul concludes with vs. 23-25:

***“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”***

Paul reminds Philemon that this entire affair between him and Onesimus is personal, but not private, and reminds Philemon that it is a public matter and everyone is watching what he will do.

So Onesimus returns home to Philemon with Paul’s letter in his hand. What followed? Did other of Philemon’s slaves demand that he set them free as well? Even the entire community might have been up in arms if Philemon frees Onesimus. Slavery was a fact of life in this time period (and, unfortunately, for over 1800 years thereafter). Critics could have easily accused Christians of advising slaves to leave their masters or even worse, murder them as they slept.

Now here’s the interesting thing to me.... we have this letter of Paul’s where he is commanding Philemon to free this slave; but we have other scriptures in three of the New Testament letters, Colossians, Ephesians, and Titus - three books many theologians do not believe were written by Paul - saying masters should treat their slaves justly, and four times as many verses with instructions for slaves and how **they** should act versus directives for slave owners. And it’s THESE verses that were used for centuries to support and justify slavery. These are not just post-Paul scriptures, they are anti-Paul.

The books genuinely attributed to Paul, outline his belief in the freedom of slaves, the gender equality of wife and husband, as well as equality in the family. But this is a topic for next week’s Part II of the discussion of Paul. What I hope we can take from the study of Paul in this one chapter book of Philemon, is that there is more to the story than we might get from lumping together all the new testament letters seemingly to have been written by Paul, as Paul’s actual writings. It’s also important to understand the historical significance of Paul commanding a slave be freed when this was not the societal norm of that time period.

For us, what is currently taking place in our world that is opposed to Jesus’ teachings that **we** must stand up against? Paul was willing to stand up for this slave from his prison cell; what are the things for which I am willing to lend my voice in opposition to?

- Laws condemning illegal immigrants and refugees seeking a better, more just life?
- Pastors and churches preaching that homosexual and transgendered members are terrible sinners and should be shunned and cast out of our churches?

- A community that has pockets of the homeless and poor but offers nothing that would empower or offer hope for a brighter future?
- The racism that still permeates much of our white, privileged world?
- And those who would pick and choose verses of scripture to support their own beliefs while never considering the historical settings and Jesus' explicit teachings?

We all have opportunities to take a stand for those ideals Jesus stood for, and make a difference – even if it's just in our own small circles of influence. Several in this greater Iowa City community did just that when joining in the women's march last weekend, including Gwen, Elaine, Ben, Jonny and probably others I'm not aware of.

Paul set the example by commanding – with love – that Philemon give Onesimus his freedom.

This is the Paul *I* choose to respect and admire.