

The Pauline Correspondence: Its Design & Distinctive

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Paul Writing His Epistles, Valentin de Boulogne, 17th Century

Part 2 of 3

In [Part 1](#) we considered the principle of *progressive revelation*, observing that Paul's revelation of the Gospel was a fulfilment of Jesus' promise that

I *still* have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into *all* the truth.

Jn 16:12

Premise

Our premise is that the Bible *is* the Word of God, which is in marked contrast to the claim that the Bible merely *contains* or *mediates* the word of God.

Many neo-evangelicals have fallen in line with liberal and neo-orthodox views on Scripture, blending the Higher Critical approach with religious existentialism. Operating on the premise that the Bible is not historically or factually reliable and humanly authored it is then reduced to a hodgepodge of competing and conflicting texts. Nonetheless, while it is not factually reliable – so the argument goes – it is religiously reliable, that is, for mediating a religious experience. And so, it is argued that the Bible *becomes* the word of God in encounter as it conveys a spiritual feeling or experience.

The difficulties of this approach are several: (1) It is contrary to the Bible's own claims of divine authorship and authority, especially those of Christ and the apostles; (2) It is contrary to the actual historicity of the Bible; (3) It subjects the Bible to the tyranny of personal subjective interpretation; (4) It is contrary to the historic faith of the church; (5) It makes truth non-absolute and existential, rendering Christianity morally relativistic; (6) It is dualistic, separating *fact* from *faith*, rendering the Gospel spiritually and intellectually impotent; and (7) It robs the Gospel of its its cultural mandate.

The Bible is the divinely *revealed*, supernaturally *received*, providentially *structured* and *preserved* communication of God to mankind; it is communicated in rational propositional statements—that is, in language.

- *Revealed & Received*

The apostles were uniquely authorised by Christ to receive and transmit truth. They "received" the revelation of Christ and his teachings and then "delivered" it through preaching and writing. They became custodians of truth, of objective propositional statements concerning the knowledge of God in Christ. This became the New Testament Scriptures. It was a foundational revelation – a body of truth – uniquely received by the first apostles, thus Jude's exhortation to "Contend for the faith once-and-for-all delivered to the saints". The apostles received it "once-and-for-all"—as a body of revelation communicated through rational propositional statements (i.e., language) it was received "once" by them to be transmitted to the church universal in all ages, in all places—"for all". Thus the apostles were the appointed authority structure and source for the standard of all future preaching of the Gospel (Mtt 10:40; Mk 3:14; Lk 1:1-4; Jn 20:21; Acts 10:39, 41; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14; 2:2; Jd 3, 17).

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

2 Timothy 3:16

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:21

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

1 Corinthians 2:13

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 14:37

- *Preserved*

The facts of the Gospel were passed on to Paul through a tradition (1 Cor 15:3-8), which critical scholarship dates from within 2-3 years of the event. In terms of the standards of historiography this is quite exceptional as, for example, the earliest biography of Alexander the Great dates centuries after his death. Not only this, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written a mere 20 years after the event (AD 53-57). Additionally, ensuring the reliability and accuracy of the New Testament, over 5,000 papyrus Greek manuscripts are extant, in addition to later Medieval Latin manuscripts as well as other languages. This makes it by far the most reliable document of Greco-Roman antiquity. Other literature from antiquity often has as few as a handful of Greek manuscripts; for example, the papyrus manuscripts of Plato's dialogues date approximately 500-600 years after their origin with only 4 extant—and then only fragments! The historicity of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is well attested. The New Testament Scriptures have been providentially preserved in such a way to ensure their accuracy.

- *Structured*

The Greek manuscripts, with few deviations, give the Pauline church epistles in the order we have today (Romans to Thessalonians) despite sometimes having a different location within the overall New Testament corpus, as do the other New Testament writings, which also have many variations of book order within their category. Hebrews is the only anomaly of the Pauline corpus in the Greek manuscripts, which the Eastern Church considered Pauline and is often placed in-between the Pauline church epistles and his personal epistles. However, while clearly authored by someone (or possibly several) in Paul's circle (Heb 13:23), the Western Church was not convinced of Paul's authorship and so placed it as a bridge between the Pauline epistles and the general epistles. The final canon has been so structured (including the Pauline corpus) under the supervening providence of God; Paul's church epistles being ordered not according to chronology but according to decreasing size and increasing maturity: Romans, the longest, laying down *first things* (ABCs of the Gospel—soteriology) and Thessalonians, the shortest, *last things* (eschatology); the only anomaly, with Ephesians slightly longer than Galatians, which nevertheless is appropriate as it signals the doctrinal shift into a higher level of understanding toward Christian maturity.

Following the church epistles are Paul's personal epistles, likewise, proceeding from the longest to the shortest (Timothy, Titus, Philemon).

Design

Paul's Seven Church Epistles

Like John who writes to the seven churches of Asia in the Book of Revelation (Rev 1-3), Paul also writes to seven churches: Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

The number 7 in scripture is symbolic of *completion* and *perfection*, for example:

God entered his *sabbath rest* on the 7th day having completed the work of creation (Gen 2); God's 7-fold *judgements* (Lev 26), including the 7 woes of Jesus (Mtt 23); *cleansing* completed through the sprinkling of blood and oil 7-times; *Jubilee year* of release is 7x7 years; the 7 spirits of God signifying the *fullness of the Holy Spirit* (Isa 11:2; Rev 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6); *restitution* paid 7-fold; Jesus taught 7 parables of the *Kingdom of God* (Mtt 13); Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy (7x10 number of testing) signifies the completion of *God's redemptive purpose*, with Christ "confirming the covenant", "putting an end to sacrifice and offering", and "sealing vision and prophecy" by becoming the incarnate Word and giving the NT Scriptures (Dan 9:24-27).

Paul's seven church epistles therefore complete the Word of God to the whole church; to the church universally, sealing "vision and prophecy", through the revelation of the Gospel and of "the mystery", of the new corporate man, providing all that is necessary for the whole Body of Christ to be matured.

Romans and Ephesians are the least corrective and the most representative of the core Pauline teaching. The remaining church epistles are occasional letters, answering questions and correcting errors; they provide the complete revelation of God's purpose communicated to the whole church universally, correcting the historically perennial errors with which it is afflicted, as listed below:

Romans: The *Gospel*—First Things; ABCs of Christian education

(soteriological)—*raised* in Christ.

Corinthians: Antinomian error (practical).

Galatians: Legalistic error (doctrinal).

Ephesians: The *Mystery*—new corporate man—*seated* in Christ.

Philippians: Relational error (practical).

Colossians: Gnostic error (doctrinal).

Thessalonians: Last Things (eschatological error)—final state *raised* and *seated* in Christ.

Distinctive

Paul's Background

(Acts 22:3-4; Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-6)

Paul's background uniquely equipped him as a keen intellect and as a student of the Scriptures. Born about 5 BC - AD 5, and a contemporary of Jesus (b. about 4 BC). Born in Tarsus, brought up in Jerusalem, studied under Gamaliel (probably from age 13 to 20), being zealous for God, persecuting this Way to the death (Acts 22:3-4).

“A Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the Law a Pharisee” (Phil 3:5):

Being a “Hebrew” is in contradistinction to a “Hellenist”. Despite both being Jews the “Hellenist” was a Greek speaker and also moulded, in some measure, by Greek culture. Notwithstanding being a Greek speaker, unlike the “Hellenists”, Paul was also fluent in both Aramaic and Hebrew and an upholder of Jewish law and culture; probably of the *Shammaite* sect (versus *Hillel*) of the Pharisees, which was the strictest. This is despite Gamaliel (Paul's teacher) being the successor of Hillel himself and possibly his son or grandson. There is a record of one of Gamaliel's students manifesting “impudence in learning”—possibly the future apostle! The Pharisees were the conservative guardians of Hebrew orthodoxy, training most of the scribes and teachers of the law. As opposed to the Sadducees, they believed in the bodily resurrection.

As a rabbi with such credentials it is very possible Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin (as was Gamaliel), the religious ruling body of the Jews, although Pharisees were the minority. If this was the case Paul would have been married at approximately 20

years of age, as did all orthodox Jews (the *Mishna* actually set marriage age at 18! It was viewed as a moral duty for all Jewish males). His marriage and status as a widower may be inferred from 1 Cor 9:5; 7:8, classing himself among the widowers or “unmarried” (in Greek there is no special word for “widower”).

Paul's Persecution of the Church

(1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6; Acts 7:58 – 8:1, 3; 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:11)

The witnesses to Stephen's stoning laying their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul also suggests Paul's membership of the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:58; Deut 17:7). Stephen's death by stoning was the normal judicial execution for blasphemy (Lev 24:10-16), which was conducted under the authority of the Sanhedrin.

With letters of authority from the High Priest in Jerusalem Paul was en-route to Damascus to arrest followers of the Way when the ascended Jesus encountered him (Acts 9).

Paul's persecution was no doubt premised on the impossibility of Jesus being the Messiah based on Deut 21:23: "...a hanged man is cursed by God" (cited Gal 3:13). A crucified Messiah was an anathema to the Jew; Paul later teaching that it was "a stumbling block (*skandalon*) to Jews" (1 Cor 1:23). Therefore, those who claimed he was Messiah were guilty of blasphemy and subject to the penalty of the law: death.

Paul's Commission and Writings

(Acts 22:6-21; 26:12-20; Rom 1:1-6; Gal 1:11-2:10)

Paul's background equipped him for his unique role. As a student of the Scriptures, possessing a penetrating intellect and a passion for God and for truth, he was used to lay the distinctive revelatory foundation for the Gospel's expansion to the Gentiles—to all nations. Peter was already receiving Paul's writings as "Scripture", but also recognising them as "hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:15-16). As we saw in *Part 1* Jesus had foreshadowed the distinctive role of Paul, by explaining in his upper room discourse that "I *still* have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into *all* the truth" (Jn 16:12). There was further revelation to come, but they were not ready for it. This is evidenced in Peter's admission to difficulty in understanding Paul, and also in the necessity of Paul's public confrontation of him in Antioch occasioned by his withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles. Despite the difficulty, as Scripture, we are warned by Peter not to "twist" Paul's words as many do. Sadly this has been much of the modern history of Pauline studies.

Nonetheless, Paul was uniquely appointed by Christ "to *know* his will, to *see* the Righteous One and to *hear* a voice from his mouth" (Acts 22:14). This revelatory realm was to the end that being sent to the Gentiles "they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith..." (Acts 26:18). The prophetic revelation of Christ and his Gospel given to Paul demanded its explication from the Old Testament Scriptures, which Paul was pre-eminently equipped to do, so that it could be proclaimed among the nations. This was not man's Gospel; it was not received through any human agency but directly from the Lord (Gal 1:11-12). Paul's revelation was so distinct that he could claim it as "*my* gospel" (Rom 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8). This was in contradistinction to the rest of the apostles of whom he claimed that they "added nothing to me" (Gal 2:6). It was, in fact, what Paul referred to as the "tradition" in which he exhorted the churches to remain (1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thes 2:15; 3:6). As a rabbi he had previously followed the "traditions of the Fathers" (Gal 1:14), which was the revelation of God to Abraham, the Patriarchs and the Prophets; i.e., the Old Testament Scriptures. This is not to be confused with the "traditions of men" (Mk 7:8), which Jesus roundly condemned; these traditions were the rabbinical teachings that the Jews exalted above the Scriptures. So when Paul exhorts the churches to follow the "traditions" that he has given them he is referring to the revelation received from Christ and *enscripturated* in his epistles. By using the same word "traditions" as he did for the Old Testament Scriptures he is, by implication, claiming the status of Scripture for his own writings. This is the foundation of the canonical New Testament Scriptures; it is not in the authorisation of the church of them, but rather in Christ's authorisation of the apostles to transmit his Word through teaching and writing.

In conclusion, as we learned in [Part 1](#), Paul is not superior to Christ but receives the progressive revelatory unfolding of God's purpose in the incarnate Son (Jn 16:12), interpreted through the Law and the Prophets (Acts 9:22; 13:15, 27, 33-35, 40, 47;

17:2-3, 11; 19:8-9; 24:14-15; 26:6; Rom 1:1-2; 3:21; 16:26), and grounded in his *earthly* ministry but now extended through his *heavenly* ministry from the Father's throne (Jn 14:16-18, 25-26; 16:5-7, 12-15; Eph 1:16 – 2:7; 3:1-6; Ps 110); and thus, providing the "full counsel of God" concerning his purpose for the cosmos (Acts 20:27; Eph 1-4).

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