

THE WORLD OF PAUL

Part I. Paul's Background—Jewish or Hellenistic?

The question of Paul's background is important because every individual is conditioned by his environment and influenced by his training and education. The mind conditioned by a **Hellenistic** environment and education will approach and express theological teaching in a manner different from a mind conditioned by a **Rabbinic** environment and education. The interpreter must take these differences into consideration in interpreting a theologian's writings. Since environment and education are factors of such broad and variegated influence, it cannot be a question of Jewishness to the exclusion of Hellenism, or Hellenistic influence to the exclusion of Rabbinic influence, but a question of degree. Was Paul predominantly Jewish and Rabbinic in the cast of his mind or predominantly Hellenistic?

According to the testimony of his letters, Paul was proud of his **Jewish** heritage and claimed to have been not only a Pharisee but a strict and uncompromising defender of Pharisaism and its teachings. In Gal. 1:13-14, he says: "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it: and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers." In Phil 3:5-6, Paul speaks of himself as "a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless" (also 2 Cor 11:22).

The thesis that Paul's rabbinic background and education were the predominant though not the only influence on his mind is not unimportant. If it is true that a man generally thinks and writes according to the categories of the culture that formed his mind and emotions, then the principal key to the interpretation of Paul's letters will be found in his knowledge and use of the OT and in his propensity of Rabbinic forms of theological argumentation and literary presentation. Practically speaking, such a conclusion means that often Paul's mind is to be interpreted against his background in Jewish culture rather than against the cultural and philosophical background Hellenism.

A modified form of the **Hellenistic** approach to Paul is that put forward by Jewish scholars. According to these scholars, Paul was indeed a Jew, but it should never be forgotten that *he was not a Palestinian Jew*, but rather one born outside Palestine in Tarsus. Tarsus was a center of philosophy, and Paul would inevitably have been *exposed to the influence of Greek thought*. Moreover, the Judaism, which Paul knew in Tarsus was an inferior, kind of

Judaism, modified and corrupted by Hellenistic influences, both philosophic and religious. These scholars urged very strongly that if Paul had known true Palestinian Judaism—that is, the best Rabbinic Judaism of his time—he would not have been so open to Christian influences. The only Judaism he knows was an inferior, Hellenized Judaism.

Part II. Paul's World

Paul recognized that Christianity needed to address itself to the questions and concerns of its day: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews...To those outside the law (to the Gentiles) I became as one outside the law...that I might win those outside the law" (1 Cor. 9:20-21). We will have a better appreciation of Paul's letters if we understand the world in which he lived.

Paul was a city person, and his world was predominantly urban. Though there were regional differences, all the major cities where Paul preached and wrote were united by the common languages and cultures of Greece and Rome. There was the more recent Roman legal and political organization over all the empire, but there was still the art, literature and philosophy of the preceding Greek empire which Rome adopted. Paul redesigned Christianity from the simple message of Jesus, not to change its essence, but to adapt it from a rural, Jewish setting to this urban, Gentile culture. The cities were a cosmopolitan then as they are now.

Urban Social Classes

There were varied classes of people and some chance for social and economic mobility, at least within the middle and lower classes, and with the help of patrons. The very exclusive **upper class** comprised the distinguished families of the city of Rome who extended themselves into the empire as some of the *administrators or military commanders*. On the next level were the **local aristocracy** composed of those with property and capital for manufacture and trade. Then there were the **small landowners**, the **craftsmen** and the **shopkeepers**. As a tentmaker, Paul himself would fit into this category. Next came the **freed men and women** who were able to move out of **slavery**, which was, finally, the lot of the lowest class.

People ended up in **slavery** through captivity from war, through kidnapping by slave hunters, because of debt, or by being born of slaves. The economic structures of the empire were built upon the system of slavery, which made it difficult to eradicate the practice without creating social upheaval. There was also a difference between the treatment of slaves who were used simply like beasts of burden in farms, mines, and other heavy construction work, and slaves who were members of households. These later often had administrative tasks, travelled for their masters on business, signed legal contracts and earned money for their own use. Such slaves also had the security of a home and necessities, so much so that often, when a slave had the means to purchase freedom, he or she as a freed person then pledged self to the former master or to a patron in order to receive the basics of survival.

All this complexity helps explain why Paul did not press for the elimination of slavery, though it does not diminish the immorality of the system. The centrality of slavery leads Paul to devote much ethical consideration to the relationship of master and slave and to offer at least the principles that will eventually eliminate it altogether. The prominence of slavery also explains why Paul uses slave imagery to speak about sin, freedom vocabulary to talk about salvation and free commitment to Christ as a way to describe the consequence of our liberation.

The **Jews** generally found themselves also within all the classes of Greek society, having settled widely within these territories from as far back as 587 BC, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and sent many of the Jews into exile. In general, they were an accepted part of the Roman Empire and participated actively in city life, though they were not always fully understood and sometimes shunned behavior that they could not accommodate to their beliefs. For example, the Jews found it offensive to offer incense to the emperor, though they made it a point to express respect for his authority. They also found it difficult to enter military service, since it created obstacles to their Sabbath worship and dietary laws. They were also uncomfortable with contributing to the support of the local temples. While these particular traits sometimes raised hostility from the society around them, generally they were tolerated. The Romans even occasionally granted formal exemptions from such practices and allowed the Jews to send tax money to Jerusalem for the support of the Temple, which had been rebuilt after the Exile.

The gathering places for Jews in the cities of the empire were the **synagogues**, which served not only as places of worship, but also as schools and community centers. They also provided places of contact for visitors to a city and for travellers in search of work. Paul, who was a tentmaker, could establish contact with others in his trade, when he reached a new city on his journeys, and they could help him secure his means of support. Thus, if Acts is historically accurate, Paul on his journeys went first to the synagogues to facilitate his livelihood as well as to find a ready audience for his preaching.

There was probably a wider audience for Paul in the synagogues than just the Jews. The strong moral standards of the Jews and their monotheism also attracted Gentiles toward the religious, and the Jews in the empire were much more open to converts than were those in Jerusalem. Thus, there were frequently **Gentile sympathizers** worshiping with the Jews in their synagogues. Not all these Gentiles formally converted to Judaism. Those who did were called **proselytes** and they underwent official initiation into the religion, with the men also receiving circumcision. Those who did not were called **God-fearers** and they shared in Sabbath worship or other Jewish

activities without becoming Jews. Thus, through the synagogue Paul's preaching reached beyond the Jews to begin touching even the Gentile world of the empire.

The **Roman Empire saw itself as one large family** composed of smaller households. Each household was composed, not only of a couple and their children, but also of extended family and of other families, friends and associates who were involved in the agriculture, commerce, craft, or other business by which the household survived. Wealthier households had freed persons and slaves as well. Very often these varied groups of people lived in the household, in a number of buildings on wealthy estates or in varied apartments or rooms in simpler households.

Thus, the **household** was a large social unit and the place of business, some social life, and daily conversation. Paul would have worked out of such households as a co-worker, using the occasions as opportunities to preach as well. Frequently, when the master of the house converted to Christianity, the entire household followed. In any case, the household became the base for a church.

Part III. Greek Philosophy

One of the prominent ancient philosophers was **Plato**, though by the time of Paul his formal and theoretical reasoning was losing appeal in favor of more concrete and practical ethical considerations. Nevertheless, his influence was still present and Paul needed to address his ideas. We can get a sense of Plato's thoughts through the following summary presented as a fictitious colloquy of Plato to his disciples: "I will remain ambiguous in talking about gods or even one God, but I would at least say that there is an unchanging, absolute and eternal spiritual world governed by what I would call the Good. All of our material world is not real, but is a shadow of the real world, which is spiritual. Our real nature is the soul, but it is trapped in our body from which at death we hope to escape. In the meanwhile, human reason is a faculty of our soul and is the way we come to know and contact the spiritual world and the Good, which governs it. If we really want to be happy, then, we must live by reason. We must be educated in virtue in such a way that it causes us to moderate our emotions and to control irrational desires of our body. My motto is "Know thyself". All happiness comes from this deepest kind of self-knowledge."

Paul would encourage the searching of the Platonists and their realization that there is more to this world than material reality. He even wrote to the Romans that human reason is a way of encountering the absolute Good, but of course he gave that Good the name of God. But Paul had also to temper the Platonists. They were too pessimistic about the body and the material world. The Platonists were also too optimistic about self-knowledge.

Platonism was not the only view of reality with suggestions about how to be happy. The following is a summary presented as the discourse of a fictitious **Stoic**: "I, too, will remain ambiguous about whether I am speaking of a personal God, and I will agree with the Platonist that there is indeed a power over all of this world. But I would not agree that this material world is but a shadow, or that my body is just a prison for my soul. The real world is all of nature around me. My human reason does indeed put me in contact with the absolute Spirit that governs everything, but this absolute Spirit is one with nature and with my human nature. In fact, the absolute Spirit is bringing all of creation to a predetermined end by fire, so that it can start all over again. If I want to be truly happy, then I will seek with my reason how to act according to nature as it has been predetermined by the absolute Spirit. There is no point in fighting what has been arranged or in letting my emotions get the best of me. My motto is, "Take each day as it comes". If I am in a

happy situation, then I should enjoy it to the hilt. If I am in tough times, then I must grin and bear it.

Paul would have to temper Stoicism with his Christian insights into a personal God, into an eternal afterlife, and into an active love of others, rather than passive self-interest, but he affirmed their shadowy insight into divine providence and their glimpses into the unity of the human race and of all of creation. If we listen to what he told the Corinthians, we see that he especially liked the Stoic concern for self-discipline in ethics, for his words are practically borrowed from the slave, Epictetus, who became a famous Stoic philosopher: "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one" (1 Cor. 9:24-25).

Every society has its outsiders or counterculture. The Greek philosophers had theirs in the **Epicureans**, who might sum up their views as follows: "I am weary of deciding who better describes reality. I have decided that the gods have no interest in the world, which therefore continues in existence through the random movement of atoms. Happiness, therefore, should not be an effort to reason out what is good or a struggle to do it. Rather, it consists in withdrawing from society and getting as much pleasure as we can among our small circle of friends. My motto is, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die". Paul warned the Corinthians about Epicurean hedonism: "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'. Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (1 Cor. 15:32-33).

As important as philosophy was to the culture of Paul's cities, it was centered on the individual and gave little sense of community. To those alienated in the society—specially the freed persons and the slaves, but even others who were uprooted from their native lands—philosophy brought no sense of belonging or of salvation. Since the state religions were in decline, some people turned toward magic, many others toward what are called mystery religions. The magic was a way to get control over life or to influence the powers who did have control. One sought horoscope, cast spells, or called in other ways on the spirit world to intervene in need. The Galatians and Colossians were both tempted to such practices.

Part IV. Mystery Religions

Many more people were attracted to the mystery religions, so called because they had secret rituals re-enacting the myth of a god who offered a feeling of salvation to those admitted to the rite. These religions in large part came from the Orient. Almost all of them originated out of ancient civilisations and their concerns for food and drink. Early humans came to tie the seasons of nature with cycles of events in the lives of their gods. An example of such association is found in the **Isis** cult, which originated in Egypt. According to the myth, Osiris, also known as Serapis, the husband of Isis, is murdered by his brother Seth. Isis discovers his coffin, but Seth recaptures it, dismembers Osiris, and scatters the god widely. Isis retrieves every member, and Osiris comes back to life. When Osiris is dead, we are in winter. When Isis searches for him, the season begins to change, and when he returns to life we are in spring and summer and the crops are again alive. We have good until fall, when Seth kidnaps Osiris and the cycle begins again.

The ancients also thought that if they could ritualise these divine events each year, they would encourage their recurrence in the lives of the gods and thus guarantee the life of the crops another year. Gradually, these cults were transformed and spread throughout the Roman Empire. Instead of guaranteeing the life of the crops, the gods were seen as offering life and salvation to the worshipers. One had to know the myth, enter community with those who preserved it, and celebrate the rituals which re-enacted the myth, such as washings, meals and processions. Thus, the people who needed the mystery cults yearned for a savior God, for acceptance by an intimate community, and for sacramental celebrations. Here, too, Paul met their needs, preaching Jesus as the true savior, stressing Christian life as a community in Christ with its initiation by baptism and its sacred meal of the Eucharist. Still, Paul also had to encourage them to ethical concerns beyond a feeling of salvation and to an open community without secrets.

In many ways, then, Paul addressed the world of his times. He moved Christianity from its Jewish roots to the Gentiles. This would lead to great struggle between Christians of Jewish background and Christians of Gentile background, an issue that we will see recurring in his letters. His message, which addressed all these issues, was the good news that Jesus is risen and is Lord and that our lives are made whole in him. That message came to Paul on the Damascus Road.

Critical Events Influencing Paul's Theological Development

All the critical events that influenced Paul's theological development during the thirty or more years of his ministry can neither be known nor adequately analysed. Certain events, however, when considered against Paul's background as a Pharisee, would appear to have served as catalysts in the development of his new theology as a Christian Rabbi.

In some cases, the events can be deduced from the differences between Paul's thinking as a Pharisee and his thinking as a Christian. In a few cases the events can be deduced from data in Paul's letters. Often the events are deduced from the tone of Paul's arguments and from the reactions of his audience. Since the critical events are for the most part mirrored in Paul's reaction to them in his letters, we will list them according to their probable chronological order as they appear behind the facades of the letters.

- 1-Paul's vision of the risen Christ—the critical event.
- 2-The naïve expectation of an imminent Second Coming of Christ.
- 3-The rejection of the resurrection of the body by the Greeks at Corinth.
- 4-Paul's close brush with death at Ephesus and his realization that Christian existence is to be patterned on the suffering life of Christ.
- 5-Paul's encounter with false apostles at Corinth, which leads him to a more profound concept of apostleship and its relationship to the cross.
- 6-A controversy with Jewish Christians about the Mosaic law and Christian liberty, which forces Paul to theologize in depth on the relationship between faith and justification.
- 7-The Jews' rejection and the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel, which leads to the falling together of the theological data in Paul's mind to bring home to him an understanding of the place of the cosmic Christ in the Church and in the Father's plan of salvation history.

1. With regard to Paul's vision of the risen Christ, the reader should remember that Paul as a Pharisee already believed in resurrection of the dead. It was a pharisaic doctrine with Old Testament roots in Dan. 12; 2 Mac. 6-7; Wis. 1-4. The Pharisees believed not only in the fact of a bodily resurrection but in the resurrection of the dead as a sign of the coming and completion of God's promised kingdom. Paul's vision of the risen Christ did not initiate but rather confirmed his pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the dead. What Paul's vision of the risen Christ meant to him, however, went far beyond a simple confirmation of his belief in resurrection; it convinced him that Jesus was sent by the Father, that Jesus was the Messiah, and that with Jesus' resurrection there had begun the beginning of the end—the turning point of all history, the time when God would fulfil his messianic promises to Israel and the world.

2. Paul's naïve expectation of an imminent Second Coming of Christ flowed from his understanding of Jesus' resurrection as the sign and guarantee that God was about to bring to consummation his plan for the salvation of the world. How soon this would happen neither Paul nor anyone else in the early Church knew, but they all expected it to happen shortly. And Paul himself felt for a good while that he would be alive for the second coming of Christ (1 Thes. 4:16-17; 1 Cor 15:51-52). The Parousia fever of the early Christians is not easy to understand but it was very real. It affected Paul in his early preaching and is evident in all his letter, especially 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians.

3. The rejection of bodily resurrection, as opposed to "soul" resurrection, by the Greeks and early Gnostics caused Paul to defend the bodily resurrection of Christians. Paul's own background as a Jew led him to think of the person as a body-person. The Greeks thought of the person as made up of two principles: soul and body. They considered the body the prison of the soul. This led them to reject the teaching of the resurrection of the body. Paul's response to their objections is found in 1 Cor 15 and in parts of 2 Corinthians.

4. Paul's close brush with death at Ephesus, reflected in Phil. 1:12-26 and 2 Cor. 1:8-11, had a double effect on him: it made him realize that he might not be alive for the parousia and that following Christ meant more than sharing in his victory—it also meant sharing in his sufferings and death. This later realization was the more significant. It led Paul to a more profound conception of Christian existence and its relationship to the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Growth in Christ meant sharing in Christ's sufferings. This is a central theme of Philippians and 2 Corinthians.

5. Paul's encounter with false apostles at Corinth led him to reflect on the purpose and meaning of apostleship and on the characteristics, that distinguished the true from the false apostle. He came to realize that an apostle was called not only to preach Christ but also to pattern his life on the life of the suffering Christ, and thus to preach with his life the central message of the gospel. He expounds his conception of the "true apostle" in 2 Corinthians.

6. To understand Paul's controversy with Jewish Christians about law, liberty, and justification by faith alone, the reader must remember that there very likely was a time when Paul himself, as a strict, practicing Pharisee, defended justification by observance of the law. His devotion to the law as law,

however, shrivelled when he came to realize that man is justified by faith and is freed from the law by Christ. Not all Jewish Christians saw this as clearly as Paul did. When Paul himself first realized the difference and the significance of justification by faith as opposed to justification by works, we cannot know. He had no doubts about it, however, by the time he came to write Philippians, Galatians, and Romans.

7. Paul's Pharisaic belief that Gentiles could be saved only by and through their entrance into the Jewish religion must be taken into consideration if the reader is to understand the impact upon Paul of the Gentiles' acceptance and the Jews' rejection of the gospel. How early he realized that it was the Gentiles as a group and not the Jews as a group who were accepting the gospel, we do not know. At some point in his career, probably in the middle fifties, Paul was forced to accept the fact that "the first (the Jews) would be last and the last (the Gentiles) first". Once he had accepted that, he began to theologize anew on the Father's plan of salvation. This led him to the synthesis we find in Romans, the most profound and the most theologically important of all his letters.

The Format of Paul's Letters

Paul expressed his theology in letterform. An understanding of the format and style of letter writing in the first century AD, therefore, should help the reader to interpret Paul's letters. Since the little letter to Philemon is typical of first-century letters in format and serves to focus attention upon much that is helpful for the understanding of Paul's letters in general, we shall quote it as a whole and then concentrate on the individual parts.

Paul's letters, as is now evident from comparisons with Greco-Roman and Jewish letters of the first century, followed the format in vogue at the time. The format consisted of four parts:

1. **The address and greeting** (vv 1-3), containing the name of the sender followed by the name of the addressee, whether an individual or group, followed by a greeting-wish, usually expressed by Paul in the words: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v 3).

2. **The thanksgiving and prayer** (vv 4-7), containing an expression of gratitude and prayer to God, expressed in a long periodic sentence whose function is to focus the epistolary situation, i.e., to introduce the vital theme of the letter. In Philemon, the use of the thanksgiving to focus the epistolary situation is found in v 6.

As an aid to interpretation, the thanksgiving is valuable for the evidence it gives by anticipation of Paul's purpose in writing as well as for its function in setting the tone the letter will take. This is true of the thanksgiving in Philemon; it is generally true also of the longer letters as well, but it is not always so clear.

3. **The message or body of the letter** (vv 8-20), containing usually both doctrine and exhortation, i.e., both the theoretical and the practical. The doctrinal part is the heart of Paul's message. The exhortation or ethical part usually flows from the doctrinal part. In the earlier letters (1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians), the two are generally intermingled; in the later letters (Galatians and Romans), the doctrinal part occurs first (e.g., Gal. 1-4; Rom. 1-11) and is followed by a section dedicated to practical advice and exhortation (e.g., Gal. 5-6; Rom. 12-16). If one can speak of a doctrinal element in so short a letter as Philemon, it would be contained in v 16, where Paul refers to Onesimus as "a brother" in the Lord. Paul's exhortation to Philemon flows from the relationship of Christians as brothers in the Lord. It runs throughout the letter but is most evident in vv 8-9, 20-21.

4. **The conclusion and final greeting** (vv 21-25), containing personal news, requests, regards to friends, and a blessing. The blessing-wish is usually in the words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit", or some such words (v 25 and 1 Thess. 5:28; Phil. 4:23).

I. The Nature of Paul's Letters

Whether Paul's letters are truly letters in the usual sense of the term or literary pieces using the format of letters is of some significance because in both ancient and modern times a distinction has been made between the personal and the literary letter. The distinction is clear enough when it is a question of a purely private letter or a public, literary letter such as a papal encyclical. In other cases—and this is the situation of most of Paul's letters—it is the degree of privacy or personalness that determines whether the letter should be considered purely private, a letter to a single group, or a letter to many groups, which is for all practical purposes the same as an encyclical.

Philemon is the closest to a purely personal letter among Paul's letters, but even Philemon is addressed to more than one person (Paul mentions in his address, in addition to Philemon, two other persons, Apphia and Archippus, as well as the Christians who meet at Philemon's house). The other letters are relatively personal to particular groups and Paul's personal touch is evident in his references to common experiences and personal friends (see especially the concluding sections of the letters). Many consider Romans a literary rather than a personal letter, on the grounds that Paul wrote it to be read not only at Rome but in all the churches.

II. The Chronology of Paul's Letters

A chronology of the letters is important because it is difficult to study the theological development of Paul's mind unless one can date the letters and thus demonstrate the progress made by Paul from one letter to another. Dating them, however, is difficult.

The letter to Philemon helps to focus the problem. Paul three times speaks of himself as a prisoner (vv 1, 9, 10) and in v 22 asks Philemon to prepare a room for him, on the chance that he may soon be released from prison. This is all the internal evidence available for dating the letter; there is no external evidence whatever.

If Paul had been in prison only in Rome toward the end of his life, it would be easy to date the letter, since we know with some certainty from Acts 28:16ff that he was a prisoner in Rome for approximately two years near the end of his life (between 60 and 64 AD). According to Acts 24:22-27, however, Paul was in prison in Caesarea for two years (58-60). There is, in addition, circumstantial evidence to suggest that he was in prison for a time during his stay in Ephesus (1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8-11). Finally, there is Paul's personal testimony to his many "imprisonment" (2 Cor. 11:23). His references to himself as a prisoner in Philemon, therefore, do not help in dating the letter.

No more helpful is Paul's possible reference to his old age (Philemon 9). The reference suggests that the letter was written late rather than early in Paul's apostolic life. But Paul was already an old man, at least by first-century standards, when he was preaching in Ephesus (54-57) and could as easily have considered himself an old man from 54-5 as he could from 58-62, the years of his imprisonments at Caesarea and Rome. In fact, since all his letters were written between 51 and 58 AD, when he was probably in his fifties, there is no time in that period when he might not have considered himself "an old man".

The only additional internal evidence for dating Paul's letter to Philemon would appear to be Paul's request for a room in Philemon's house (v 22). Since Philemon probably lived in the neighbourhood of Colossae (Col. 4:17), the request would be more reasonable coming from Paul in Ephesus (a two-day journey from Colossae) or in Caesarea (some three hundred miles away) than from Paul in prison in Rome (some eight hundred miles away). On the same internal evidence, *Fitzmyer* dates Philemon to Paul's imprisonment in Rome, and *Feine-Behm-Kummel* to his captivity in Caesarea.

Similar problems arise with the dating of Paul's other letters. Leaving aside the discussion of the evidence, the following dates seem reasonably close to the mark and will serve as a working hypothesis:

1 Thessalonians	51 from Corinth
1 Corinthians	54 from Ephesus
Philippians	56 from Ephesus
2 Corinthians	57 from Macedonia
Galatians	58 from Corinth
Romans	58 from Corinth

III. Number and Grouping of The Letters and Lost Letters

Of the fourteen letters attributed to Paul, only seven are unanimously accepted today as authentic:

1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Philemon.

Three letters are debatably authentic:

2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians.

Three are very doubtful:

1 & 2 Timothy, Titus.

One is certainly not authentic:

Hebrews.

The letters are commonly grouped as follows:

- EARLY LETTERS: 1 & 2 Thessalonians (51-52 AD).
- GREAT LETTERS: Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans (54-58 AD)—so called because of their doctrinal importance.
- CAPTIVITY LETTERS: Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon (54-64 AD)—so called because presumably written from prison.
- PASTORAL LETTERS: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus (undatable but very late).

Some of Paul's letters (referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9 and 2 Cor. 2:4) are presumed to have been lost.

(It is possible, but not likely, that parts of them have been conserved by editing and interpolating them into 1 or 2 Corinthians. Paul's extant letters derive from the peak period of his ministry (51-58 AD). Letters written before and following upon this period have been lost. It is safe to presume that Paul wrote purely private letters that have not survived.)

The reader should remember that problems dealt with in one letter lead in later letters to more nuanced solutions and to a consequent deeper penetration of the earlier theological teaching.

(Paul's solution to the problem of the parousia and the resurrection in 1 Thess., for example, is followed a few years later by the deeper penetration of the resurrection in 1 Cor. And Romans. Also, it is possible to discern a development of Paul's theology of faith and justification from his initial exposition of the problem in Gal. 2:15-2:29 to his final, masterful exposition of the same problem in Roman 1-11.)