



## CHAPTER 14

# Unity, Freedom, and Christ's Return

## Paul's Letters to Thessalonica and Corinth

*The time we live in will not last long. . . . For the whole frame of this world is passing away.* 1 Corinthians 7:29, 31

**Key Topics/Themes** The dominant theme of Paul's letters to Thessalonica and Corinth is that the *eschaton* is near: Paul expects to witness Jesus' return and the resurrection of the dead in his lifetime (1 Thess. 4:13–18). However, believers must not waste time speculating about the projected date of the Parousia (1 Thess. 5:1–3).

Paul's letters to Corinth are aimed at healing serious divisions in the newly founded church there. Paul urges members to give up their destructive competitiveness and work toward unity of belief and purpose. Their cooperation is essential because the remaining

time is so short. His most important topics include (1) differences between human and divinely revealed wisdom (1:10–3:23), (2) Christian ethics and responsibilities (5:1–11:1), (3) behavior at the communion meal (11:17–34), valuing gifts of the Spirit (chs. 12–14), and (4) the resurrection of the dead (ch. 15).

A composite work composed of several letters or letter fragments, 2 Corinthians shows Paul defending his apostolic authority (2 Cor. 10–13); chapters 1–9, apparently written after chapters 10–13, describe his reconciliation with the church at Corinth.

Paul's early letters are dominated by his **eschatology**. Convinced that the Messiah's death and resurrection have inaugurated End time, Paul strives to achieve several related goals. Traveling from city to city, he establishes small cells of believers whom he calls to a "new life in Christ." He argues that Jesus' crucifixion has brought freedom from both Torah observance and the power of sin, and he emphasizes the necessity of leading an ethically pure life while awaiting Christ's return. In his letters to the young Greek churches at Thessalonica and Corinth, Paul underscores the nearness of the Parousia—the

Second Coming—an event that he believes to be imminent. Much of Paul's advice to these congregations is based on his desire that they achieve unity and purity before Christ reappears.

While he is attempting to keep believers faithful to the high ideals of Christian practice, Paul also finds himself battling opponents who question the correctness of his teaching and/or his apostolic authority. According to Luke, an apostle was one whom Jesus had personally called to follow him and who had witnessed the Resurrection (Acts 1:21–22). Not only had Paul not known the earthly Jesus; he had cruelly

persecuted the disciples. Paul's sole claim to apostolic status was his private revelation of the risen Lord, a claim others repeatedly challenged. To achieve the goal of guiding his flock through End time, Paul must ensure that his apostolic credentials are fully recognized (1 Cor. 15:9–10; 2 Cor. 11:1–13:10).

To appreciate the urgency of Paul's first letters, we must approach them from the writer's historical perspective: The Messiah's coming spelled an end to the old world. The New Age—entailing the Final Judgment on all nations, a universal resurrection of the dead, and the ultimate fulfillment of God's purpose—was then in the process of materializing. Paul writes as a parent anxious that those in his care survive the apocalyptic ordeal just ahead and attain the saints' reward of eternal life.



## First Letter to the Thessalonians

The oldest surviving Christian document, 1 Thessalonians preserves our earliest glimpse of how the new religion was established in Gentile territory. Capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, Thessalonica (now called Thessaloniki) (see Figure 14.1) was a bustling port city located on the Via Egnatia, the major highway linking Rome with the East. According to the Book of Acts, Paul spent only three weeks there, preaching mainly in the local synagogue to generally unreceptive Jews, who soon drove him out of town (17:1–18:5).

Paul's letter to the newly founded Thessalonian congregation, however, paints a different picture, making no reference to a synagogue ministry and implying that his converts were largely Gentile (1 Thess. 1:9). Probably written in Corinth about 50 CE, a scant twenty years after the Crucifixion, 1 Thessalonians is remarkable in showing how quickly essential Christian ideas had developed and how thoroughly apocalyptic Paul's message was. Referring to the Parousia in no fewer than six different passages, at least once in each of the letter's five brief chapters,

### First Thessalonians

**Author:** Paul, missionary Apostle to the Gentiles.

**Date:** About 50 CE.

**Place of composition:** Probably Corinth.

**Audience:** Mostly Gentile members of a newly founded congregation in Thessalonica, Greece.

Paul makes the imminence of Jesus' return his central message (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:1–11).

**M** The Thessalonians, he says, have become  
**E** a shining example to other Greek churches  
**L** because they have

**H** turned from idols to be servants of the true and  
**O** living God, . . . to wait expectantly for his Son  
**R** from heaven, whom he raised from the dead,  
**N** Jesus our deliverer from the retribution to come.  
(1 Thess. 1:10)

This passage may, in fact, epitomize the principal themes of Paul's oral gospel, the *kerygma* he preached in urban marketplaces, shops, and private homes. In general content, it resembles the more elaborate proclamation that Luke placed on Paul's lips when he spoke to the Athenians (Acts 17: 22–31). Urging the Greeks to forsake lifeless idols for the "living God" of Judaism, Paul presents Jesus' resurrection from the dead as introducing history's climactic moment: his impending descent from heaven to rescue his followers from catastrophic divine judgment.

For Paul, the implications of the coming apocalypse are clear: The Thessalonians must reform their typically lenient Gentile attitudes toward sexual activity. They have already made progress in living "to please God," but they can do better, abstaining from "fornication," becoming "holy," living "quietly," and showing love to all (4:1–12).

Although the Thessalonians do not exhibit the kind of opposition Paul describes in letters to the Corinthians and Galatians, he devotes considerable space to self-justification, emphasizing how nurturing, altruistic, and hard-working he was when in their company (2:1–12). In particular, he emphasizes the fact that he remained financially independent of the people



FIGURE 14.1 Paul's churches. Paul established largely Gentile churches in the northeastern Mediterranean region at Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, and Corinth. Paul's teaching was also influential in the Asia Minor city of Ephesus, where he lived for at least two years. The sites of some other Christian centers are also given.

he taught, working “night and day” to be self-supporting (2:9). Some commentators have suggested that Paul set up a leather goods shop, where he preached to customers and passersby. The passage in which he suddenly departs from praising his healthy relationship with the Thessalonians to castigate his fellow Jews, referring to the “retribution” inflicted on them, may have been inserted by a later copyist after Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (2:13–16).

Chapter 2 concludes with an insight into the source of Paul’s concern for the Thessalonians’ good behavior: Their ethical purity will provide validation for him when “we stand before our Lord Jesus at his coming.” If they maintain their righteous conduct until the Parousia, their loyalty to his teaching will be a “crown of pride” for him, showing that Paul has properly discharged his obligation to God, his patron and divine benefactor (2:19–20). Declaring that their faithfulness is no

less than “the breath of life” to him, Paul offers a fervent prayer that the Thessalonians remain “holy and faultless,” acceptable to “our God and Father” at Jesus’ return (3:7–13).

### The Parousia and the Resurrection

Having demonstrated the importance—to both the congregation collectively and the apostle individually—of their leading ethically unblemished lives until the Parousia, Paul then previews events that will take place when Jesus reappears in glory. Apparently, some Thessalonians believed that Jesus’ return would occur so swiftly that all persons converted to Christianity would live to see the Second Coming. That belief was shaken when some believers died before Jesus had reappeared. What would become of them? Had the dead missed their opportunity to join Christ in ruling over the world?

Paul explains that the recently dead are not lost but will share in the glory of Christ's return. To denote the exalted Jesus' arrival from heaven, Paul uses the term *Parousia*, a Greek word meaning "presence" or "coming" (the same word that the authors of the Synoptic Gospels later adopt to designate Jesus' return to earth [see Chapters 7–9]). In employing this word, Paul refers to an impressive public ceremony with which his audience in Thessalonica would have been familiar—the actions accompanying the formal entrance of a Roman emperor or other high official into some provincial city. As the visiting dignitary approached the city gates, a trumpet blast announced his appearance, at which sound the inhabitants were expected to drop everything they were doing and rush outside the city walls to greet the important visitor. Gathering along the main roadway, the crowds then followed the official as he moved into the city. Paul's vision of Jesus' imminent Parousia, his coming in supernatural glory, not only draws on this common Roman political spectacle but also shows that he fully expects to be alive when Jesus reappears:

[W]e who are left alive until the Lord comes shall not forestall those who have died; because at the word of command, at the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet call, the Lord himself will descend from heaven; first the Christian dead will rise, then we who are left alive shall join them, caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

(1 Thess. 4:15–17)

Jesus' followers, in joyous acclamation, will then accompany their Master—humanity's true king—as he revisits the earth to begin his active rule as Israel's Messiah. After his Parousia, Jesus at last will reign, not only over a redeemed Israel but over the entire cosmos. In thus likening Jesus' Parousia to an emperor's display of power, Paul implies that Christ is clearly superior to an earthly sovereign (see Malina and Pilch in "Recommended Reading").

Although he depicts Jesus' triumphant return by analogy to a Roman imperial custom,

Paul's allusion to a "trumpet" (Greek, *salpinx*) sounding probably also refers to trumpets used in Jewish worship, such as the playing of a "ram's horn" (Hebrew, *shophar*) announcing the Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:9; cf. Num. 10:2, 10). (In his description of the Parousia, Matthew mentions a similar eschatological trumpet call [Matt. 24:31].) Paul's immediate purpose, however, is to assure his Thessalonian friends that in both life and death the believer remains with Jesus (4:13–18). (Compare 1 Thessalonians with Paul's more elaborate discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, a passage in which he reaffirms his hope to be alive at Jesus' Parousia.)

### On Not Calculating "Dates and Times"

Although he eagerly expects Jesus' reappearance "soon," Paul has no patience with those who try to predict the exact date of the Parousia. He discourages speculation and notes that calculating "dates and times" is futile because the world's final day will come as quietly as a thief at midnight. Emphasizing the unexpectedness of the Parousia, Paul declares that it will occur while men proclaim "peace and security" (a common political theme in Roman times, as well as today). Disaster will strike the nations suddenly, as labor pains strike a woman without warning (5:1–3).

In the Hebrew Bible, the "Day of the Lord" was the time of Yahweh's intervention into human history, his visitation of earth to judge all nations and to impose his universal rule (Amos 5:18; Joel 2:14–15). In Paul's apocalyptic vision, Jesus is the divinely appointed agent of *eschaton*. As the eschatological Judge, Jesus serves a double function: He brings punishment to the disobedient ("the terrors of judgment") but vindication and deliverance to the faithful. Paul's cosmic Jesus is paradoxical: He dies to save believers from the negative judgment that his return imposes on unregenerate humanity. Returning to his main theme, Paul concludes that "we, awake [living] or asleep [dead]" live in permanent association with Christ (5:4–11).

## The Role of the Spirit

With anticipation of Jesus' speedy return a living reality, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the Holy Spirit's visible activity among them is also evidence of the world's impending transformation. As noted in Acts, the Spirit motivating believers to prophesy, heal, or speak in tongues was taken as evidence of God's active presence. Thus, Paul tells his readers not to "stifle inspiration" or otherwise discourage believers from prophesying. Christian prophets, inspired by the Spirit, play a major role in Pauline churches, but Paul is aware that enthusiastic visionaries can cause trouble. Believers are to distinguish between "good" and "bad" inspirations, avoiding the latter, but they are not to inhibit charismatic behavior. Besides providing evidence that the End is near, the Spirit's presence also validates the Christian message (Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:1–21; 1 Cor. 2:9–16; 12–14).

(A disputed letter, 2 Thessalonians is discussed in Chapter 17.)

### First Corinthians

**Author:** Paul.

**Date:** Early 50s CE.

**Place of composition:** Ephesus.

**Audience:** Members of the newly established church at Corinth, Greece.



## First Letter to the Corinthians

According to Acts (17:1–18:17), after establishing churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea (all in northern Greece), Paul briefly visited Athens and then journeyed to Corinth, where he remained for a year and a half (c. 50–52 CE). Accompanied by Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila, Jewish Christians exiled from Rome, he subsequently sailed to Ephesus, from which city he addressed several letters to the Corinthians. The first letter has been lost (1 Cor. 5:9), but the books presently numbered 1 and 2 Corinthians embody the most voluminous correspondence

with any single church group in the New Testament. Whereas 1 Corinthians is a single document, scholars believe that 2 Corinthians is a patchwork of several Pauline letters or parts of letters written at different times that an editor later combined.

Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church was not a one-way affair, for the Corinthians also wrote to the apostle (1 Cor. 7:1). Delegations from Corinth also kept Paul in touch with the group (1:11; 16:15–18; 2 Cor. 7:5–7, 13). Preserving a comprehensive picture of the diversity of ideas and behavior of a youthful Jewish and Gentile church, the Corinthian letters give us an unrivaled sociological study of early Christianity.

## The City and Its People

The emperor Augustus made Corinth, the richest and most populous city in Greece, the Greek capital in 27 BCE (see Figure 14.2). In Paul's day, Corinth was famous for its prosperity, trade, and materialism. As a busy seaport, it was also notorious for its legions of prostitutes, who entertained sailors from every part of the Greco-Roman world. With Aphrodite—supreme goddess of love and fertility—as its patron deity, Corinth enjoyed a reputation for luxury and licentiousness remarkable even in pagan society. Given this libertine environment, it is not surprising that Paul devotes more space to setting forth principles of sexual ethics to the Corinthians than he does in letters to any other churches (1 Cor. 5:1–13; 7:1–40).

Recent sociological studies of early Christianity indicate that the Corinthian group may have been typical of Gentile churches in many parts of the Roman Empire. In the past, many historians thought that the first Christians largely belonged to the lower socioeconomic ranks of Greco-Roman society. Recent analyses of Paul's letters to Rome and Corinth, however, suggest that early Christians came from many different social classes and represented a veritable cross section of the Hellenistic world.

Paul's statement that "few" members of the Corinthian congregation were highborn, wealthy, or politically influential (1 Cor. 1:26–28) implies



FIGURE 14.2 View of Corinth. Once a prosperous commercial center, Corinth was dominated by the Acrocorinth, the steep hill in the background. After the Romans destroyed the original Greek city, it was refounded in 44 BCE as a Roman colony. As Paul's letters to the Corinthians demonstrate, however, it soon became a Greek-speaking urban center, of which Aphrodite, goddess of love, was the divine patron.

that some were. This inference is borne out by the fact that some Corinthian believers apparently held important positions in the city (see Figure 14.3). Acts identifies the Crispus whom Paul baptized (1 Cor. 1:14) as the leader of a local synagogue, a function ordinarily given to persons rich enough to maintain the building. Erastus, who also seems to have belonged to the Corinthian church, was the civic treasurer (Rom. 16:23).

A diverse assortment of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and landowners, rich and poor, educated and unlettered, the Corinthian group was apparently divided by class distinctions and educational differences, as well as by varieties of religious belief. Even in observing the communion ritual, members' consciousness of differences in wealth and social status threatened to splinter the membership (1 Cor. 11:17–34).

From Paul's responses to their attitudes and conduct, readers learn that the Corinthians individually promoted a wide range of ideas. Some

advocated a spiritual marriage in which sexual union played no part; others visited prostitutes. Some defrauded their fellow believers, causing victims to seek restitution in the public courts. Some, convinced of their Christian "freedom," not exist, dined at banquets in Greco-Roman temples and attended religious ceremonies there. Still others claimed a superior understanding of spiritual matters, viewed themselves as already living in the kingdom, denied the necessity of a bodily resurrection, or questioned Paul's right to dictate their behavior.

As the Corinthian correspondence shows, Paul faced the almost impossible challenge of bringing this divisive and quarrelsome group into a working harmony of belief and purpose. In reading Paul's letters to Corinth, remember that he is struggling to communicate his vision of union with Christ to an infant church that has apparently only begun to grasp the basic principles of Christian life.



FIGURE 14.3 Painting of a Roman couple. In this portrait uncovered at Pompeii (buried by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE), Terentius Neo and his wife proudly display the pen and wax tablets that advertise their literary skills. Similar young Roman couples of the professional classes undoubtedly were among the members of Paul's newly founded churches in Corinth and other Greco-Roman cities.

### Topics of Concern

Paul's first extant letter to the group is distinguished by some of his most memorable writing. Two passages in particular, chapter 13 (on love) and chapter 15 (on resurrection), are highlights of Pauline thought and feeling. His praise of love (ch. 13) uses the Greek term *agapē*, "selfless love," as opposed to *eros*, the word denoting the sexual passion associated with Aphrodite. This may be an appropriate hint to those Corinthians sexually involved with persons other than their legal mates. Paul's mystic vision of attaining immortality (ch. 15) is the most extensive commentary on life after death in the New Testament. It also contains the earliest account of Jesus' post resurrection appearances.

**Organization** The first letter to the Corinthians divides into two main sections. In the first six chapters, Paul directly addresses his principal

objective—helping the church, split by rivalries and factions, attain the unity befitting a Christian congregation. Here, Paul shows the futility of false wisdom and human competitiveness and of attempts to demonstrate Christian freedom by violating the sexual conventions honored even by unbelievers. In the second half (chs. 7–15), he answers specific questions that the Corinthians addressed to him. These issues include marriage and divorce, the consumption of meat previously sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods, proper conduct during the **Lord's Supper**, and eschatology—the Final Judgment and resurrection of the dead.

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**Paul's Eschatological Urgency** As in his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul structures his advice to the Corinthian church according to his eschatological convictions. The Parousia is imminent: The Corinthians "wait expectantly for our Lord Jesus to reveal himself," for he will keep them "firm to the end . . . on the Day of our Lord Jesus" (1:7–8). Like the Thessalonians, the recipients of Paul's Corinthian letters expect to experience the **Day of Judgment** soon, a belief that affects their entire way of life. Paul advises single people to remain unmarried; neither slaves nor free citizens are to change their status because "the time we live in will not last long." All emotions—from joy to grief—are only temporary, as are ordinary human pursuits. "Buyers must not count on keeping what they buy," because "the whole frame of this world is passing away" (7:29–31). Paul speaks here not of the philosopher's conventional wisdom—that the wise person shuns life's petty goals to pursue eternal truths—but of the *eschaton*, the End of the familiar world.

In anticipating the coming resurrection, Paul echoes his words in 1 Thessalonians 4: When Judgment's trumpet sounds, "we [Christians then living] shall not all die, but we shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye" (15:51–55). Such passages reveal that Paul, along with his contemporaries, expects to be alive when Christ returns to raise the dead.

## The Necessity of Christian Unity

Paul's first objective is to halt the rivalries that divide the Corinthians. Without imposing a dogmatic conformity, he asks his readers to work together cooperatively for their mutual benefit (1:8–10). Like all early Christian congregations, that at Corinth met in a private house large enough to accommodate the entire group. Although membership was limited to perhaps 50–100 persons, the group was broken into several cliques. Some members placed undue importance on the particular leader who had converted or baptized them and competed with one another over the prestige of their respective mentors.

### Avoiding Competitiveness and Cultivating Divine Wisdom

A more serious cause of division may have been the members' unequal social and educational backgrounds. As in any group, modern or ancient, some individuals believed they were demonstrably superior to their neighbors. Examining chapter 1 carefully, readers will see that Paul's attack on false "wisdom" is really an attempt to discourage human competitiveness. In Paul's view, all believers are fundamentally equal: "For through faith you are all [children] of God in union with Christ Jesus. . . . There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26, 28). This assumption underlies Paul's method of presenting the *kerygma*—the proclamation about Jesus. When he reminds the Corinthians that he taught them the message as simply as possible, he does so to show that the new faith is essentially incompatible with individual pride or competitiveness.

Paul's concurrent theme is that human "weakness" is the unexpected medium through which God reveals his strength. In contrast to the Roman soldiers who crucified him, Christ was weak. Paul is also weak in refusing to use the rhetorical embellishments with which Hellenistic teachers were expected to present their ideas. Thus, with almost brutal directness, he proclaims "Christ nailed to the cross" (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:1).

(Paul's relative lack of success debating philosophers in Athens just before coming to Corinth [Acts 17] may have influenced his decision to preach henceforth without any intellectual pretensions.)

Paul's weak and "foolish" proclamation of a crucified Messiah offends almost everyone. It is a major obstacle to Jews, who look for a victorious conqueror, not an executed criminal, and an absurdity to the Greeks, who seek rational explanations of the universe. To the believer, however, the paradox of a crucified Messiah represents God's omnipotent wisdom (1:22–24).

Paul's argument (1:17–2:5) is sometimes misused to justify an anti-intellectual approach to religion, in which reason and faith are treated as if they were mutually exclusive. The apostle's attack on "worldly wisdom" is not directed against human reason, however. It is aimed instead at individual Corinthians who boasted of possessing special insights that gave them a "deeper" understanding than that granted their fellow Christians. Such elitism led some persons to cultivate a false sense of superiority that devalued less educated believers, fragmenting the congregation into groups of the "wise" and the "foolish."

Paul seeks to place all believers on an equal footing and allow them no cause for intellectual competition. He reminds the Corinthians that human reason by itself is not sufficient to know God, but that God revealed his saving purpose through Christ as a free gift (1:21). No one merits or earns the Christian revelation, which comes through God's unforeseen grace, not through human effort. Because all are equally recipients of the divine benefits, no believer has the right to boast (1:21–31).

Paul does, however, teach a previously hidden wisdom to persons mature enough to appreciate it. This wisdom is God's revelation through the Spirit (Greek, *pneuma*) that now dwells in the Christian community. The hitherto unknown "mind" of God—the ultimate reality that philosophers make the object of their search—is unveiled through Christ (2:6–16). The divine mystery, although inaccessible to rational inquiry, is finally made clear in the weakness and



obedient suffering of Christ, the means by which God reconciles humanity to himself.

**The Limits of Christian Freedom** Paul's doctrine of freedom from Torah restraints is easily abused when mistakenly interpreted as an excuse to ignore all ethical principles. As a result of some Corinthians' misuse of Christian freedom, Paul finds it necessary to impose limits on believers' individual liberty. Exercising his apostolic authority, Paul orders the Corinthians to excommunicate a Christian living openly with his stepmother. Apparently, the Corinthian church was proud of the man's bold use of freedom to live as he liked, though his incest scandalized even Greek society. Directing the congregation to evict the sinner from their midst, Paul establishes a policy that later becomes a powerful means of church control over individual members. In excommunication, the offender is denied all fellowship in the believing community and is left bereft of God as well. Although consigned "to Satan" (the devil-ruled world outside the church), the outcast remains a Christian destined for ultimate salvation on the Lord's Day (5:1–13).

**Lawsuits Among Christians** Claiming freedom "to do anything," some Corinthians bring lawsuits against fellow Christians in civil courts, allowing the unbelieving public to witness the internal divisions and ill will existing in the church. Paul orders that such disputes be settled within the Christian community. He also orders men who frequent prostitutes to end this practice. Answering the Corinthians' claim that physical appetites can be satisfied without damaging faith, Paul argues that Christians' bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (God's *pneuma*) and must not be defiled by intercourse with prostitutes (6:1–20).

### Answering Questions from the Congregation

**Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy** In chapters 7–15, Paul responds to a letter from the Corinthians, answering their questions on several crucial

topics. The first item concerns human sexuality (7:1–40), a subject in which the writer takes a distant but practical interest. Paul clearly prefers a single life without any kind of sexual involvement. He begins this section by declaring that "it is a good thing for a man to have nothing to do with women," and he closes by observing that women whose husbands have died are "better off" if they do not remarry. In both statements, Paul may be quoting some Corinthians who boasted of their superior self-control. Although he does not find marriage personally attractive, he is far from forbidding others to marry (7:2–9). He also emphasizes the mutual obligations of marriage, stating that husbands and wives are equally entitled to each other's sexual love. However, he pragmatically describes marriage as an inevitably painful experience that can interfere with a believer's religious commitment (7:28, 32–34).

Paul's general principle is that everyone should remain in whatever state—single or married, slave or free—he or she was in when first converted. Although aware of Jesus' command forbidding divorce, he concedes that a legal separation is acceptable when a non-Christian wishes to leave his or her Christian mate (7:10–24).

It is important to remember that Paul's advice, particularly on celibacy, is presented in the context of an imminent Parousia. The unmarried remain free "to wait upon the Lord without distraction." Freedom from sexual ties that bind one to the world is eminently practical because "the time we live in will not last long" (7:25–35). Paul regards singleness not as the prerequisite to a higher spiritual state but as a practical response to the eschatological crisis.

**A Problem of Conscience** In the next long section (8:1–11:1), Paul discusses a problem that ceased to be an issue over 1,600 years ago—eating meat that had previously been sacrificed in Greco-Roman temples. (The meat was then commonly sold in meat markets or cooked and served in public dining halls, which some of the Corinthian Christians frequented.) Although the social conditions that created the issue have long since disappeared, the principle that Paul

articulates in this matter remains relevant to many believers.

Paul argues that, although Christians are completely free to do as they wish when their consciences are clear, they should remember that their behavior can be misinterpreted by other believers who do not think as they do. Some believers may interpret actions such as eating meat that had been given to “idols” as violating standards of religious purity. Paul rules in favor of the “weak” who have trouble distinguishing between abstract convictions and observable practices. Respecting a fellow Christian’s sensitive conscience, the mature believer will forfeit his or her right to eat sacrificed meat—or, presumably, to engage in any other action that troubles the “weak” (8:1–13; 10:23–11:1).

Paul interrupts his argument to insert a vigorous defense of his apostolic authority (9:1–27) and give examples of ways in which he has sacrificed his personal freedoms to benefit others. The rights Paul has voluntarily given up suggest some significant differences between his style of life and that practiced by leaders of the Jerusalem church. Unlike Peter, Jesus’ brothers, and the other apostles, he forfeits the privilege of taking a wife or accepting money for his missionary services. He even sacrifices his own inclinations and individuality, becoming “everything in turn to men of every sort” to save them. Paul asks the “strong” Corinthians to imitate his selfless example (9:3–23; 10:33–11:1).

Paul’s demand to live largely for other people’s benefit and to accommodate one’s conduct to others’ consciences raises important issues. Some commentators observe that, although Paul’s argument protects the sensibilities of believers who are less free-thinking, it places the intellectually aware Christian at the mercy of overscrupulous or literal-minded believers. Followed explicitly, the apostle’s counsel here seriously compromises his doctrine of Christian freedom.

### Regulating Behavior in Church

Chapters 11–14 contain Paul’s advice regulating behavior in church. The issues he addresses

include the participation of women, conduct during reenactments of the Last Supper, and the handling of charismatic “gifts,” such as the Spirit-given ability to prophesy, heal, or speak in tongues.

**The Role of Women in the Church** In recent decades, Pauline regulations about women’s roles in the church have been attacked as culture-bound and chauvinistic. Because we know so little of very early Christian practices, it is difficult to establish to what degree women originally shared in church leadership (see Chapter 13). Jesus numbered many women among his most loyal disciples, and Paul refers to several women as his “fellow workers” (Phil. 4:3). In the last chapter of Romans, in which Paul lists the missionary Prisca (Priscilla) ahead of her husband, Aquila, the apostle asks the recipients to support **Phoebe**, a presiding officer in the Cenchreae church, in discharging her administrative duties (Rom. 16:1–6).

In Corinthians, however, Paul seems to impose certain restrictions on women’s participation in church services. His insistence that women cover their heads with veils (11:3–16) is open to a variety of interpretations. Is it the writer’s concession to the existing Jewish and Greco-Roman custom of secluding women, an attempt to avoid offending patriarchal prejudices? If women unveil their physical attractiveness, does this distract male onlookers or even sexually tempt angels, such as those who “lusted” for mortal women before the Flood (Gen. 6:1–4)? Conversely, is the veil a symbol of women’s religious authority, to be worn when prophesying before the congregation?

Paul’s argument for relegating women to a subordinate position in church strikes many readers as labored and illogical. (Some scholars think that this passage [11:2–16] is the interpolation of a later editor, added to make Corinthians agree with the non-Pauline instruction in 1 Timothy 2:8–15.) Paul grants women an active role, praying and prophesying during worship, but he argues as well that the female is a secondary creation, made from man, who was

created directly by God. The apostle uses the second version of human origins (Gen. 2) to support his view of a human sexual hierarchy, but he could as easily have cited the first creation account, in which male and female are created simultaneously, both in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:27). Given Paul’s revelation that Christian equality transcends all distinctions among believers, including those of sex, class, and nationality (Gal. 3:28), many commentators see the writer’s choice in a Genesis precedent as decidedly arbitrary.

**The Communion Meal (the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist)** Christianity’s most solemn ritual, the reenactment of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, represents the mystic communion between the risen Lord and his followers. Meeting in private homes to commemorate the event, the Corinthians had turned the service into a riotous drinking party. Instead of a celebration of Christian unity, it had become another source of division. Wealthy participants came early and consumed all the delicacies of the communion meal before the working poor arrived, thus leaving their social inferiors hungry and humiliated (11:17–22).

Paul contrasts this misbehavior with the tradition coming directly from Jesus himself. Recording Jesus’ sacramental distribution of bread and wine, he insists that the ceremony is to be decorously repeated in memory of Christ’s death until he returns. This allusion to the nearness of Jesus’ reappearance reminds the Corinthians of the seriousness with which they must observe the Last Supper ceremony (11:23–34).

**Gifts of the Spirit** Led by the Holy Spirit, the early Christian community was composed of many persons gifted with supernatural abilities. Some had the gift of prophecy; others were apostles, teachers, healers, miracle workers, or speakers in tongues. In Corinth, these individual gifts, and the rivalries among those possessing them, were yet another cause of division. Reminding them that one indivisible Spirit (*pneuma*) grants all these different abilities, Paul employs a

favorite metaphor in which he compares the church to the human body, with its many different parts. “Christ,” Paul explains, “is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body” (12:12). Because they represent the visible form of Christ on earth, the congregational “body” must function harmoniously, showing due respect to each of its many parts. Apparently some Corinthians judged themselves to be analogous to the more “honorable” body parts, such as the head or eye, and despised the lower or more “unseemly parts”—thereby discriminating against humbler church members. Whereas the more educated or spiritually gifted leaders evidently dismissed the poor or “weak” members as unworthy, Paul insists that they are “indispensable.” “The eye,” he asserts, “cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you’; nor the head to the feet, ‘I do not need you.’” Everyone belonging to the people of God, whatever their position or function, must be treated honorably because all are part of Christ’s “body.” In fact, God gives “special honor to the humbler parts,” the laboring hands and feet, elevating them to equality with the “strong” and “wise” (12:4–31).

**The Hymn to Love (*Agapē*)** Paul’s famous discourse on love (*agapē*) is intimately linked to his call for congregational unity and mutual respect. In every letter, Paul is more concerned about behavior—how people live the gospel—than he is about subjective feeling. As noted in Paul’s concept of love (*agapē*) in Chapter 13, biblical love does not refer primarily to an emotional state, but to active care and concern for others. Defining *agapē* as “the best way of all,” Paul emphasizes its expression through action: Love is patient, kind, forgiving; it keeps no record of offenses. Its capacity for loyal devotion is infinite: “there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance.” Love once given is never withdrawn. Whereas other spiritual gifts are only partial reflections of the divine reality and will be rendered obsolete in the perfect world to come, the supreme trio of Christian virtues—faith, hope, and love—endures forever (1 Cor. 13:1–13).

**Speaking in Tongues (*Glossolalia*)** Although he gives love top priority, Paul also acknowledges the value of other spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, which involves rational communication. “Ecstatic utterance”—speaking in tongues, or *glossolalia*—may be emotionally satisfying to the speaker, but it does not “build up” the congregation as do teaching and prophecy. Although he does not prohibit ecstatic utterance (Paul states that he is better at it than any Corinthian), the apostle ranks it as the least useful spiritual gift (14:1–40).

### The Eschatological Hope: Bodily Resurrection of the Dead

Paul’s last major topic—his eschatological vision of the resurrection (15:1–57)—is theologically the most important. Apparently, some Corinthians challenged Paul’s teaching about the afterlife. One educated group may have questioned the necessity of a future bodily resurrection because, influenced by the popular philosophy of the day, they held negative views of the physical body, making the concept of a future “resurrection body” undesirable. Others may have denied Paul’s concept of bodily resurrection because they shared the Greek philosophical view that a future existence is purely spiritual. According to Socrates, Plato, and many Stoic thinkers, death occurs when the immortal soul escapes from the perishable body. The soul does not need a body when it enters the invisible spirit realm. To believers in the soul’s inherent immortality, Paul’s Hebrew belief in the body’s material resurrection was grotesque and irrelevant (cf. Acts 17:32).

**The Historical Reality of Jesus’ Resurrection** To demonstrate that bodily resurrection is a reality, Paul calls on the Corinthians to remember that Jesus rose from the dead. Preserving the earliest tradition of Jesus’ post resurrection appearances, Paul notes that the risen Lord appeared to as many as 500 believers at once, as well as to Paul (15:3–8; see Box 14.1). Paul uses his opponents’ denial against them and argues that if

there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised and Christians hope in vain. He trusts, not in the Greek philosophical notion of innate human immortality, but in the Jewish apocalyptic faith in God’s ability to raise the faithful dead (Dan. 12:1–3). Without Christ’s resurrection, Paul states, there is no afterlife, and of all people Christians are the most pitiable (15:12–19).

Paul now invokes two archetypal figures to illustrate the means by which human death and its opposite, eternal life, entered the world. Citing the Genesis creation account, Paul declares that the “first man,” Adam (God’s first earthly son), brought death to the human race, but Christ (Adam’s “heavenly” counterpart, a new creation) brings life. The coming resurrection (and perhaps salvation as well) is universal: “as in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life.” The “first fruits” of the resurrection harvest, Christ will return to raise the obedient dead and defeat all enemies, including death itself. Noting that the Corinthians practice baptism of their dead (perhaps posthumously initiating them into the church), Paul argues that this ritual presupposes the resurrection’s reality (15:29).

When the Corinthians ask how the dead are raised and “in what kind of body,” Paul’s answer, particularly his use of the term “spiritual body,” merits close analysis. Traditionally, scholars have read Paul’s discussion of the resurrection as invoking the classic duality between the physical body (Greek, *soma*) and the nonmaterial spirit (Greek, *pneuma*). An increasing number of scholars, however, have come to realize that, for Paul, as for most Greco-Roman thinkers, all forms of existence, including the spiritual, partake of matter. Spiritual beings—gods, stars, and angels—manifest a more refined, ethereal existence, but they were still thought to embody some form of matter, albeit infinitely superior to that of earthly organisms. As we shall see, Paul’s concept of the “resurrection body” embraces this ancient philosophical consensus.

In persuading the Corinthians to share his understanding of the eschatological means by which God restores people to life, Paul first cites the example of a seed “that does not come to life



### BOX 14.1 Resurrection Traditions in Paul and the Gospels

The oldest surviving account of Jesus' post resurrection appearances occurs in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which contains a tradition "handed on" to Paul from earlier Christians. None of the Gospels' resurrection

narratives, written fifteen to forty years after the date of Paul's letter, refers to Jesus' manifestations to his kinsman James or to the "over 500 brothers" who simultaneously beheld him (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3–8).

PAUL (C. 54 CE)	MARK (C. 66–70 CE)	MATTHEW (C. 85 CE)	LUKE (C. 85–90 CE)	JOHN (C. 95–100 CE)
Jesus appears to Cephas (Peter) to "the Twelve" to "over 500" to James (Jesus' "brother") to "all the Apostles" to Paul (as an <i>apokalypsis</i> , or "revelation," Gal. 1:15–16)	No post resurrection account in original text (Two accounts were added later: Mark 16:8b and 16:9–19, in which Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, and then to the Eleven.)	No parallels Jesus appears to "the eleven disciples" (minus Judas Iscariot) "in Galilee"	Reference to "Simon [Peter]" to "the Eleven" (in Jerusalem) Jesus appears to "Cleopas" and an unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus (near Jerusalem)	No parallels Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (in Jerusalem) to "the disciples," particularly Thomas (in Jerusalem) to "the sons of Zebedee," Simon Peter, and the "Beloved Disciple" (in Galilee)

unless it has first died." As the seemingly dead seed bears little resemblance to the colorful flower that grows from it, so the resurrection body little resembles the deceased physical body that is "sown," buried in earth. Reasoning by analogy, Paul then observes that earth's different life forms—men, animals, birds, and fish—all have different kinds of "flesh." So, too, the "heavenly bodies"—sun, moon, and stars—are composed of a different—and superior—substance from that composing earthly creatures. By implication, resurrected bodies will not only differ from their present physical forms but will also, like the stars, show hierarchical degrees of difference. Presumably depending on their individual merits, the risen and transformed dead will reveal a wide range of "splendor," even as individual stars visibly differ in "brightness." Like Jesus, who "died" and "was buried" (15:4), yet who rose to eternal life, believers will undergo radical

transformation: "Sown in the earth as a perishable thing," their bodies will be "raised in glory" because the "animal body" will be "raised as a spiritual [pneumatic] body," still material but wholly etherealized (15:35–44).

Returning to his contrast between "the first man, Adam" and "the last Adam [Christ]," Paul underscores the perishable nature of the first human creation, from whom we are all descended and with whom we share unavoidable mortality. When Paul describes Adam as "an animate being," he borrows the phrase from the Genesis creation account. Absolutely essential to Paul's thought here is the Hebrew Bible's concept of human nature: "God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Thus the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7). The Hebrew word translated "living creature" is *nephesh*, the same term used to denote animals, or any other

mortal creature that the divine breath has animated. When Genesis was translated into Greek, *nephesh* was rendered as *psyche*, the word that Plato and other Greek philosophers later employed to describe the “soul,” the immortal part of humans that allegedly separates from the body at death and then enters into the divine realm. Contrary to the Greek duality of immortal soul housed in a mortal body, however, the biblical view consistently portrays humans as a physical/spiritual unity—and fully mortal. In the biblical tradition, humans do not *have* a soul, they *are* a soul, whether called *nephesh* or *psyche*.

According to this line of thought, future life depends not on a person’s intrinsic possession—an immortal soul—but entirely on the life-giving power of God. This is the view that Paul adopts when he argues that the *psyche* (soul) is as perishable as the *soma* (body) (cf. the reference to *soma psychikon* in 15:44). Adam, “the man made of dust,” is the model of human mortality, the image of death that comes to all. By contrast, Christ, “the heavenly man,” offers, through resurrection, the opportunity to be refashioned in his divine image. In describing what happens in the eschatological raising of the dead, Paul emphasizes that our mortal natures will be radically “changed”: “This perishable being must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal must be clothed with immortality” (15:53).

Although he concedes that “flesh and blood can never possess the kingdom of God,” Paul insists that the mortal components of human existence will be utterly transformed at the eschatological consummation, as if absorbed into a “spiritual [pneumatic] body.” In his letter to the Romans, Paul explicitly attributes this change to the Spirit (*pneuma*) of God, which is already effecting inward changes in the Christian’s present life. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you,” Paul states, “then the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also give new life to your mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit” (Rom. 8:11; see also Paul’s discussion of pneumatic transformations currently at work within believers in 2 Cor. 4:16–5:10).

In Paul’s view, it is not the Greek idea of an innately eternal soul that guarantees future life, but the omnipotence and graciousness of the God who first created humanity—the One upon whom all depend for eschatological *re-creation* at the resurrection. Raised to a purified, exalted form of bodily existence, the resurrection body affirms not only the goodness of God’s material creation but also the universality of his reign. Following the resurrection, when God has subjected the world to Christ, Paul declares, “then the Son himself will also be made subordinate to God who made all things subject to him” (15:25–28). The purpose of Christ’s climactic submission to the Father is clearly stated in the new Scholars Version of Paul’s letters: “so that God may be the One who rules everything everywhere” (15:28). (For this new edition of Paul’s authentic letters, see Dewey et al. in “Recommended Reading.”) Paul says little about the “intermediate state,” the interval between a believer’s death and the future time of resurrection, but elsewhere he implies that believers will posthumously “be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23–24), perhaps enjoying the “paradise” to which the Lukan Jesus refers (Luke 23:43).

For Paul, however, resurrection is not a vague hope for the distant future, but the promise of imminent bodily transformation. As Jesus’ rising from the dead took place in the recent historical past, so his return to earth will occur in the near future. Similarly, Jesus’ rising is the “first fruits” of an impending global “harvest” in which the faithful dead will be restored to life and living Christians will be instantly and gloriously transformed. “Listen!” Paul commands the Corinthians, “I will unfold a mystery: we shall not all die, but we [the living believers] shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet-call” (15:51–52). Paul fully expects to be alive to hear that final trumpet blast announcing Jesus’ Parousia (cf. 1 Thess. 4:15–18). (For helpful analyses of Paul’s concept of resurrection, see Martin, Engberg-Pedersen, and Wright in “Recommended Reading.”)

**Closing Remarks** Retreating abruptly from his cosmic vision of human destiny to take up

mundane themes again, Paul reminds the Corinthians of their previous agreement to help the Jerusalem church. They are to contribute money every Sunday, an obligation Paul had assumed when visiting the Jerusalem leadership (Gal. 2). The letter ends with Paul's invocation of Jesus' speedy return—"Marana tha" ("Come, O Lord")—an Aramaic prayer dating from the first generation of Palestinian Christians.



## Second Letter to the Corinthians

Whereas 1 Corinthians is a unified document, 2 Corinthians seems to be a compendium of several letters or letter fragments written at different times and reflecting radically different situations in the Corinthian church. Even casual readers will note the contrast between the harsh, sarcastic tone of chapters 10–13 and the generally friendlier, more conciliatory tone of the earlier chapters. In the opinion of many scholars, chapters 10–13 represent the "painful letter" alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:3–4, making this part necessarily older than chapters 1–9. Some authorities find as many as six or more remnants of different letters in 2 Corinthians, but for our purposes, we concentrate on the work's two main divisions (chs. 10–13 and 1–9), taking them in the order in which scholars believe they were composed.

Underlying the writing of 2 Corinthians is a dramatic conflict between Paul and the church he had founded. After he had dispatched 1 Corinthians, several events took place that strained his relationship with the church almost to the breaking point. New opponents, whom Paul satirizes as "superlative apostles" (11:5), infiltrated the congregation and rapidly gained positions of influence. Paul then made a brief, "painful" visit to Corinth, only to suffer a public humiliation there (2:1–5; 7:12). His visit a failure, he returned to Ephesus, where he wrote the Corinthians a severe reprimand, part of which is preserved in chapters 10–13. Having carried the

## Second Corinthians

**Author:** Paul.

**Date:** Mid-50s CE.

**Place of composition:** The "severe letter" was probably sent from Ephesus, and the letter of reconciliation from Macedonia.

**Audience:** The congregation at Corinth, Greece.

"severe" letter to Corinth, Titus then rejoins Paul in Macedonia, bringing the good news that the Corinthians are sorry for their behavior and now support the apostle (7:5–7). Paul subsequently writes a joyful letter of reconciliation, included in chapters 1–9. Although this reconstruction of events is speculative, it accounts for the sequence of alienation, hostility, and reconciliation found in this composite document.

Although a scholarly majority holds that the document known as 2 Corinthians is a composite work, other commentators point out that we have no manuscript evidence indicating that it is a patchwork of letter fragments. Some proposals that divide the letter into as many as six or eight different missives may be criticized as overly ingenious. As in many scholarly debates, a theory that makes good sense to one investigator is not necessarily convincing to others. Some critics argue that the letter's abrupt changes of subject and tone can be explained by assuming that Paul dictated it over a period of days or weeks, during which time his attitude toward the Corinthians fluctuated considerably. Most commentators, however, do not find this argument persuasive.

## The "Severe" Letter: Paul's Defense of His Apostolic Authority

In the last three chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul writes a passionate, almost brutal defense of his apostolic authority. A masterpiece of savage irony, chapters 10–13 show Paul boasting "as a fool," using every device of rhetoric to demolish his opponents' pretensions to superiority. We don't know the precise identity of these opponents, except that they were Jewish Christians whom Paul accuses of proclaiming "another

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Jesus” and imparting a “spirit” different from that introduced by his “gospel.” The label “superlative apostles” suggests that these critics enjoyed considerable authority, perhaps as representatives from the Jerusalem church.

Whoever they were, the “superlative apostles” had succeeded in undermining many Corinthians’ belief in Paul’s individual teaching and trust in his personal integrity. Pointing to Paul’s refusal to accept payment for his apostolic services (perhaps implying that he knew he was not entitled to it), his critics seriously questioned his credentials as a Christian leader. When he fights back, Paul is defending both himself (hence the many autobiographical references) and the truth of the gospel he proclaims. In some passages, Paul sounds almost desperately afraid that the church for which he has labored so hard will be lost to him.

Although Paul’s bitter sarcasm may offend some readers, we must realize that this unattractive quality is the flip side of his intense commitment to the Corinthians’ welfare. Behind the writer’s “bragging” and threats (10:2–6; 11:16–21; 13:3, 10) lies the sting of unrequited affection. The nature of loyal love that Paul had so confidently defined in his earlier letter (1 Cor. 13) is now profoundly tested.

**The Nature of Apostleship and the Christian Ministry** Whereas in 1 Corinthians Paul deals with ethical and doctrinal issues, in 2 Corinthians he struggles to define the qualities and motives that validate his leadership and authority. His main purpose in boasting “as a fool” (11:1–12:13) is personally to demonstrate that true apostleship does not depend on external qualities like race or circumcision or the strength to browbeat other believers. Paradoxically, it depends on the leader’s “weakness”—his complete dependence on God, who empowers him to endure all kinds of hardship to proclaim the saving message. Outwardly “weak” but inwardly strong, Paul willingly suffers dangers, discomforts, humiliations, and unceasing toil—daily proof of selfless devotion—for the sake of a church that now openly doubts his motives (11:16–33).

It is not certain that the “superlative apostles” (11:5) are the same opponents as the “sham apostles” (11:13) whom Paul accuses of being Satan’s agents (11:12–15). Whatever their identity, they apparently based their authority at least in part on supernatural visions and revelations. Paul responds by telling of a believer, caught up to “the third heaven,” who experienced divine secrets too sacred to reveal (see Box 14.2). Disclosing that the mystic is himself, Paul states that to keep from becoming overrelated by such mystical experiences he was given a counterbalancing physical defect. This unspecified “thorn in the flesh” ties Paul firmly to his earthly frame and grounds him in the human “weakness” through which God reveals spiritual power (12:1–13; 13:3–4).

Paul implores the Corinthians to reform so that his planned third visit will be a joyous occasion rather than an exercise in harsh discipline. He closes the letter with a final appeal to the congregation to practice unity and “live in peace” (13:1–14).

## The Letter of Reconciliation

Although scholars discern as many as five or more separate letter fragments in this section, we discuss chapters 1–9 here as a single document. The opening chapters (1:1–2:13) contrast sharply with the angry defensiveness of chapters 10–13 and show a “happy” writer reconciled to the Corinthians. The unnamed opponent who had publicly humiliated Paul on his second visit has been punished and so must be forgiven (2:5–11). Titus’s welcome news that the Corinthians are now on Paul’s side (7:5–16) may belong to this section of the letter, misplaced in its present position by a later copyist.

**Paul’s Real Credentials** Despite the reconciliation, the Corinthian church is still troubled by Paul’s rivals, whom he denounces as mere “hawkers” (salespersons) of God’s word (2:17). Although he is more controlled than in chapters 10–13, his exasperation is still evident when he asks if he must begin all over again proving his apostolic credentials (3:1). Placing the





### BOX 14.2 Paul's Ascent to the "Third Heaven"

In listing his apostolic qualifications—which include mystical visions and other spiritual gifts—Paul “boasts” that he was “caught up as far as the third heaven . . . into paradise,” where he “heard words so sacred that human lips may not repeat them” (2 Cor. 12:1–4). Paul’s reference to the “third heaven” indicates that he, like many of his Hellenistic-Jewish contemporaries, envisioned the spirit realm as a vertical hierarchy of successive levels. Some Jewish mystics of Paul’s day postulated that heaven contained three levels, in which case Paul, “whether in the body or out of it” (the expression he uses to denote his altered state of consciousness), attained the topmost level. Other visionaries, however, conceived of seven celestial stages, with the ultimate spiritual reality—God’s throne room—at the pinnacle (hence the expression “to be in seventh heaven”) (see Figure 14.4). Still other traditions assumed as many as ten levels of heaven.

Because Paul does not specifically mention how many different levels he believes heaven encompasses, interpreters have long debated the significance of his having visited the “third heaven.”

His reference to “paradise,” which some contemporaries conceived as the temporary habitation of blessed souls awaiting resurrection (cf. Luke 23:43; Josephus, *Discourse on Hades*), suggests that it was not the locus of the divine throne. Given that Paul cites his mystical experience in the context of his quarrel with the Corinthians, in which he argues that God uses human “weakness” in order to show divine strength, it may be that in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul is actually confessing the limitations of his spiritual striving. Along with the “magnificence of [these] revelations,” he was given a counterbalancing “physical pain” that severely limited the extent of his ecstatic experiences. Presuming that the Corinthians had heard of realms higher than “paradise,” Paul’s account of his heavenly ascent may have served to emphasize that, despite his apostolic rank, he—like his fellow believers—must await the Parousia for complete spiritual fulfillment; only then will the faithful behold divinity “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). (For a detailed examination of Paul’s report of his ascent, see Gooder in “Recommended Reading.”)

responsibility for recognizing true apostolic leadership squarely on the Corinthians, the writer reminds them that they are his living letters of recommendation. Echoing Jeremiah 31:31, Paul contrasts the Mosaic Covenant, inscribed on stone tablets, with the New Covenant, written on human hearts. Inhabited by the Holy Spirit, the Christian reflects God’s image with a splendor exceeding that of Moses (3:2–18).

**Nurturing a Spiritual Body** Paul pursues his theme of the indwelling Spirit and further develops ideas about the future life that he had previously outlined in discussing resurrection (1 Cor. 15). In the earlier letter, Paul wrote that the believer will become instantly transformed—receive an incorruptible “spiritual body”—at Christ’s return. He said nothing about the

Christian’s state of being or consciousness during the interim period between death and the future resurrection. In the present letter (4:16–5:10), Paul seems to imply that believers are already developing a spiritual body that will clothe them at the moment of death.

Paul appears to state that God has prepared for each Christian an eternal form, a “heavenly habitation,” that endows the bearer with immortality. Yearning to avoid human death, he envisions receiving that heavenly form now, putting it on like a garment over the physical body, “so that our mortal part may be absorbed into life immortal.” The presence of the Spirit, he concludes, is visible evidence that God intends this process of spiritual transformation to take place during the current lifetime (5:1–5). United with Christ, the believer thus becomes a new creation (5:11–17).



FIGURE 14.4 The Ptolemaic Universe. Ptolemy (c. 100–178 CE), a Greek astronomer and mathematician, posited a geocentric theory of the universe, in which the planets and stars rotated around a stationary earth. In Paul’s day, most Hellenistic mystics accepted a similar concept, a system in which the orbits of planets and stars represented successive levels of a heavenly hierarchy (see Box 14.2). In this seventeenth-century drawing of the Ptolemaic cosmos, at least seven stages of heaven appear.

The spiritual renewal is God’s plan for reconciling humankind to himself. As Christ’s ambassador, Paul advances the work of reconciliation; his sufferings are an expression of loyal service to his divine benefactor (5:18–6:13). Imploring the Corinthians to return his loyalty, Paul ends his defense of the apostolic purpose with a not-altogether-convincing expression of confidence in their reliability (7:2–16). (Many scholars believe that 6:14–7:1, which interrupts Paul’s flow of thought, either belongs to a separate letter or is a non-Pauline fragment that somehow was interpolated into 2 Corinthians. Because of its striking resemblance to Essene literature, some critics suggest that this passage, with its reference to “Belial [the devil],” originated in Qumran.)

Chapters 8 and 9 seem to repeat each other and may once have been separate missives before an editor combined them at the end of

Paul’s reconciliation letter. Both concern the collections for the Jerusalem church, a duty that had been allowed to lapse during the hostilities between the apostle and his competitors. Highlighting Titus’s key role, Paul emphasizes the generosity of Macedonia’s churches, an example the Corinthians are expected to imitate. He reminds prospective donors that “God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7).



## Summary

Paul’s letters to the early Greek churches at Thessalonica and Corinth reveal that the first Christians held widely diverging opinions about the content and practice of their new religion. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul struggles to correct misconceptions about the fate of believers who die before the Parousia. In 1 Corinthians, he urges

the congregation to overcome rivalries and unite as a single body for the spiritual welfare of all believers. The passionate arguments with which Paul defends his right to lead and teach (especially 2 Cor. 10–13) are reminders that God operates through human instruments who, like Paul, are “weak” and dependent on divine power. The key to understanding the urgency of Paul’s plea for unity in belief and behavior is his assumption that his generation stands at the turning point between two ages. The history of evil is nearly finished; Christ will soon return to establish the New Age, in which God rules all.

### Questions for Review

1. Which passages in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians indicate that Paul believed the End to be very near?
2. When Paul advises believers about choosing between marriage and the single life, to what extent does his expectation that ordinary history will soon end affect his counsel? What eschatological assumptions underlie his view of the world?
3. What kinds of wisdom does Paul discuss in 1 Corinthians 1–3?
4. Why do some Corinthians disagree with Paul’s belief in the future resurrection of the body? Explain the difference between the notion of having an inherently immortal soul and the concept of receiving eternal life through resurrection, by the power of Christ’s Spirit (*pneuma*) that dwells in the believer? How does Paul link Jesus’ resurrection to the Christian hope of an afterlife?
5. In 2 Corinthians 10–13, what arguments do Paul’s Corinthian opponents use against him? Why does he respond by boasting “as a fool”? Why are his mystical experiences important to the Corinthians?

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. If Paul was wrong about the occurrence of the Parousia during his lifetime, to what extent does that mistaken view affect readers’ confidence in his teachings?
2. After reading 1 Corinthians 7 and 11, discuss Paul’s views on human sexuality and the relative status of men and women. On what tradition does Paul base his opinion of women’s roles in

the church? How have Paul’s attitudes influenced modern policies on the ordination of women for the ministry?

3. In 2 Corinthians 1–9, the Corinthian majority apparently decided to accept Paul and his individual gospel on the apostle’s own terms. Which of Paul’s threats or arguments do you think most influenced the church to become reconciled with its founder?

### Terms and Concepts to Remember

M	Day of Judgment	Parousia (1
E	eschatology	Thessalonians)
L	<i>glossolalia</i>	Phoebe
H	Lord’s Supper	
O	love ( <i>agapē</i> ) (1	
R	Corinthians 13)	

### Recommended Reading

#### 1 Thessalonians

Ascough, Richard S. “Thessalonians, First Letter to the.” In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 5, pp. 569–574. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. A concise analysis, including the Parousia theme and Paul’s rhetorical devices.

Bridges, Linda M. “1 Thessalonians.” In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 406–410. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Focuses on the recipients’ social setting, their manual labor, and the absence of women.

Malherbe, Abraham J. *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible, Vol. 32B. New York: Doubleday, 2000. Argues that 2 Thessalonians is genuinely Pauline, but was sent to a different house church in Thessalonica.

Malina, Bruce J., and Pilch, John J. *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. Offers important insights into the cultural content of Paul’s thought, including his comparison of Jesus’ return to a Roman leader’s parousia.

#### 1 and 2 Corinthians

Capes, David B. “1 Corinthians.” In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 139–148. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Offers a chapter-by-chapter analysis of Paul’s ideas to correct the recipients’ faith and behavior.

- Dewey, Arthur J.; Hoover, Roy W.; McGaughy, L. C.; and Schmidt, Daryl D. *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Letters and Meaning*. The Scholars Version. Salem, Ore.: Polebridge Press, 2010.
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## CHAPTER 15

# Freedom from Law and Justification by Faith

## Galatians and Romans

*For through faith you are all [children] of God in union with Christ Jesus. . . . There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:26, 28*

**Key Topics/Themes** In his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, Paul defines Christianity's relationship to Judaism. He uses the Hebrew Bible to demonstrate that faith was always God's primary means of reconciling humanity to himself. God's revelation (*apokalypsis*) of Jesus frees believers from the "bondage" of Torah observance.

Paul argues in Romans that all humanity imitates Adam's disobedience and is therefore enslaved to sin and alienated from God. The "holy" and "just" Law of the Torah serves only

to increase an awareness of human imperfection and to condemn the lawbreaker. Thus, obedience to the Torah cannot rescue people from sin's consequence—death—or unite them with the Deity. Only the heavenly benefactor's undeserved love expressed through Christ and accepted through faith can reconcile humanity with the Creator.

The Jewish lack of faith in Jesus as the divinely appointed agent of redemption is only temporary, a historical necessity that allows believing Gentiles also to become God's people.

Galatians and Romans are two of Paul's most important letters, for in these he spells out his distinctive vision of freedom from the Mosaic Torah and justification by faith in Christ. An angry declaration of Christianity's independence from Torah obligations, Galatians argues that obedience to Torah commandments cannot justify the believer before God. Only trust (faith) in God's gracious willingness to redeem humanity through Christ can now win divine approval and obtain salvation for the individual.

This uniquely Pauline gospel revolutionized the development of Christianity. By sweeping away all Torah requirements, including **circumcision** and dietary restrictions, Paul opened the church wide to Gentile converts. Uncircumcised former adherents of Greco-Roman religions were now granted full equality with Jewish Christians. Although the process was only beginning in Paul's day, the influx of Gentiles would soon overwhelm the originally Jewish church, making it an international community with members belonging to every known ethnic

## Galatians

**Author:** Paul.

**Date:** About 56 CE.

**Place of composition:** Perhaps Ephesus or Corinth.

**Audience:** The “churches of Galatia,” perhaps southern Galatia, a Roman province containing the towns of Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe.

**Occasion or purpose:** To refute opponents who advocated circumcision and to demonstrate that Jew and Gentile are equally saved by faith in Jesus’ redemptive power.

group. This swift transformation would not have been possible without Paul’s radical insistence on the abandonment of all Mosaic observances, which for centuries had separated Jew from Gentile.



## An Angry Letter to the “Stupid” Galatians

Perhaps written at about the same time he was battling the “superlative apostles” of Corinth (2 Cor. 10–13), Paul’s Galatian letter contains a similarly impassioned defense of his apostolic authority and teaching. It seems that almost everywhere Paul founded new churches troublemakers infiltrated the congregation, asserting that Christians must keep at least some provisions of the Mosaic Law. Influenced either by representatives from the Jerusalem church or by a wish to combine Jewish practices with elements of pre-Christian religions, the Galatians had abandoned Paul’s gospel (1:6) and now required all male converts to undergo circumcision (5:2–3; 6:12–13), the physical sign of belonging to God’s covenant community (Gen. 17).

### The Recipients

The identity of the Galatian churches Paul addresses is uncertain. In Paul’s time, two different geographical areas could be designated “Galatia.” The first was a territory in north-central Asia Minor inhabited by descendants of Celtic tribes that had invaded the region during the third to first centuries BCE. Brief references

to Galatia in Acts (16:6; 18:23) suggest that Paul may have traveled there, but this is not certain.

The other possibility, as some historians suggest, is that Paul was writing to Christians in the Roman province of **Galatia**. The southern portion of this province included the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, places where the apostle had established churches (Acts 14). If the “southern Galatia” theory is correct, it helps to explain the presence of “Judaizers” (those persons advocating circumcision), for the Roman province was much closer to Jewish-Christian centers at Antioch and at Jerusalem than was the northern, Celtic territory (see Figure 15.1).

### The Identity of Paul’s Opponents

Some commentators identify Paul’s opponents as emissaries of the Jerusalem church, such as those apparently sent by James to inspect the congregation at Antioch (2:12). It seems improbable, however, that Jewish Christians from Jerusalem would have been unaware that requiring circumcision also meant keeping the entire Torah (5:2–3). Paul’s opponents appear to combine aspects of Greco-Roman cult worship, such as honoring cosmic spirits and observing religious festival days (4:9–10), with selected Torah requirements (6:12–14). This **syncretism**—mixing together aspects of two or more different religions to create a new doctrine—suggests that the opponents are Galatian Gentiles. In Paul’s view, their attempt to infuse Jewish and pagan elements into Christianity misses the point of the Christ event.

### Purpose and Contents

Writing from Corinth or Ephesus about 56 CE, Paul has a twofold purpose: (1) to prove that he is a true apostle, possessing rights equal to those of the Jerusalem “pillars” (chs. 1–2), and (2) to demonstrate the validity of his gospel that Christian faith replaces works of Mosaic Law, including circumcision. The letter can be divided into five parts:

1. A biographical defense of Paul’s autonomy and his relationship with the Jerusalem leadership (1:1–2:14)
2. Paul’s unique gospel: justification through faith (2:15–3:29)



FIGURE 15.1 Potential locations of Paul's Galatian churches. The identity of Paul's Galatians is uncertain. The letter may have been directed to churches in the north-central plateau region of Asia Minor (near present-day Ankara, Turkey) or to churches in the southern coastal area of east-central Asia Minor (also in modern Turkey). Many scholars believe that the Galatians were Christians living in Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and other nearby cities that Paul had visited on his first missionary journey.

3. The adoption of Christians as heirs of Abraham and children of God (4:1–31)
4. The consequences and obligations of Christian freedom from the Mosaic Law (5:1–6:10)
5. A final summary of Paul's argument (6:11–18)

### Paul's Freedom from Institutional Authority

Largely dispensing with his usual greetings and thanksgiving, Paul opens the letter with a vigorous defense of his personal autonomy. His apostolic rank derives not from ordination or “human appointment” but directly from Israel's God, his divine patron (1:1–5). Similarly, his message does not depend on information learned from earlier Christians but is a direct “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12). Because he regards his gospel of faith as a divine communication, Paul sees no

need to consult other church leaders about the correctness of his policies (1:15–17).

Unlike in Acts, in Galatians Paul presents himself as essentially independent of the parent church at Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he apparently recognizes the desirability of having his work among the Gentiles endorsed by the Palestinian Christian leadership. His visit with the Jerusalem “pillars”—Peter (Cephas), John, and James—is probably the same conference described in Acts 15. According to Paul, the pillars (a term he uses somewhat ironically) agree to recognize the legitimacy of his Gentile mission. Imposing no Torah restrictions on Gentile converts, the Jerusalem trio ask only that Paul's congregations contribute financially to the mother church, a charitable project Paul gladly undertakes (2:1–10; cf. Paul's appeals for donations in 2 Cor. 8–9 and Rom. 15).

After the Jerusalem conference, Paul meets Peter again at Antioch, a meeting that shows how far the Jewish–Gentile issue is from being resolved. Paul charges that Jesus’ premier disciple is still ambivalent about associating with uncircumcised believers. When James sends emissaries to see if Antiochean Christians are properly observing Mosaic dietary laws, Peter stops sharing in communal meals with Gentiles. Apparently, Peter fears James’s disapproval. Although Paul denounces Peter’s action as hypocrisy, claiming that Peter privately does not keep Torah regulations, we cannot be sure of Peter’s motives. He may have wished not to offend more conservative Jewish believers and behaved as he did out of respect for others’ consciences, a policy Paul himself advocates (1 Cor. 8:1–13).

### Justification by Faith

Paul’s strangely negative attitude toward the Mosaic Law has puzzled many Jewish scholars. Why does a Pharisee trained to regard the Torah as God’s revelation of ultimate Wisdom so vehemently reject this divine guide to righteous living? Is it because of a personal consciousness that (for him) the Law no longer has power to justify his existence before God? In both Galatians and Romans, Paul closely examines his sense of a relationship to his divine benefactor, attempting to show how the experience of Christ achieves for him what the Law failed to do—assure him of God’s love and acceptance.

**Replacing Law with Faith** Using a legal metaphor to interpret the Crucifixion, Paul states that Jesus’ voluntary death pays the Torah’s penalty for all lawbreakers (3:13–14). Thus, Paul can say figuratively, that “through the law I died to law.” He escaped the punishments of the Torah through a mystical identification with the sacrificial Messiah. Vicariously experiencing Jesus’ crucifixion, Paul now shares in Christ’s new life, which enables him to receive God’s grace as never before (2:17–21).

Paul also appeals to the Galatians’ personal experience of Christ, reminding them that they

received the Spirit only when they believed his gospel, not when they obeyed the Law (3:1–5). If they think that they can be judged righteous by obeying the Torah, then there was no purpose or meaning to Christ’s death (2:21). Paul reinforces his argument in the rabbinic tradition by finding a precedent in the Hebrew Bible that anticipates his formula of “faith equals righteousness.” Paul notes that Abraham’s “faith” in God’s call “was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Therefore, Paul reasons, persons who exercise faith today are Abraham’s spiritual children, heirs to the promise that God will “bless,” or justify, Gentile nations through faith (3:6–10). Faith, not obedience to the Law, is the key to divine approval.

In support of his appeal to biblical authority, Paul finds only one additional relevant text, Habakkuk 2:4: “he shall gain life who is justified through faith.” Paul interprets the Habakkuk text as prophetic of the messianic era and contrasts its emphasis on faith with the Law’s focus on action (3:11–12). The faith Habakkuk promised comes to the lawless Gentiles because Christ, suffering a criminal’s execution, accepted the Law’s “curse” on unlawful people and allowed them to become reconciled to God (3:13–14).

### The Role of the Mosaic Torah in Human Salvation

If, as Paul repeatedly asserts, the Mosaic Torah cannot really help anyone, why was it given? Paul’s answer is that the Torah is a temporary device intended to teach humans that they are unavoidably lawbreakers, sinners whose most conscientious efforts cannot earn divine favor. Using an analogy from Roman society, Paul compares the Law to a tutor—a man appointed to guide and protect youths until they attain legal adulthood. Like a tutor imposing discipline, the Law makes its adherents aware of their moral inadequacy and their need for a power beyond themselves to achieve righteousness. That power is Christ. Having served its purpose of preparing Abraham’s children for Christ, the Torah is now obsolete and irrelevant (3:19–25).

**The Equality of All Believers** Paul denies the Law’s power to condemn and separate Jew



from Gentile and asserts the absolute equality of all believers, regardless of their nationality, social class, or sex. Among God's children, "there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female," because all are "one person in Christ Jesus" (3:26–28).

**All Believers as Heirs of Abraham** Because Jesus purchased Christians' freedom from slavery to the Torah's yoke, all are now God's adopted heirs. As such, they are entitled to claim the Deity as *Abba* ("father" or "daddy") and to receive the Abrahamic promises. Paul underscores the contrast between the Christian community and Judaism by interpreting the Genesis story of Abraham's two wives as an allegory, a narrative in which the characters symbolize some higher truth. Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian slave girl, is earthly Jerusalem, controlled by Rome. Sarah, the patriarch's free wife, symbolizes the "heavenly Jerusalem," the spiritual church whose members are also free (4:21–31).

**Responsibilities of Freedom** What does freedom from Torah regulations mean? Aware that some Galatians used their liberty as an excuse to indulge any desire or appetite (a practice called **antinomianism**), Paul interprets his doctrine as freedom to practice neighborly love without external restrictions. Somewhat paradoxically, Paul quotes from the Torah to define the limits of Christians' freedom from Torah restrictions. Citing Leviticus 19:18, he asserts that "the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:13–14; cf. Mark 12:31). For Paul, "the harvest of the Spirit is love," which has the power not only to transcend Torah regulations but also to safeguard believers from the potential excesses of freedom. Exercising "faith active in love" (5:6), the Galatians will not indulge humanity's "lower nature"; love keeps them from all abuses and errors that the Torah prohibits. Practicing love promotes the kindness and mutual support that makes the congregation thrive spiritually (5:13–6:2).

Paul's exasperation with the Galatians' failure to understand that Jesus' death and resurrection are God's complete and all-sufficient means of human salvation inspires his most brutal insult. With savage irony, he suggests that persons who insist on circumcision finish the job by emasculating themselves (5:7–12). Paul's remark may refer to an infamous practice among male adherents of the goddess Cybele, some of whom mutilated themselves in a religious frenzy. This oblique allusion to a pagan cult also implies that Paul's opponents were Galatian syncretists.

In closing his letter, Paul seizes the pen from his secretary to write a final appeal to the Galatians in his own hand. Accusing his opponents of practicing circumcision only to escape persecution, presumably from Torah-abiding Jews, Paul summarizes his position: Torah obedience is meaningless because it implies that God's revelation through Jesus is not sufficient. Contrary to his opponents' limited view, Paul asserts that Jesus alone makes possible the new creation that unites humanity with its Creator. Paul's closing words are as abrupt and self-directed as his opening complaint (1:6): "In future let no one make trouble for me" (6:11–17).

### Recent Scholarly Evaluations of Paul's Interpretation of Judaism

A scholarly debate about Paul's interpretation of first-century-CE Judaism that began in the 1970s has persisted into the twenty-first century, with many scholars advocating a "new perspective" on Paul's seemingly negative attitude toward Torah-observant Judaism, the religion in which he was raised. Before this ongoing reevaluation of Paul's thought, many commentators contrasted a "legalistic" Judaism—dominated by scrupulous law-keeping and the consequent fear of divine punishment—against a Pauline gospel of divine grace and redemption. Scholars such as E. P. Sanders and James Dunn have argued that this traditional view is too simplistic, pointing out that the Judaism of Paul's day not only was extremely diverse—making it



### BOX 15.1 Through a Glass Darkly: Justification and Unconditional Love

In contrasting our dark present age with the future light of divine rule, Paul states that now “we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). To many students of Paul’s work, recent critical interpretations of his thought offer no less than a major paradigm shift in our understanding of the apostle’s worldview. In reevaluating Paul’s attitude toward Judaism, for example, scholars increasingly view it from a “new perspective,” rejecting earlier conclusions that Paul had dismissed the Mosaic Torah as “legalistic,” in contrast to the dynamic exercise of “faith in Christ.” Citing passages that many earlier critics largely ignored, current scholarship emphasizes Paul’s vision of the law as “holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12; cf. 3:31). Taking this argument further, Douglas Campbell has proposed an even

more radical reconsideration of Paul’s doctrine of justification. Focusing on Romans, Campbell insists that the letter should be read through the lens of chapters 5 through 8, which emphasize the positive effects of God’s unconditional love, rather than through the first four chapters describing humanity’s dire predicament, the traditional approach. (See works by Campbell, Sanders, Westerholm, Wright, and Yinger in “Recommended Reading.”)

Another scholarly trend sees Paul as a political as well as a religious activist, a Christian missionary who established a network of new communities practicing egalitarian ideals that opposed the materialistic goals of Greco-Roman society, particularly the coerciveness and economic exploitations of the Roman imperial system. (See Horsley and Crossan and Reed in “Recommended Reading.”)

impossible to lump all branches indiscriminately together—but also embraced a number of components, such as many Jewish teachers’ emphasis on God’s mercy and grace, that also characterized Christianity.

Some commentators have suggested that Paul addresses his criticism of Judaism only to Gentiles, who, as people born outside the Mosaic Covenant, do not need to follow Torah regulations. By demonstrating the same kind of faith that Abraham manifested, however, non-Jews also become Abraham’s spiritual descendants, recipients of the “blessing” that God promised eventually to extend to all nations (Gen. 12:3; 15:6). According to this theory, Christian Jews, who *are* born into the covenant community, presumably may continue to practice their ancestral customs, which they can rightly view as an act of faith in Christ (who also kept Torah). This proposal has the advantage of exonerating Paul from a doctrine that some see as anti-Semitic and of acknowledging that all, both Jew and Gentile, are “made righteous” by faith in Christ, but the scholarly community generally has not found this argument persuasive.

Although scholars generally agree that interpreting Paul’s theology in terms of an uncritical opposition between “faith” and “works of the law” misrepresents his gospel, there is still no consensus on the exact meaning of his complex ideas about the interrelationship of Judaism and its offspring, Christianity. Despite the continuing controversy, many scholars welcome the “new perspective’s” insights into Pauline thought, which may result in a clearer understanding about the nature of membership in the covenant and the people of God (see Box 15.1).



### Letter to the Romans

Galatians was dictated in the white heat of exasperation; Romans is a more calmly reasoned presentation of Paul’s doctrine of salvation through faith. This letter is generally regarded as the apostle’s most systematic expression of his theology. In it, Paul thoughtfully explores an issue central to all world religions: how to bridge the moral gap between God and humanity, how to

## Romans

**Author:** Paul.

**Date:** About 57–58 CE.

**Audience:** The house churches at Rome.

**Place of composition:** Corinth.

**Occasion or purpose:** To give a careful explanation of his “gospel to the Gentiles,” particularly the doctrine of justification by faith and the place of both Jews and Gentiles in the divine plan for human redemption.

reconcile imperfect, sinful humanity to a pure and righteous Deity. As a Jew, Paul is painfully aware of the immense disparity between the actions of mortals and the immaculate holiness of Israel’s God, whose justice cannot tolerate human error or wrongdoing. Yet Paul sees these irreconcilable differences between humanity and God as overcome in Christ, the Son who closes the gulf between perfect Father and imperfect children. In Paul’s vision of reconciliation, God himself takes the initiative by re-creating a deeply flawed humanity in his own transcendent image.

## Purpose, Place, and Time of Composition

Unlike other Pauline letters, Romans is addressed to a congregation the writer has neither founded nor previously visited. In form, the work resembles a theological essay or sermon rather than an ordinary letter, lacking the kind of specific problem-solving advice that characterizes most of Paul’s correspondence. Some commentators regard Romans as a circular letter, a document intended to explain Pauline teachings to various Christian groups who may at that time have held distorted views of the apostle’s position on controversial subjects.

Many scholars view chapter 16, which contains greetings to twenty-six different persons, as a separate missive. If it is, it originally served as a letter of recommendation for **Phoebe**, who probably conveyed Paul’s letter to Rome and was perhaps commissioned to prepare for his impending visit to the capital. Paul describes Phoebe as **deacon** (“minister” or “servant”) of the church at

Cencreae, the eastern port of Corinth, a term he also uses to describe his own ministry and that of other male leaders (1 Cor. 3:5). As host of the congregation that met in her house, Phoebe acted as “patron [*prostotes*]” to the group, including Paul (16:1–2). The apostle’s greetings to Prisca (Pricilla) and her husband, Aquila, indicates that the couple so instrumental to him in Corinth (1 Cor. 16:19; cf. Acts 18:18, 26) had returned to Rome. Although the present chapter 16 likely originated as a separate missive asking the Romans to assist Phoebe “in any business in which she may need your help,” a later editor appended it to the main body of Paul’s letter.

Although Paul may have intended the document we call Romans to circulate through many different churches, at the time of writing, he has compelling personal reasons to open communications with Rome. As 2 Corinthians 10–13 and Galatians reveal, Paul’s churches in the northeastern Mediterranean region were rife with divisions and rebellion against his authority. Perhaps in hope of leaving this strife behind, Paul intends to move westward to Spain. He frankly confesses that he prefers to work in territories where no Christian has preceded him (Rom. 15:19–24; 1 Cor. 3:10–15; 2 Cor. 10:15–16). Paul writes not only to enlist Roman support for his Spanish mission (15:24) but also to ensure that his doctrines are understood and endorsed by the prestigious church at Rome, center of the imperial government and capital of the civilized world. He assures the Romans that he intends only to pass through their city (see Figure 15.2), lest they fear a lengthy visit from so controversial a figure.

Before journeying to Rome, however, Paul plans to take the money collected from his churches in Greece to the Jerusalem headquarters. He feels some anxiety about the trip to Judea, stronghold of his Jewish and Jewish-Christian opponents, and may have composed Romans as a means of marshaling the most effective arguments for his stand on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity (15:26–32). Chapters 9–11 contain his most extensive analysis of the parent religion’s role in the divine plan. As Acts indicates, Paul’s



FIGURE 15.2 Streetside restaurant in Ostia. Remarkably well preserved, this restaurant in Ostia, the seaport of Rome, offered convenient meals to busy passersby. Such “fast food” establishments were common in Roman cities and a familiar sight to Paul and other early Christians.

premonition of future trouble was fully justified by his subsequent arrest in Jerusalem and imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 21–26). The letter was probably sent from Corinth about 57–58 CE.

### Organization

The longest and most complex of Paul’s letters, Romans can be divided into nine thematically related parts:

1. Introduction (1:1–15)
2. Statement of theme (1:16–17) and exploration of both Gentile and Jewish predicaments: God’s wrath directed at all humanity because all people are guilty of deliberate error (1:18–3:31)
3. Abraham as the model of faith (4:1–25)

4. Faith in Christ ensuring deliverance from sin and death (5:1–7:25)
5. Renewed life in the Spirit (8:1–39)
6. The causes and results of Israel’s disbelief (9:1–11:36)
7. Behavior in the church and the world (12:1–15:13)
8. Paul’s future plans and greetings (15:14–33)
9. Appendix: a letter recommending Phoebe, a woman serving as deacon of the Cenchrere church (16:1–27)

### Introduction

Paul opens the letter with an affirmation of his apostleship as the result of God’s direct call, again implicitly denying that he owes his authority to any human ordination. Chosen for a

special role, Paul is divinely commissioned to achieve both faith and obedience among all people. As Apostle or divinely appointed envoy to the Gentiles, he now plans to bring his gospel (*evangelion*) to Rome (1:1–15).

In defining his message as *evangelion* (“good news”), Paul implicitly identifies it as an alternative to Roman imperialistic propaganda, official government pronouncements about the “glad tidings” of the emperor’s accomplishments. (See the discussion of imperial *evangelion* in Chapter 5.) Whereas the emperor was widely credited with establishing world peace and prosperity, in this letter Paul will present Jesus—“who was declared Son of God by a mighty act in that he rose from the dead” (1:4; cf. Acts 2:36)—as the real source of universal blessings. “Gracious favor and peace,” Paul states, come from “God our great Benefactor and from our lord Jesus the Anointed” (1:7, Scholars Version).

Eager to convince the Roman congregations, that his distinctive “gospel [*evangelion*]” is correct, Paul announces the same grand theme of salvation “through faith” that he had used in his earlier letter to the Galatians. “God’s way of righting wrong,” he insists, is “a way that starts from faith and ends in faith.” He then cites the same passage from Habakkuk that he had quoted in Galatians: “He shall gain life who is justified through faith” (Rom. 1:17; cf. Gal. 3:11; Hab. 2:4). Or, as the Scholars Version renders it: “The one who decides to live on the basis of confidence in God is the one who gets it right.” The Greek term that Paul uses here, *pistis*, is usually translated as “faith,” but has a broader connotation of “trust,” a deep confidence in God’s reliability, such as that which Abraham displayed when God summoned him to a new life (see below). For Paul, such confidence in God is the foundation on which the divine–human relationship must be built.

### The Gentiles’ Idolatry and Its Consequences

In the first part of Romans, Paul surveys the causes and consequences of humanity’s present alienation from God, turning first to the Gentiles,

the “nations” outside a covenant bond with God. Like other Jewish moralists of his day, Paul sees the Gentiles’ moral errors as resulting from their polytheism and idolatry. In Paul’s eyes, the Creator’s glory is unmistakably revealed in the natural world, making idol-worship inexcusable. Describing the Gentiles’ religious and moral failures, Paul reflects ideas from Hellenistic-Jewish literature, as well as the concepts of “natural” and “unnatural” from the philosophies of Aristotle and the Stoics. Paul also adopts a popular Jewish view that the Gentiles deliberately “bartered away the true God for [a lie]” (1:25). Although Genesis, a narrative of human origins, says nothing about the beginning of polytheism, some noncanonical works, such as the Book of Jubilees, anticipate Paul’s view that, at a particular point in history, the Gentiles deliberately abandoned a pure monotheism to pursue a multiplicity of false gods. They are thus guilty of “exchanging the splendor of immortal God for an image shaped like [human or animal forms]” (1:23). Because they fell into idolatry, worshiping images instead of true divinity, God abandoned them to the “shameful passions” of erotic desire. Throughout this section, Paul echoes the Wisdom of Solomon, a book of the Apocrypha, which was probably written only a few decades before his birth. According to Wisdom’s theory of human history, “The idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life” (Wisd. 14:12; cf. 14:11–31).

Paul’s controversial opinion about same-sex love affairs (1:26–27), common in the Greco-Roman world, was probably determined by the prohibitions against them in Leviticus (18:22; 20:13), but Paul’s attempt to validate this Torah ordinance is based on his assumptions about the history of religion. Paul assumes that monotheism originally prevailed in human society, only to be followed by the proliferation of polytheism, spawning an idolatry that fatally corrupted the human mind. Twenty-first-century historians and anthropologists, however, find no evidence to support this Hellenistic-Jewish hypothesis, on which Paul grounds his condemnation of same-sex attraction. As scholars have discovered, belief

in a single universal God, such as that characterizing postexilic stages of Israelite religion, is a late historical development. Today's readers, including many ethicists and psychologists, may similarly be puzzled by Paul's assumed link between idolatry and homosexual behavior, a connection prevalent in the first-century CE Jewish milieu but not verifiable by the standards of contemporary science. (For an exploration of this topic, see Michael Coogan and Dale Martin in "Recommended Reading.")

**Jews Are Also Alienated from God** When Paul turns from describing Gentile errors to addressing his fellow Jews, he does not accuse them of idolatry, though he judges them "equally guilty." Although God provided Jews with the Torah to guide them in righteousness, a fact that gives them an initial advantage over the Gentile nations, they have not, Paul asserts, lived up to the Law's high standards. As a result, Jews have not achieved justification before God any more than Gentiles have. Paul reiterates his argument to the Galatians that the Torah fails to effect a right relationship between God and the lawkeeper; it serves only to make one conscious of sin (2:17–3:20).

All humanity, then, both Jew and Gentile, is in the same sinking boat, incapable of saving itself. No one can earn through his or her own efforts the right to enjoy divine approval. Paul now goes on to show how God—whose just nature does not permit him to absolve the unjust sinner—works to rescue undeserving humanity (3:21–31).

### Abraham as the Model of One "Justified" by Faith

Paul realizes that, if his doctrine is to convince Jewish Christians, it must find support in the Hebrew Bible. He therefore argues that God's plan of rescuing sinners through faith began with Abraham, foremost ancestor of the Jewish people. As in Galatians, he cites Genesis 15:6: Abraham's faith in God "was counted to him as righteousness." For Paul, the fact that God

pronounced Abraham "righteous" while the patriarch was still uncircumcised has enormous implications for the uncircumcised Gentiles, providing a prophetic model of God's plan to save all peoples through faith. In achieving justification by placing his trust in God, Abraham is not only the father of his Jewish descendants but also "the father of all who have faith when uncircumcised, so that righteousness is 'counted' to them" (4:3–11). Therefore, Gentiles who imitate Abraham's example—trusting that God will do what he has promised—are also heirs of the divine promises given in Genesis. Without compromising his impartiality, God succeeds in justifying both Jew and Gentile, encompassing previously distinct groups in an act of redemptive grace. As Abraham proved his confidence in God by obediently responding to Yahweh's voice, so must the faithful now respond to God's new summons through Christ (4:15–25). "Justified through faith" in Jesus' sacrificial death, a demonstration of divine love, believers are now reconciled to God (5:1–11).

In using Abraham's example to support his thesis that people are "justified by faith quite apart from success in keeping the law" (3:28; cf. 4:1–25), Paul selects only one verse (Gen. 15:6) from the thirteen chapters that Genesis devotes to Abraham's story. Another New Testament letter—traditionally ascribed to James, Jesus' Torah-keeping "brother"—cites a different part of the Genesis narrative to argue that it was not Abraham's trust in itself but his faith expressed *in action* that pleased God. Insisting that "faith divorced from deeds is barren," the author of James interprets Abraham's significance as that of a person who demonstrates his faith through his deeds, such as (almost) offering his son Isaac as a human sacrifice. Only by translating his trust into action, James declares, did Abraham prove "the integrity of his faith." Tellingly, James then cites the same Genesis verse that Paul had evoked to illustrate the sufficiency of faith alone, but, by placing Genesis 15:6 in the broader context of Abraham's actions, James interprets the passage quite differently (James 2:14–26). Although most



### BOX 15.2 Differing New Testament Views on Torah Keeping

Paul's "gospel"—that Gentiles may become full-fledged members of the Christian community without having to keep Torah ordinances—so completely won the day that later generations of Christians have taken it for granted. By the end of the first century CE, Gentile converts numerically dominated the church, relegating Torah-keeping Jewish Christians to a small minority. Although the writings of Torah-observant Christians were not included in the New Testament canon, occasional voices of dissent from the Pauline position appear in Christian Scripture. The author of Matthew's Gospel, for example, argues that Israel's Messiah "did not come to abolish the Law [Torah]" and that it remains binding on Jesus' followers:

If any man therefore sets aside even the least of the Law's demands, and teaches others to do the same [as Paul did], he will have the lowest place in the kingdom of Heaven, whereas anyone who

keeps the Law, and teaches others so [as did Paul's opponents], will stand high in the kingdom of Heaven. (Matt. 5:19)

In describing Jesus' future judgment on those claiming to follow him, the Gospel writer is even more severe:

Not everyone who calls me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my heavenly Father [who commanded Israel to obey his laws]. . . . Then I [Jesus as eschatological judge] will tell them [the condemned] to their faces, "I never knew you; out of my sight, you and your wicked ways." (Matt. 7:21–23)

The phrase here translated "wicked ways" is more accurately rendered "subverters of the Law," as in the Scholars Version. According to Matthew, Jesus will thus condemn Christians who fail to imitate his example in observing Torah regulations. Paul, of course, would disagree.

commentators believe that James is merely correcting a later misinterpretation of Paul's doctrine of faith, and not necessarily contradicting it, his conclusion that people are "justified by deeds and not by faith in itself" (2:25) does not precisely accord with the Pauline equation of faith and righteousness (see Chapter 18). (For another New Testament author's view on the "works of the law," see Box 15.2.)

### Faith in Christ Ensuring Deliverance from Sin and Death

**The Roles of Adam and Christ** At the outset of his letter (1:5), Paul declares that he tried to bring the whole world to a state of obedient faith. In chapter 5, he outlines a theory of history in which God uses these two qualities—obedience and faith—to achieve human salvation. God's intervention into human affairs became necessary when the first human, Adam (whose name means "humankind"), disobeyed the Creator. Through this act, Adam alienated not only

himself but all his descendants from their Maker (see Box 15.3). Like some other Jewish teachers of the first century CE, Paul interprets the Genesis story of Adam's disobedience as a tragic **Fall** from grace, a cosmic disaster that introduces sin and death into the world. (Paul's word for "sin"—*hamartia*—is a Greek archery term that means "missing the mark" or "falling short of a desired goal." Aristotle used the same term to denote the "fatal flaw" of the tragic hero in Greek drama. *Hamartia* commonly refers to an error of judgment rather than an act of in-born human wickedness.) In Paul's moral scheme, the entire human race fails to hit the target of reunion with God, thus condemning itself to death—permanent separation from the Source of life.

Obedience to the Torah cannot *save* because the Law merely defines errors and assigns legal penalties. It is God himself who overcomes the hopelessness of the human predicament. He does this by sending his Son, whose perfect obedience and sacrificial death provide a saving

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### BOX 15.3 Paul's Views on the Origin of Sin and Death

In Romans 5, Paul attributes the existence of sin and death to the first man's deliberate disobedience of a divine command, that which prohibited Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Rom. 5:12–23; cf. Gen. 3). According to orthodox interpretations of Paul's thought, particularly Augustine's doctrine of original sin, the first couple's error resulted in a death sentence not only for them but also for their descendants, all of whom are born under divine condemnation. In scrutinizing Genesis 3, however, readers will notice that most of the terms commonly used to describe the tale of Adam's and Eve's alienation from Yahweh are entirely absent. The Genesis narrator makes no reference to sin, evil, rebellion, disobedience, punishment, damnation, or a fall from grace—all are interpretative terms supplied by later theologians. The narrator, moreover, does not present the talking serpent who persuades Eve to taste the forbidden fruit as “bad,” but only as “subtle” or “shrewd.” Interestingly, after Genesis 3, no writer in the canonical Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) ever again refers to this Genesis episode or accords it any theological significance.

It was not until shortly before Paul's day that Hellenistic-Jewish writers began to reinterpret the

events related in Genesis 3. During the first century BCE, a Hellenistic Jew in Alexandria, Egypt, composed the *Wisdom of Solomon*, a book that integrated Greek philosophy with the Hebraic biblical tradition. (Excluded from the Tanakh, the *Wisdom of Solomon* was part of the Septuagint Apocrypha and is included in Catholic and Orthodox editions of the Old Testament.) According to this source, the devil was responsible for introducing death into human experience: “God created man for immortality, and made him the image of his own eternal self; it was the devil's spite that brought death into the world” (*Wisd. of Sol.* 2:23–24). Other extrabiblical traditions that it was the devil, speaking through the serpent, who tempted Eve to sin were eventually incorporated into the noncanonical *Life of Adam and Eve*, a Hellenistic work that imaginatively dramatizes Satan's role in corrupting the first humans. Whether directly influenced by this work or by the oral traditions underlying it, Paul evidently adopts the book's Hellenistic view that Adam and Eve are the sources of sin and death (Rom. 5:12–21; 2 Cor. 11:3; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). (A Jewish apocalyptic work, *2 Esdras* [c. 100 CE], also explores the concept of original sin; see Chapter 19.)

counterweight to Adam's sin. As all Adam's children share his mortal punishment, so all will share the reward of Christ's resurrection to life. It is the believer's trust in the saving power of Christ that makes him or her “righteous,” enabling the just Deity to accept persons trustfully responding to his call (5:12–21).

Several scholars have proposed that, in a few crucial passages, Paul's use of the phrase “faith *in* Christ” (*pistis Christou*) should be translated as the “faith *of* Christ,” referring to the faithfulness that Jesus displayed in loyally serving God to the end (Rom. 3:22, 25–26; cf. Gal. 2:16; 3:22). In this view, Christian faith can be interpreted as a willingness to imitate the perfect trust in God

that Jesus showed in submitting to a shameful death on the cross. A model of selfless devotion and confidence in divine mercy, Jesus' human life acquired cosmic significance when the Deity accepted his faithfulness as a means of validating or redeeming the human race. A majority of commentators, however, seem to endorse the traditional view that belief or trust *in* Christ correctly expresses Paul's concept. (For a perceptive treatment of this issue, see Dunn in “Recommended Reading.”)

Some later theologians used Romans 5 to formulate a doctrine of **original sin**, which states that all human beings inherit an unavoidable tendency to do wrong and are innately corrupt.



From Augustine to Calvin, such theologians had a deeply pessimistic view of human nature, in some cases regarding the majority of people as inherently depraved and justly damned.

Paul, however, emphasizes the joyful aspects of God's reconciliation to humanity. It is the Deity who initiates the process, and God's "grace"—his gracious will to love and to give life—far exceeds the measure of human failings. So powerful is God's determination to redeem humankind, Paul implies, that he may ultimately save all people:

It follows, then, that as the issue of one misdeed was the condemnation for all [people], so the issue of one just act is acquittal and life for all [people]. For as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of the one man [Christ] the many will be made righteous.

(Rom. 5:18–19; see Paul's similar declaration in 1 Cor. 15:21–23)

This passage, in which Paul optimistically seems to envision a universally redeemed humanity, must be balanced against his more negative evaluation of human sinfulness in Romans 8. In this chapter, he contrasts two different ways of life that produce opposite results. Those who submit to their "lower nature" make themselves God's enemies and earn "death"; those united with Christ, however, live on a higher plane, "the level of the spirit," which produces "life and peace" (Rom. 8:5–13).

**A Distortion of Paul's Teaching on Freedom** In chapter 6, Paul seems to be refuting misconceptions of his doctrine on Christian freedom. As in Galatia, some persons were apparently acting as if liberty from the Law entitled them to behave irresponsibly. In some cases, they concluded that "sinning" was good because it allowed God's grace more opportunity to show itself. Paul reminds such dissidents that sin is a cruel tyrant who pays wages of death. In contrast, Christ treats his servants like a generous benefactor, bestowing the gift of everlasting life (6:1–23).

## The Law's Holiness and Human Perversity

Paul makes one final attempt to place the Torah in the context of salvation history and to account for its failure to produce human righteousness. In Galatians, Paul describes the Law harshly, referring to it as slavery, bondage, and death. Writing more temperately in Romans, he judges the Law "holy and just and good" (7:12). If it is, why does it not serve to justify its practitioners?

In this case, Paul answers that the fault lies not in the Torah but in human nature. The Torah is "spiritual," but human beings are "unspiritual" and enslaved by sin. Throughout this long passage (7:7–25), Paul uses the first person, as if he were analyzing his own nature and then projecting his self-admitted defects onto the rest of humanity. His rhetorical "I," however, should probably be read "we"—for he means to describe human nature collectively. Laws not only define crimes, he asserts, but create an awareness of lawbreaking that does not exist in their absence. Thus, the Torah makes sin come alive in the human consciousness (7:7–11).

Speaking as if sin were an animate force inside himself, Paul articulates the classic statement of ethical frustration—the opposition between the "good" he wishes to do and the "wrong" he actually performs. As he confronts the huge gap between his conscious will and his imperfect actions, Paul can only conclude that it is not the real "he" who produces the moral failure, but rather the "sin that lodges in me" (7:14–20). For Paul, "sin" is not only autonomous but a personification of supernatural forces profoundly hostile to humankind.

With his higher reason delighting in the Torah but his lower nature fighting against it, he finds that he incurs the Law's punishment—death. He bursts with the desire to attain God's approval but always "misses the mark." In agony over his fate, he seeks some power to rescue him from an unsatisfying existence that ends only in death (7:21–25). Paul may be accused of attributing his personal sense of moral imperfection to everyone else, but his despairing

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self-examination illustrates why he believes that the Law is unable to deliver one from the lethal attributes of imperfect human nature (8:3).

### Renewed Life in the Spirit

Paul then tries to show how God accomplishes his rescue mission through Christ (8:1–39). By sharing humanity’s imperfect nature and dying “as a sacrifice for sin,” Christ transfers the Torah’s penalties to sin itself, condemning it and not the human nature in which it exists (8:3–4). Because Christ’s Spirit now dwells within believers, sin no longer exerts its former control, and new life can flourish in each Christian’s body. Thus, Christians escape their imperfection, having put it to death with Christ on the cross. No longer sin’s slaves, they become God’s children, joint heirs with Christ (8:5–17).

**Universal Renewal** Paul uses mystical language to describe not only human nature but also the cosmos itself struggling to be set free from the chains of mortality. During this period of cosmic renewal, the whole universe wails as if in child-birth. Believers now hope for a saving rebirth, but that reality is still ahead. Ultimately, they will be fully reshaped in the Son’s image, the pattern of a new humanity reconciled to God (8:18–30).

**Doxology** Paul concludes this section of his letter with a memorable **doxology**. It is a moving hymn of praise to the God who has lovingly provided the means for humanity to transcend its weakness and attain “the liberty and splendour” of God’s children. In this brilliant credo, Paul declares his absolute confidence that no suffering or power, human or supernatural, can separate the believer from God’s love (8:31–39).

### The Causes and Results of Israel’s Disbelief

Now that he has explained his position on the Law and the means by which God arranges human salvation, Paul explores the difficult question of Israel’s rejection of its Messiah. How

does it happen that the people to whom God granted his covenants, Torah, Temple, and promises failed to recognize Jesus as the Christ? First, Paul argues that God never intended all Israelites to receive his promises; they were meant for only a faithful remnant, represented in Paul’s day by Jewish Christians (9:1–9). (But does Paul’s theory of a “faithful remnant” fully agree with other parts of his argument?)

Second, Paul tries to show that Israel’s present unbelief is part of God’s long-range plan to redeem all of humanity. In a long discourse sprinkled with loose paraphrases of passages from the Hebrew Bible, Paul makes several important assumptions about God’s nature and the manner in which the Deity controls human destiny. He first assumes that because God’s will is irresistible, humans’ freedom of choice is severely limited. Citing the Exodus story, Paul reminds his readers that Yahweh manipulated the Egyptian king in order to demonstrate his divine strength (Exod. 9:15–16). He argues that God’s omnipotence entitles him to show favor or cruelty to whomever he pleases. Paul compares the Deity’s arbitrariness to that of a potter who can assign one clay pot an honorable use and smash another if it displeases him. Implying that might makes right, Paul declares that no human being can justly challenge the supreme Potter’s authority to favor one person and not another (9:10–21; 10:7–10).

Paul’s assumption is that the Creator pre-determines the human ability to believe or dis-believe, thus foreordaining an individual’s eternal destiny. This assumption troubles many believers for its apparent repudiation of free will, although some have embraced it. Later theologians such as Augustine and Calvin formulated a doctrine of **predestination**, in which God—before the world’s creation—decreed everyone’s fate, selecting a few for salvation and relegating the majority to damnation.

Paul, however, emphasizes the positive aspect of God’s apparent intervention into the human decision-making process. In God’s long-range plan, Jewish refusal to recognize Jesus as the Messiah allows Gentiles to receive the Gospel;

thus, nations previously ignorant of God can become part of his covenant people and thereby, through faith, receive redemption. In a famous analogy, Paul likens Gentile believers to branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted onto the cultivated olive trunk, which signifies Israel. If some of the old branches from the domesticated tree had not been lopped off, there would have been no room for the new (11:16–18). For humanity’s universal benefit, God has taken advantage of Israel’s unresponsiveness to produce a greater good.

Paul also states that the creation of churches in which Greeks and Romans now worship Israel’s God will incite a healthy envy among Jews, kindling a desire to share the churches’ spiritual favor. Furthermore, Israel’s disbelief is only temporary. When all Gentiles become believers, then the original branches will be regrafted onto God’s olive tree and “the whole of Israel will be saved” (11:19–27).

Paul does not explain why both Israelites and Gentiles could not have been saved simultaneously, but he remains absolutely certain that the Jews are still God’s chosen people. Writing before Rome destroyed the Jewish state in 70 CE, Paul does not predict divine vengeance upon Israel. He affirms instead that God’s own integrity ensures that he will honor his promises to the covenant community. Some later Christian writers argue that God disowned Israel, replacing it with the Christian church. In contrast, Paul’s witness confirms Israel’s continuing role in the divinely ordered drama of human salvation (11:1–36).

### Behavior in the Church and the World

Paul’s ethical instruction (chs. 12–15) is closely tied to his sense of apocalyptic urgency. Because the New Age is about to dawn, believers must conduct themselves with special care, not only in their personal lives but also in their behavior toward the imperial powers that govern society at large.

**Cooperation with Government Authority** Paul’s advice that “every person must submit to the

supreme authorities” was written before his imprisonment and prosecution at Rome. We do not know if his counsel would be the same after his experience in the emperor Nero’s court, but in chapter 13 he recommends a program of obedience and cooperation with government officials. Echoing the Stoic view that the state exists to maintain public order and to punish wrongdoing, Paul argues as if the Roman Empire were a “divine institutio”—an opinion contrasting with his earlier view that the present world is ruled by demonic forces (2 Cor. 4:4).

Although he emphasizes the Christian’s duty to pay taxes and submit to legally constituted authority, Paul does not consider the ethical problem of a citizen’s duty to resist the state’s illegal or exploitative acts. Nor does he urge believers to change the present social system, probably because it will soon end. Immediately following his message of submission to the state (13:1–10), Paul reminds his Roman correspondents that their rescue from the present evil age is rapidly approaching: “It is time for you to wake out of sleep, for deliverance is nearer to us now than it was when first we believed. It is far on in the night; day [of the Parousia] is near” (13:11). Paul’s apparent toleration of human slavery in his brief letter to **Philemon** may also stem from his conviction that Jesus will soon take over world rule, ending all imperial abuses (see Chapter 16).

**Rome as Anti-Christ** Paul implies that voluntary cooperation with Rome will benefit Christians; he could not know that he soon would be among the first victims of a state-sponsored persecution of his faith (see Figure 15.3). Following the emperor Nero’s execution of many Roman believers (c. 64–65 CE) and the threat of more persecution under Domitian (81–96 CE), some New Testament authors came to regard the state as Satan’s earthly instrument to destroy God’s people. After the Jerusalem Temple was razed in 70 CE, Rome became the new Babylon in the eyes of many Christians. The author of Revelation pictures Rome as a beast and predicts its fall as a cause of universal rejoicing



FIGURE 15.3 Fourth-century Roman lime relief depicting the apostles Peter and Paul. Because early church traditions assert that both apostles were executed in Rome during Nero's reign, their images are commonly paired. Paul's letter to the Galatians indicates that their historical relationship was not so close (Gal. 2:11–13).

(Rev. 17–19). At the time Paul wrote, however, the adversarial relationship between church and state was still in the future (see the photo essay preceding Chapter 19, “The Tension Between Caesar and Christ”).



## Summary

Romans is the most comprehensive statement of Paul's teaching. In it, Paul wrestles with the problems of humanity's estrangement from God and God's response to human need. Arguing that Torah observance cannot justify one to the righteous God, Paul states that in Christ the Deity creates a new humanity, a new beginning. Through Christ, all persons of faith can become God's children and benefit from the promises made to Abraham.

God's ultimate plan is to defeat sin and reconcile all humanity—ironically, first Gentiles and then Jews—to himself. Because the time remaining

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is so short, believers must submit to existing governments and lead blameless lives.

## Questions for Review

1. As Paul describes it in Romans 1–3, how is all humanity trapped in a hopeless predicament? How has God acted to rescue people from the power of sin and death?
2. Define what Paul means by such terms as *righteousness*, *justification*, and *faith*. According to Paul's evaluation of the Torah in Galatians and Romans, why are Torah observances such as circumcision irrelevant to God's action through Christ?
3. In both Galatians and Romans, Paul cites excerpts from Genesis 15 and Habakkuk 2 to prove that God always intended faith to be the means by which humanity was to be “justified.” Compare Paul's interpretation of Abraham's example with that given by James (2:14–26). In what ways does James disagree with Paul's explanation of the Genesis text?

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Some commentators have argued that Paul misunderstands the purpose of Torah obedience. They claim that most Jewish teachers of his day did not present Torah observance as a means of salvation and that Paul's contrast between "works" and "faith" misrepresents first-century Judaism. From your reading of Galatians and Romans, how would you explain Paul's position?
2. What aspects of Paul's teaching in Galatians or Romans are most influenced—hence limited—by his particular historical/social circumstances? If Paul were alive today, would a knowledge of modern anthropology and biological evolution cause him to change his presentation of the Adam–Christ parallel? How could Paul's notion of inherited Adamic sin be translated into an understanding of humanity's biological heritage in which humans retain genetic traits of more "primitive" ancestors?
3. How do you think Paul's ideas about submission to governmental authority should be modified to reflect post-Enlightenment principles of freedom and individual rights? If Paul had survived Nero's persecutions, would he have revised his advice in Romans 13?
4. Why does Paul, who believed that Mosaic Law had been superseded by divine grace and faith in Christ, base his condemnation of homosexuality on a Torah statute (Lev. 18:22; 20:13)? How do you think Paul's views on same-sex love need to be reinterpreted?

## Terms and Concepts to Remember

Abraham	original sin
Adam	Philemon
antinomianism	Phoebe
circumcision	predestination
deacon	Roman Empire
doxology	syncretism
Fall, the	Torah
Galatia	

## Recommended Reading

### Galatians

Braxton, Brad R. *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002. Explores the implications

of Paul's emphasis on uniting different races in Christ for the African American community.

Dunn, James D. G. *Epistle to the Galatians*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993. Discusses Pauline themes of faith and justification.

Koperski, Veronica. *What Are They Saying About Paul and the Law?* Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2001. Essays on current interpretations of Paul's views on the Torah.

Martyn, J. Louis. *Galatians*. Anchor Bible Series. New York: Doubleday, 1997. A new translation and commentary.

Riches, John. "Galatians." In M. D. Coogan, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 311–315. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Emphasizes Paul's historic break with the past and its historical reinterpretations.

Soards, Marion. "Galatians, Letter to." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 508–514. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. A helpful introduction.

Wiley, Tatha. *Paul and the Gentile Women: Reframing Galatians*. New York: Continuum International, 2005. Examines the effect of Paul's gospel on women believers.

### Romans

Campbell, Douglas A. *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. Much more detailed than most books listed in this text, it reinterprets Romans as a statement of divine grace and unconditional love.

Coogan, Michael. *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*. New York: Twelve, 2010. Lucidly surveys differing biblical attitudes toward various sexual relationships, including marriage and homoeroticism.

Crossan, John Dominic, and Reed, Jonathan L. *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*, reprint edition. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005. A scholarly analysis of Roman culture that emphasizes the political dimension of Paul's mission.

Dunn, James D. G. "Faith, Faithfulness." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 407–423. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. Offers important insights on Paul's gospel of salvation through faith.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998. Thorough exposition of Paul's thought, using Romans as his most important theological statement.

Ehrensperger, Kathy. *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies*. New York: T and T Clark International, 2004.

- Eisenbaum, Pamela. *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010. Argues that Paul continued to see himself as a Jew who promulgated Israel's Messiah.
- Elliott, Neil. "Romans." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 271–279. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Offers a variety of traditional and innovative interpretations of Paul's arguments on Christ and Judaism, including nontheological views.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *Romans*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 33. New York: Doubleday, 1993. A new translation with extensive commentary.
- Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004. Explores Paul's doctrine of justification by faith.
- Horsley, Richard, ed. *Paul and the Imperial Roman Order*. New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2004. Collection of cutting-edge essays on the political aspects of Pauline thought.
- Martin, Dale B. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Includes a careful analysis of Paul's views on sexuality, passion, and marriage.
- Moo, Douglas. "Romans, Letter to the." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, pp. 841–852. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. Examines the letter's historical background, purpose, and theological contents.
- Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978. An important scholarly study of Paul's relationship to rabbinic Judaism.
- . *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.
- Soards, M. J.; Sampley, J. P.; and Wright, N. T., eds. *Romans—First Corinthians, The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000. Provides extensive commentary.
- Watson, Francis. *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007. A perceptive sociological approach.
- Westerholm, Stephen. *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004. A thorough review of recent Pauline scholarship on the relationship of Jewish law and Christian faith.
- Witherington, Ben, III, and Hyatt, Darlene. *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009. Argues that through the "faithfulness of Christ" God gathers believers into his covenant with Abraham.
- . *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. Approaches Paul's doctrine of justification in the context of first-century Jewish theology. For more advanced students.
- Yinger, Kent L. *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction*. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Pub, 2011. A lucid and balanced exposition on scholars' recent interpretations of Paul's attitude toward Mosaic law and Christian faith.



## CHAPTER 16

# Letters from Prison

## Philippians and Philemon

*He [Jesus] did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave.* Philippians 2:6–7

**Key Topics/Themes** Although it contains some sharp criticism of his opponents, Paul's letter to the Philippian church reveals an unusual warmth and friendliness in general. Urging cooperation for the mutual benefit of all believers, Paul cites an early hymn that depicts Jesus as the opposite of Adam—a

humbly obedient son whose self-emptying leads to his heavenly exaltation.

The apostle's only surviving personal letter, Philemon shows Paul accepting the Greco-Roman institution of slavery while simultaneously emphasizing that Christians of all social classes are intimately related in love.

According to an early church tradition, Paul wrote four canonical letters while imprisoned in Rome—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Known as the “captivity letters,” they were long believed to represent the apostle's most mature reflections on such topics as the divine nature of Christ (Phil. 2:5–11; Col. 1:13–20; 2:9–15) and the mystic unity of the church (Eph. 1–5).

Rigorous scholarly analysis of the four works, however, has raised serious questions about the time and place of their composition, as well as the authorship of two of them. All leading scholars accept Philippians and Philemon as genuinely Pauline, but many (perhaps more than half) challenge Paul's authorship of Colossians. Even more deny that he wrote Ephesians, a work that differs in content, tone, and style from the apostle's accepted letters.

Because so many scholars question Paul's responsibility for Colossians, we discuss it among the disputed letters in Chapter 17. (For scholarly arguments defending or denying Pauline authorship of these works, see the “Recommended Reading” at the end of Chapter 17.)



### Place of Origin

Scholars pose various objections to the traditional belief that Paul wrote Philippians and the other letters while under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28). In the apostles' day, traveling the almost 800 miles between Rome and **Philippi**, located in north-eastern Greece, took as long as ten months (see Figure 16.1). Philippians implies that Paul's friends



FIGURE 16.1 Potential sites where Paul wrote his “prison letters.” Paul may have written these letters in Rome (in the far west on this map), in Ephesus (on the coast of present-day Turkey), or in Caesarea (in the far eastern Mediterranean). Note that Ephesus is much closer to Philippi than either of the other two cities.

made four journeys between Philippi and his place of imprisonment and that a fifth trip was planned (Phil. 2:25–26). Some scholars consider the distance separating these two cities too great to travel so frequently. They propose Ephesus, a city where Paul spent three years (Acts 20:31) and that is only about ten days’ travel time from Philippi, as the place of origin. Philippians’ references to the Praetorian Guard, the Roman emperor’s personal militia (1:13), and “the imperial establishment” (4:22) do not necessarily mean that the letter originated in Rome. Ancient inscriptions recently discovered in Ephesus show that members of the Praetorian Guard and other imperial officials were stationed in the Roman province of Asia, where Ephesus and Colossae are located.

Although many scholars support the “Ephesian theory,” others suggest that Paul wrote from Caesarea, where he was imprisoned

for two years (Acts 23–25). Still other critics point out that we lack proof that Paul was actually jailed in Ephesus; they also claim that the difficulties in traveling between Macedonia and Rome have been overstated. Where Paul was imprisoned remains an open question, although many commentators still uphold the traditional view that Paul’s prison letters emanate from the Roman capital (see Figure 16.2).



### Letter to the Philippians

Paul enjoyed an unusually warm and affectionate relationship with Christians at Philippi. He and Timothy had established the church during their first tour of Greece (Acts 16:11–40), and he maintained an intimate communication





FIGURE 16.2 *St. Paul in Prison*. In this painting by Rembrandt (1606–1669), Paul sits in his murky cell, composing letters to inspire faith and hope in the membership of his tiny, scattered churches. Notice that the light from the cell’s barred window seems to emanate from Paul himself, surrounding his head like a halo and glowing from the pages of the manuscripts he holds.

with the Philippians, who were the only group from whom he would accept financial support (4:15–16). In welcome contrast to the “boasting” and threats that characterize the letters to Corinth and Galatia, Philippians contains no impassioned defense of his authority, undoubtedly because his friends in Philippi did not question it. The author instead exposes a more kindly and loving aspect of his personality.

Like all genuinely Pauline letters, Philippians reveals the author’s quick changes of mood, ranging from a personal meditation on the meaning of his impending death to a brief but savage attack on his opponents. The letter features so many abrupt changes of subject and shifts in tone that many analysts believe it to be, like 2 Corinthians, a composite work, containing parts of three or four different missives.

## Philippians

**Author:** Paul.

**Audience:** Congregation at Philippi in north-eastern Greece.

**Date and place of composition:** About 56 CE if from Ephesus, 61–62 if from Rome, or 58–60 if from Caesarea (dating depends on the location of Paul’s imprisonment).

**Occasion or purpose:** To express his friendship with the Philippians and to thank them for their monetary support.

According to this theory, the note thanking the Philippians for their financial help (4:10–20 or 23) was composed first, followed by a letter warning the church about potential troublemakers (partially preserved in 1:1–3:1a and 4:2–9). A third letter bitterly attacks advocates of circumcision (3:1b–4:1). The letter may be a single composition, however, for Paul commonly leaps from topic to topic, registering different emotional responses to different problems in the course of a single letter.

Philippians is important not only for the insight it permits into Paul’s volatile character but also for the clues it gives to early Christian beliefs about Jesus’ nature. The key passage appears in Philippians 2:5–11, in which Paul seems to quote an early Christian hymn celebrating Jesus’ humble obedience and subsequent exaltation.

## Organization

Philippians covers a variety of topics, but it can be divided into six relatively brief units:

1. Salutation and thanksgiving (1:1–11)
2. Paul’s meditation on his imprisonment (1:12–30)
3. An exhortation to humility, in imitation of Christ’s example (2:1–18)
4. The recommendation of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–3:1a)
5. An attack on advocates of circumcision and an exhortation to live harmoniously, in imitation of Paul (3:1b–4:9)
6. A note of thanks for financial help (4:10–23)

## The Significance of Paul’s Imprisonment

After affectionately greeting the Philippians (1:1–11), Paul explores the significance of his prison experience and courageously underscores its positive effects. Apparently widely talked about, his case gives other believers the opportunity to witness publicly for Christ. At the same time, not all of Paul’s fellow Christians support him; they use his imprisonment as a means of stirring up new troubles for the prisoner. Paul does not identify those Christians whose personal jealousies complicate his already difficult situation, but they may have been connected with the “advocates of circumcision” denounced in chapter 3. In Acts’ narration of Paul’s arrest, imprisonment in Caesarea, and transportation to Rome under armed guard, the Jerusalem church leadership is conspicuously absent from his defense. Perhaps those who shared James’s adherence to Torah obligations were in some degree pleased to see Paul and his questionable views under legal restraint.

Paul’s attitude toward his troublesome rivals is far milder than it is in Galatians. Determined to find positive results even in his opponents’ activities, Paul adopts a stoic detachment and concludes that their motives, whether sincere or hypocritical, are finally irrelevant: They successfully proclaim the Christian message (1:12–18).

As he contemplates the possibility of his execution, Paul is torn between wishing to live for his friends’ sake and wishing to “depart and be with Christ,” thereby attaining a posthumous union with his Lord while awaiting resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15). Paul places himself on a par with his beloved Philippians when he states that they run the same race as he to win life’s ultimate prize (1:19–30). Despite his ceaseless efforts, Paul remains aware of his imperfection and explicitly states that he is not yet certain of victory (3:10–14).

## The Hymn to Christ

Chapter 2 contains the letter’s most important theological concept. Urging the Philippians to place others’ welfare before their own, Paul cites

Jesus' behavior as the supreme example of humble service to others. To encourage his readers to emulate the same self-denying attitude that Jesus displayed, he recites a hymn that illustrates his intent. The rhythmic and poetic qualities of this work, as well as the absence of typically Pauline ideas and vocabulary, suggest that it is a pre-Pauline composition. The first stanza reads as follows:

Who though he was in the form of God,  
 Did not count equality with God  
 A thing to be grasped,  
 But emptied himself,  
 Taking the form of a servant,  
 Being born in the likeness of men.  
  
 And being found in human form  
 He humbled himself  
 And became obedient unto death.  
 (2:6–8, Revised Standard Version)

The hymn's second stanza (2:9–11) describes how God rewards Jesus' selfless obedience by granting him universal lordship, elevating him to heaven, thereby glorifying "God, the Father."

In this famous passage, which has been translated in various ways to highlight different theories about Christ's divinity, Jesus' relation to the Father is ambiguously stated. Since the fourth century CE, when the church officially adopted the doctrine of the Trinity, it has commonly been assumed that the hymn refers to Jesus' prehuman existence and affirms the Son's co-eternity and co-equality with the Father. (See Box 16.1 for different ways of translating Philippians 2.)

Remembering Paul's explicit subordination of Jesus to God in 1 Corinthians (15:24–28), many readers will be cautious about attributing post-New Testament ideas to the apostle. A growing number of scholars believe that Paul employs the hymn in order implicitly to contrast two "sons" of God—Adam (Luke 3:38) and Jesus. (The Adam–Christ contrast figures prominently in 1 Corinthians 15:21–23, 45–49, and in Romans 5:12–19.) The mention of "form" (Greek, *morphe*) refers to the divine image that both Adam and Jesus reflect (Gen. 1:26–28). But whereas Adam tried to seize

God-like status (Gen. 3:5), Jesus takes the form of a slave. Instead of rebelling against the Creator, he is fully obedient unto death.

Finally, Adam's disobedience brings shame and death, but Jesus' total obedience brings glory and exaltation. Jesus' self-emptying earns him the fullness of God's reward, the bestowal of "the name above all names," to whom all creation submits. In accordance with his usual method of using theology to impart behavioral instruction, Paul implicitly compares the reward given to Jesus for his humility with that in store for humbly obedient Christians. Now shining like "stars in a dark world," they will inherit a future life similar to that which Jesus now enjoys (2:14–18). (For a lucid discussion of the Adam–Christ contrast, see Dewey et al. in "Recommended Reading.")

### Recommendations of Timothy and Epaphroditus

The references to Timothy and Epaphroditus, two of his favorite companions, suggest Paul's warm capacity for friendship. **Timothy**, whose name appears as courtesy coauthor of this letter (1:1), is one of Paul's most reliable associates. Unlike Barnabas and John Mark, with whom Paul quarreled, Timothy (who is half Jewish and half Greek) shares Paul's positive attitude toward Gentile converts. In the apostle's absence, Paul trusts him to act as he would (2:19–24).

**Epaphroditus**, whom the Philippians had sent to assist Paul in prison, has apparently touched Paul by the depth of his personal devotion. Epaphroditus's dangerous illness, which delayed his return to Philippi, may have resulted from his helping the prisoner. Paul implies his gratitude when urging the Philippians to give Epaphroditus an appreciative welcome home (2:25–3:1a).

Paul's concern for individual believers in Philippi is also apparent in his personal message for two estranged women, Euodia and Syntyche. Pleading with sensitivity and tact for their reconciliation, he ranks the two women as co-workers who share his efforts to promote the gospel (4:2–3).

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## BOX 16.1 Comparative Translations of the Hymn in Philippians 2

Unlike the two other great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, Christianity traditionally expresses its ideas and insights in formal doctrines. During the first three or four centuries CE, Christian teachers were bitterly divided on the precise way to define Jesus' divine nature and his relationship to God. Whereas some Christians argued that Jesus was subordinate to the Father, others insisted that he was co-equal and co-eternal with God. The view that Jesus and God were the same Being eventually prevailed and was formulated in the concept of the Trinity, a doctrine articulated in the famous Nicene Creed.

Throughout the long controversy, both sides cited Paul's letter to the church at Philippi to support their conflicting arguments. In the second chapter of Philippians, Paul apparently quotes a pre-Pauline Christian hymn praising Jesus' example of humble obedience to the Father, a willing submission to the divine will that led to his death and posthumous exaltation. Understanding exactly what the hymn states about Jesus' relation to God—whether in a prehuman heavenly existence he was “equal to God”—depends largely on how one interprets a crucial Greek verb, which translators render in a variety of ways, giving different theological meanings to the text. The King James Version provides a traditional wording consistent with the orthodox belief that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, whereas most modern translations reflect the ambiguity of the passage. (To avoid repetition, the second stanza is omitted in several examples. The key phrases for theological interpretation are placed in italics.)

### Attacking Advocates of Circumcision

In chapter 3, flashes of Paul's old fire give his words a keen edge. This section (3:1b–20), which is thought to have originated as a separate memorandum, attacks Judaizers who insist on circumcising Gentile converts. Denouncing circumcision as “mutilation,” he contemptuously dismisses his opponents as “dogs”—the common Jewish tag for the uncircumcised.

#### PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11

##### KING JAMES VERSION

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: *who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God;* but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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##### NEW AMERICAN BIBLE

*Your attitude must be that of Christ. Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at.*

Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.

He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross!

Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name,

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Paul provides valuable autobiographical information when he cites his ethnic qualifications—superior to those of his enemies—to evaluate the advantages of being a Jew. Despite his exemplary credentials—and his scrupulousness in keeping the Torah regulations—he discounts his Jewish heritage as “garbage.” All human advantages are worthless when compared to the new life God gives in Christ (3:1–11).

So that at Jesus' name  
every knee must bend  
in the heavens, on the earth,  
and under the earth,  
and every tongue proclaim  
to the glory of God the Father:  
Jesus Christ Is Lord!

but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—even death on  
a cross! . . .

**NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, *though he was in the form of God,*  
*did not regard equality with God*  
*as something to be exploited,*  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

**REVISED ENGLISH BIBLE**

Take to heart among yourselves what you find in  
Christ Jesus: *He was in the form of God; yet he laid no*  
*claim to equality with God,* but made himself noth-  
ing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the hu-  
man likeness, sharing the human lot, he  
humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the  
point of death, death on a cross! . . .

**NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION**

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ  
Jesus:  
*Who, being in very nature God,*  
*did not consider equality with God something to be*  
*grasped,*

**NEW JERUSALEM BIBLE**

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus:  
*Who, being in the form of God,*  
*did not count equality with God*  
*something to be grasped.*

But he emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
becoming as human beings are;

and being in every way like a human being,  
he was humbler yet,  
even to accepting death, death on a cross. . . .

**SCHOLAR'S VERSION**

[You should] think in the same way that the  
Anointed Jesus did, who  
although he was born in the image of God,  
*did not regard "being like God"*  
*as something to use for his own advantage,*  
*but rid himself of such vain pretension*  
and accepted a servant's lot.  
Since he was born like all human beings  
and proved to belong to humankind,  
he recognized his true status  
and became trustfully obedient all the way to death,  
even to death by crucifixion.

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## Letter to Philemon

Consisting of a single chapter, Philemon is a short letter dealing with a large topic—the relationship of Christian slaveholders to their human property. Contemporary readers are typically shocked that Paul, who had proclaimed the essential equality of all believers united in

Christ (Gal. 3:28), does not use this occasion to denounce the institution of slavery as totally incompatible with Christian faith. Although Paul does not condemn the practice of buying and selling human beings—probably because he believes that the Greco-Roman world order will soon end—he does argue persuasively for a new relationship between master and slave. He asks the slave owner, **Philemon**, to accept

## Philemon

**Author:** Paul.

**Audience:** Philemon's house church, probably at Colossae in western Asia Minor.

**Date and place of composition:** About 55–56 CE if from Ephesus, 61–63 if from Rome, or 58–60 if from Caesarea (dating depends on the location of Paul's imprisonment).

**Occasion or purpose:** To reconcile Philemon with one of his slaves, Onesimus, and perhaps to secure Onesimus's services for himself.

his runaway slave, **Onesimus**, as a “beloved brother,” thereby establishing a new bond of kinship humanely linking Christian owners and their human chattel.

Unfortunately for enslaved persons, the divine intervention into human history that Paul expected to occur in his own day did not happen. Israel's Messiah did not reappear to overthrow unjust governments and set up a divinely empowered kingdom in which transformed believers would enjoy the full social and racial equality that Paul had envisioned. To the contrary, as late as the pre-Civil War United States (1860), Southern clergy and slaveholders continued to cite Paul's letter to Philemon as scriptural justification for their “peculiar institution” of legally sanctioned slave labor. The historical consequences of Paul's brief missive to his friend Philemon give this personal note an extraordinary importance (see Harrill in “Recommended Reading”).

## The Question of Slavery

In seeking out Paul's purpose in writing this letter, it is helpful to realize that it is addressed not only to Philemon but also to “Apphia our sister, and Archippus our comrade-in-arms, and the congregation at your house” in the town of Colossae (v. 2; because Philemon has only one chapter, all citations refer to verse numbers). Although the letter's main body (vv. 4–24) speaks directly to Philemon (the Greek pronoun “you” is singular throughout this section), the text was clearly intended to be read aloud to the

whole congregation meeting in Philemon's house. (Apphia may have been the host's wife, and Archippus their son.)

Because the exact circumstances that prompted Paul to write his only surviving personal letter are not clear, scholars differ in their reconstruction of the situation involving Onesimus and his master. According to one plausible interpretation, Onesimus had stolen money or other property from Philemon. Somehow he then made his way from Colossae to Rome or Ephesus (if that is where Paul was imprisoned), where the apostle converted him to Christianity. Paul therefore speaks of Onesimus as “my child, whose father I have become” (by imparting to him the life-giving faith in Christ) (v. 10). Some recent commentators, however, think it highly unlikely that Onesimus happened to encounter Paul by pure chance. More likely, they suggest, Onesimus—after having displeased his master—deliberately set out to find Paul and enlist his aid in reconciling with Philemon, whom the apostle had earlier converted to the faith. According to widely accepted Roman legal practice, a third party could settle disputes between masters and slaves, and Paul may have filled that role. Punning on the meaning of Onesimus's Greek name (“useful”), Paul writes to Philemon that the slave was “once so little use to you, but now useful indeed, both to you and to me” (v. 11).

Although Onesimus had made himself almost indispensable to the imprisoned apostle, Paul—perhaps compelled by Roman law—decides to send the slave back to his master. Maintaining a fine balance between exercising his apostolic authority and appealing to the equality existing among all Christians, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back, treating him “no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave—as a dear brother, very dear indeed to me and how much dearer to you” (v. 16). We do not know if Paul is thereby requesting the master to free Onesimus, granting him legal and social status to match his Christian freedom, but the writer clearly underscores the slave's human value. Paul writes that Onesimus is “part of

myself” and that Philemon should welcome him as he would the apostle himself (vv. 12, 17).

Paul also gives his guarantee to reimburse Philemon for any debt Onesimus may have incurred, or perhaps money he may have embezzled or stolen (vv. 18–20). Appealing to Philemon’s reputation for showing love to his fellow Christians (vv. 4–6), Paul gently pressures the slave owner to be generous, anticipating that Philemon “will in fact do better than I ask” (vv. 20–21). Is Paul asking Philemon, in a not-too-subtle way, to free Onesimus in order for him to remain in Paul’s service?

Having invoked his apostolic authority and addressed his letter so that it will be read before the entire congregation at Colossae (which will expect Philemon to live up to his saintly reputation and give Onesimus a loving welcome?), Paul adds a final element of persuasion at the letter’s close. As if penning an afterthought, Paul says that he now expects to be freed from his prison and will pay Philemon a personal visit (v. 22), an apostolic parousia ensuring that his requests will be honored. He concludes with greetings from, among others, Mark and Luke, traditional authors of the two Gospels bearing their respective names.

## Slavery in Context

Most readers today are deeply disappointed that Paul does not reject slavery outright as an intolerable evil. Instead, he advises slaves not to be “trouble[d]” about their status, advising them to remain in whatever social “condition” they had when they first became Christians (1 Cor. 7:17–24). Paul’s reasons for accepting the slave–master arrangement even in Christian society probably derive from his expectation that Jesus would soon return.

But other factors also influenced Paul’s lack of interest in abolishing slavery or reforming other unjust social customs. In its acceptance of slavery, the Hebrew Bible differs little from the Greco-Roman society in which Paul lived. The Torah does, however, distinguish between Gentile slaves captured in battle and native-born Israelites who sold themselves or

their children to pay off financial debts. In a passage known as the “Book of the Covenant,” Mosaic Law decrees that after six years’ servitude a male Hebrew slave is to be set free. Any children born to him and one of his master’s female slaves, however, are to remain the master’s property. If at the end of six years’ time the freed man wishes to remain with his wife and family, he must submit to a mutilation of his ear (the organ of obedience) and remain a slave for life (Exod. 21:2–6). This legal statute clearly favors slave owners’ “rights.”

Following Torah regulations—and the institutions of Greco-Roman society at large—New Testament writers neither condemn slavery nor predict its abolition. Only after the scientific Enlightenment of the eighteenth century CE was the persistence of slavery seen as inconsistent with the ethical principles of Christian freedom and with the innate worth of all humans as “images” of God. In American history, both pro- and antislavery parties used the New Testament to support their conflicting views. Slavery’s proponents argued that biblical writers, including Paul, accepted the institution as a “natural” condition. Focusing on Paul’s doctrines of freedom and Christian equality (Gal. 3:28), slavery’s opponents eventually persuaded the Western world to grant a corresponding social and legal freedom to all people.



## Paul’s Lasting Influence

During his lifetime, Paul fought constantly to win other Christians’ recognition that his gospel and claim to apostleship were legitimate. Even his own churches frequently challenged his authority and doubted his view that humans receive salvation through God’s free gift, accepted in faith rather than through obedience to the biblical Torah. Ironically, in the decades following his death—as the church rapidly changed from a mostly Jewish to a largely Gentile institution—Paul was recognized as chief among the missionary apostles, and his doctrine became the basis for much of the church’s theology.



FIGURE 16.3 Locations of the major churches at the end of Paul’s ministry (c. 62 CE). Most of the tiny cells of Christians are at the eastern end of the Mediterranean (Palestine and Syria) or in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). Paul established many of the churches in western Asia Minor, as well as the first churches in Greece (Philippi to Corinth). We do not know who founded the Italian churches, including the one in Rome. How or when Christianity was introduced to Egypt (Alexandria) or to other sites in Africa (Cyrene) is also unknown.

By the mid-second century, when the document known as 2 Peter was written, Paul’s collected letters had assumed the authority of Scripture, at least in some Christian circles. At the same time, Paul’s difficult ideas and sometimes ambiguous phrasing left his work open to a variety of interpretations. The author of 2 Peter denounces students of Paul who interpret Pauline thought in a way contrary to official church teaching:

[Paul] wrote to you with his inspired wisdom. And so he does in all his other letters, . . . though they contain some obscure passages, which the ignorant and unstable misinterpret to their own ruin, as they do the other scriptures.  
(2 Pet. 3:16)

Now, as then, believers may find it easy to disagree on Paul’s intentions in many “obscure passages.”

### Paul’s Accomplishments

In a characteristic remark, Paul observes that he works harder than any other apostle to bring the Christian message to potential converts (2 Cor. 11:23). Even today, the enormous distances he traveled, by sea and on foot, would challenge the physical stamina of the most dedicated missionaries. He established Christian “colonies” throughout Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece and left behind an impressive network of churches (see Figure 16.3). These were interconnected by itinerant



missionaries (many trained by Paul himself) and at least partly united by memories of Paul's preaching and his voluminous written legacy. As the author of Acts realized, Paul also made himself a formidable model for later believers to emulate.

## Paul—Christianity's First Great Interpreter of Christ

In introducing Pauline thought (in Chapter 13), we listed some of the assumptions and personal experiences, such as his mystical encounter with the risen Christ, that helped shape Paul's distinctive ideas about God's changed relationship to humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. In assessing his legacy, we can briefly review several of Paul's most enduring contributions, teachings that have influenced the church for almost two millennia.

Although not a systematic thinker, Paul was the first to create a coherent theology about Jesus and is thus counted as Christianity's first theologian. In interpreting Jesus' career theologically—showing how God (*theos*) revealed his will through Jesus' death and resurrection—Paul laid the foundations on which later interpreters of the "Christ event" built. We have space here to summarize only a few of Paul's main ideas. The ones we select illustrate the general trend of his views on the nature of God and his purpose in using Jesus to reconcile the previously alienated human and divine components of the universe.

**God** As a "Hebrew born and bred" (Phil. 3:5), Paul is unquestionably a monotheist, recognizing the Jewish God as the entire world's sovereign and judge. Steeped in the Hebrew Bible's composite portrait of Yahweh, Paul regards God as embodying human traits on a superhuman scale. Both "severe" and "kind," he manifests his dual nature to humankind, alternately condemning or showing mercy according to his irresistible will. He is incomparably holy, just, and pure; his perfect justice does not allow full communion with imperfect, deliberately

unjust, and otherwise sinful humanity. As supreme patron and benefactor, however, he sets in motion the process of reconciling an estranged human creation to himself.

**The Role of Jesus** Paul realized that his fellow Jews expected an undefeated Messiah and that Jesus' crucifixion was a major "stumbling block" to Jewish acceptance. He therefore formulated a theology of the cross. In Romans and Galatians, he interprets the Crucifixion as a redemptive act in which human "weakness"—Jesus' "shameful" death—is the means by which God bridges the great moral gulf between himself and humanity. Demonstrating absolute obedience to the divine will, Jesus sacrifices his life to satisfy God's justice and obtain forgiveness for others.

**Justification** By "justification" Paul means being "made righteous" or having a right standing or relationship with God. Keeping the Mosaic Torah cannot justify people because the Torah only serves to make them aware of law-breaking, of committing "sin" (*hamartia*), of falling short of ethical perfection. When he died voluntarily, Jesus not only took on himself the Law's penalty for all sinners but also transferred just punishment to sin itself. He thus rid sin of its power to operate uncontrolled in what Paul calls our "fleshly" (physical) or "lower" nature (Rom. 1-4; 7-8).

**Adam and Christ** In Paul's view of human history, the earthly prototype—Adam—willfully disobeyed God, thus separating himself from life's source and bringing sin (error) and death to himself and all his descendants. In Jesus, God found Adam's moral opposite, a man of perfect obedience who achieved a right relationship with God and through his resurrection became God's Son (Rom. 1:4). Now the model of a renewed humanity reconciled to God, Jesus as Christ brings life to all who place their trust (faith) in him (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15), thereby imitating the loyalty or "faithfulness" of Jesus himself.

**Salvation Through Faith** The idea that humans are saved by their faith is one of Paul’s most distinctive and revolutionary ideas. By “faith,” Paul does not mean belief in a creed or a set of religious doctrines. For Paul, faith is a dynamic force that motivates a confidence and trust that Israel’s God, humanity’s great benefactor, willingly justifies believers through Christ, bringing even Gentiles into a covenant relationship with him. Whether it is the loyalty or “faithfulness of Christ,” his perfect submission to the divine will, or believers’ “faith in Christ[’s]” saving power, Jesus is the cosmic agent who reconciles humankind to God. Because God, the divine patron, grants his rewards freely, a person can neither earn nor deserve them. Hence, the regulations of the Torah—including circumcision and food purity laws—are irrelevant.

**God and Christ** Although he calls the glorified Jesus “lord” (Greek, *kyrios*) and assigns him the highest possible status in God’s plan for universal redemption, Paul remains a Jewish monotheist, always regarding the Son as subordinate to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24–28). Jesus refuses to attempt “equality with God” and is eternally the model of humble submission to the paternal will (Phil. 2:6–7). In some metaphysical sense, however, the Son is the agent by whom God created the universe, in whom “the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied” and through whom the divine purpose is revealed (Col. 1–2). As human beings were originally created in God’s “image” (Gen. 1:27), so Christ is that divine–human image perfected (Col. 1:15). (Even if not by Paul, these passages in Colossians express a Pauline **Christology**.)

**Eschatology** Because he believes that he is living at the very edge of the New Age that Jesus’ advent introduced, Paul places much of his ethical instruction to the church in the context of End time. Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to heaven now allow Christ’s Spirit to dwell in each believer, giving him or her charismatic gifts of prophesying, healing, teaching, and speaking in or interpreting ecstatic language.

Paul regards these spiritual gifts as further evidence of the “last days” and urges believers to produce the Spirit’s good fruits—steadfast loyalty and a grateful awareness that in Christ they attain a new nature. Thus, they are prepared for the “splendor” of the resurrection body they will receive at the Parousia.



## Summary

**M** This brief survey, concentrating on Paul’s vision of God’s plan to redeem humanity through Christ, does scant justice to the range and profundity of Pauline thought. The apostle’s views on free will and predestination, Christian ethics, the church, human sexuality, and related matters merit fuller discussion than we can offer here.

**E** Embattled in his own day, within two generations after his death Paul became a monument of orthodoxy (correct teaching) to many church leaders. The letters to Timothy and Titus, written in Paul’s name by a later disciple, show in what high regard the apostle was held (see Chapter 17). After another 1,400 years had passed, Paul again became a center of controversy. During the Protestant Reformation, conflicting interpretations of the Pauline belief that human beings are saved by faith and not by works (including the performance of sacramental rituals) deeply divided Roman Catholics and Protestants. Today, Paul remains a stimulating, dynamic influence wherever the New Testament is read. Second only to Jesus in his lasting influence on Christendom, he is the prism through which Jesus’ image is most commonly viewed.

## Questions for Review

1. Why is it difficult to know exactly where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote to Philemon and the church at Philippi?
2. Although the hymn Paul cites in Philippians 2 is commonly interpreted as describing Jesus’ prehuman existence, many commentators believe that it contains instead an implied contrast between Adam’s disobedience and Jesus’ humble obedience. Summarize the arguments for and against these differing interpretations.

- Identify Philemon and Onesimus and their connection to Paul. Why do you think Paul does not condemn human slavery as an evil institution?
- Summarize Paul's major contributions to Christian thought, including his beliefs about the *eschaton*, his teachings about the nature and function of Christ (Christology), and his doctrine of justification by faith.

### Question for Discussion and Reflection

- Like all historical figures, Paul is firmly linked to his particular time and place. On many issues, such as the restricted role of women and a hierarchical view of society, Paul reflects the accepted norms of his day. Writing as a former Pharisee who believed that the crucified Messiah would soon return to judge the world, bringing human history to an end, Paul often fails to address such important issues as the evils of slavery, widespread poverty, and governmental injustice. Do you think that if Paul were alive today—and fully aware of the past 1,900 years of human development—he would revise his opinions on such topics as master–slave relationships, celibacy, homosexuality, and unquestioning submission to governmental authorities? If they had followed Paul's advice in Romans 13, could the leaders of the American Revolution have framed the Declaration of Independence or broken free of British control?

### Terms and Concepts to Remember

Christology	Philemon
Epaphroditus	Philippi
Onesimus	Timothy

### Recommended Reading

Ascough, Richard S. "Philippians." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 167–170. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Includes scholarly speculations about where Paul was imprisoned and about the letter's composite nature.

Byrne, Brendan. "The Letter to the Philippians." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2nd ed., pp. 791–797. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990.

Dewey, Arthur J.; Hoover, Roy W.; McGaughey, Lane C.; and Schmidt, Daryl D., eds., "Paul's Correspondence to the Philippians." In *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*, pp. 165–196. Salem, Ore.: Polebridge Press, 2010. Includes a perceptive reading of the Christ–Adam contrast in the famous hymn.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2000. A detailed analysis by a major scholar.

Harrill, J. Albert. "Philemon, Letter to." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, pp. 497–499. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. Includes discussion of pre–Civil War U.S. Supreme Court decisions that cite Philemon to affirm the legality of racial slavery.

Holloway, Paul A. *Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategies*. Albany, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Proposes that Paul uses Stoic ideas and rhetoric to "console" suffering believers through rational argument.

Knox, John. *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, rev. ed., New York: Abingdon Press, 1959. Develops Edgar Goodspeed's theory that about 90 CE a Paulinist—perhaps the former slave Onesimus, who may then have been bishop of Ephesus—collected Paul's letters and circulated them among the entire church.

Martin, R. P.; and Hawthorne, G. F. *Philippians*, rev. ed., World Biblical Commentary 43. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004.

Saunders, Stanley P. "Philippians, Letter to." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, pp. 503–507. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. A conventional description of the letter's contents.

Silva, Moises. *Philippians*, 2nd ed. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005.

Wright, N. T. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2007. Explores the slavery issue.