



Paul the Missionary

Paul's missionary strategy was to sow the seeds of the gospel in as many towns and cities as he could reach. It is estimated that in the course of his travels he walked some 10,000 miles across what is now the countries of Turkey and Greece. Acts 13-21 organises his travels into three missionary journeys, the last of which sees him on his way to Rome.

*"So we are always of good courage.
We know that while we are at home in the
body we are away from the Lord,
for we walk by faith, not by sight."
(2 Corinthians 5:6-7)*

It is tempting to think of Paul's missionary activity as an individual enterprise, but this is far from the case. Paul travelled and worked with a team of trusted colleagues and co-workers.

Some are named in Acts and Paul's letters, such as the Jewish converts Priscilla and Aquila who like Paul were tentmakers and also supported Paul's work in preaching the gospel (Acts 18:2-3). One of the most intimate and loyal members of his team was Timothy, whom Paul used on occasions as his personal envoy.



Having gathered potential converts either by public speaking in the synagogues or wherever Jews gathered for prayer (cf. Acts 16:13), or through his debates in the marketplace, Paul and his team would set up small communities who would meet for the Sunday Eucharist in the house of some wealthy person who had an atrium or courtyard capable of holding up to 30 or 40 people. These groups of people who believed in Jesus as Messiah and Lord were known as 'assemblies.' The Greek word for assembly was *ekklesia* which came to be translated as 'church' and gave us the term 'ecclesial'.

Outsiders would classify these gatherings as another of the local civic assemblies which formed part of the political and social landscape of the towns and cities of the Roman Empire. What made them different was their agenda, that their leader and head was the risen Lord, that Paul was their pastor, and that they were committed to a lifestyle imitating that of the Lord Jesus.

In a world where family connections were important and necessary for economic survival, the Christian communities became a family in their own right, whom Paul addressed as 'brothers and sisters' so that his new relationship in Christ transcended the usual social connections. In his Letter to the Thessalonians Paul describes himself as 'gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children' (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

PAUL WITH PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

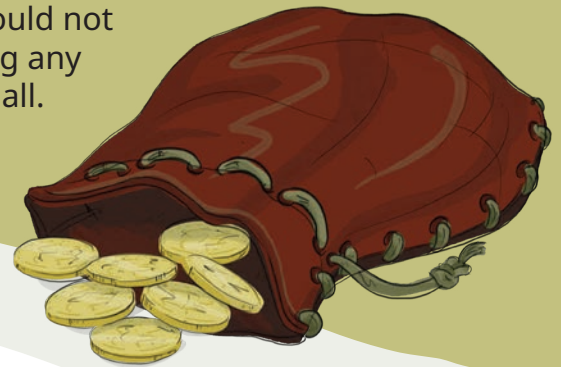


Financing the Mission

We would be over-romanticising Paul's journeys to think that he could have undertaken such a mission without financial resources, yet unlike other preachers he did not charge for his services. Because he had a trade, he was able to support himself so that he was not an immediate burden on the communities he had brought together. Once a community had been established, however, Paul was willing to accept gifts from them to support his ongoing work or to donate to poorer communities such as the Church in Jerusalem.

Paul saw his policy of supporting himself as a way of imitating Christ who *'became poor for our sake'* (2 Corinthians 8:9-11). Strategically it enabled him to preach the gospel without fear or favour.

In his first Letter to the Corinthians (ch.9) we discover that his policy was counter-cultural. It was a general expectation in society that the labourer should be rewarded for their services – as Paul wrote, *'Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?'* (1 Corinthians 9:7). Nevertheless, there were many who did not appreciate Paul's gesture and complained that he should not be receiving any support at all.



Paul's Letters An Extension of his Apostolate

Paul's missionary strategy was to keep on the move and found new communities of believers. Once he had founded a stable community, he would head on to the next nearby town, handing over leadership to trusted converts or occasionally to a member of his travelling team. He had sufficient confidence in the community, and above all in the grace of God, not to feel that his continued presence was vital to their existence. Yet even when he had gone, he kept these churches in his prayer and kept up informal contact with them through supporting his colleagues and the local leadership.

For the most part that strategy worked. By the time Luke wrote Acts, many of the communities in places he mentioned must have still been in existence. They are the fruits of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with its power that not only gave Paul the courage to speak and others to listen in faith (1 Corinthians 2:4-5) but also enabled these assemblies to grow after his departure.

However, that was not always the case. Paul clearly felt the need to return to some communities and help them to mature in their faith or to give them the pastoral support they needed to resolve problems that had either grown up among them or had influenced them from outside. It often required all Paul's vision, wisdom and experience to discern whether what was happening in a particular place might prove detrimental to the faith of all and the survival of the young church. Since he was obviously unable to be in two places at once, he sometimes addresses the problems by writing letters.



Among the places Paul visited, some communities took up an inordinate amount of Paul's time and energy. Letters he addressed to them have since been included in the writings we call the New Testament. Taken together, they provide us with a snapshot of Christian life in Paul's time, though they do not tell us everything we might like to know to satisfy our curiosity. The young churches did not exist in isolation from one another; they were founded by Paul in a family spirit, and as they grew, they formed a kind of 'Christian internet' sending messengers

to one another. Hearing about letters Paul had written, and perceiving value in them for themselves, they asked for a copy (cf. Colossians 4:16). As time went on those individual letters, written to different communities in different places became collections of letters that were held by every Christian community. We continue to use those collections today and honour them as Scripture, the word of God. They have travelled a long way from the occasional letters Paul first sent out.

THE LETTERS OF PAUL AS 'OCCASIONAL' WRITINGS

Letter writing as a means of communication has diminished in our society, but the letter form survives in emails. Even a short email will begin, 'Dear X'. Then comes the body of the message followed by a signing off with a phrase such as 'Kind regards' or 'Yours sincerely'. This format goes back to ancient times.



Most letters were brief and written on clay tablets

In the time of Paul letter writing tended to be the business of state officials and highly respected families. Most letters were brief (like a text message) and written on clay tablets. Many still survive in museums. While most letters were intended only for the recipient, some were intended for public consumption, such as the letters of Cicero, and were an opportunity for the writer to display their literary and rhetorical skills. At first glance we might associate Paul's letters with these more literary compositions, as some, like his Letter to the Romans, are long, but they are not theological treatises or the equivalent of papal encyclical letters. Paul's letters were written on specific occasions for specific reasons pertinent to the communities he was addressing. Though they may be highly theological, they are first and foremost pastoral letters concerned with the spiritual formation of his communities in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ and their implications.

PAUL DEVELOPS THE LETTER FORM

It is most likely that Paul's letters were read to the congregation when they gathered on Sunday for the Eucharist, and it is likely too, that that they were read as a whole. Reading extracts came later. Paul adopts the conventional form of the letters of his time but he 'Christianises' them.

May the grace of Jesus Christ be with you

So, whereas a standard letter might begin with the word *chairein* – Hello, or Hi! Paul writes, *charis and eirene* – grace and peace, words that are rooted in Scripture, and still used in the Priest's greeting at the beginning of the Eucharist. Before beginning the main concerns of the letter, Paul writes a paragraph that begins with the word *eucharisto* – I give thanks - which both reflects Paul's prayer and concern for the community and also provides a hint of what is to come. On the other hand, the Letter to the Galatians stands out because it contains no opening thanksgiving. We can assume that with the tensions that Paul was about to address he felt there was nothing to be thankful for. Similarly, Paul concludes his letters with phrases such as 'May the grace of Jesus Christ be with you', replacing the standard Greek phrase, *erroso*, meaning 'goodbye' or 'farewell'.

**'THERE ARE SOME THINGS
IN THEM DIFFICULT TO
UNDERSTAND.'**

Contemporary readers may well find much of what they hear in Paul's writings difficult to understand, as did the author of the Second Letter of Peter (3:16) and may well write Paul off because some of the things he says do not fit easily with our contemporary culture, and the concepts and vocabulary Paul uses may sound alien to us. Paul uses the rhetorical techniques of his own time, but he also makes use of the Old Testament which he interprets according to the rules of his own day, and he will assume knowledge which may not be apparent to the modern reader. The letters were written in Greek, the language of the Jewish diaspora, and even the most skilled of translators can find it difficult to give a true but accessible account of Paul's thinking.



Another reason these letters may prove difficult to understand has to do with the means by which Paul produced them. In Paul's time many people left letter writing to the professionals, the scribes, because writing was a slow and laborious process. At the end of the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul remarks, *'I have written this greeting in my own hand'* (1 Corinthians 16:21). This would imply that the greater part of the letter was written down by someone else. Paul may have dictated the letter word by word, or he may have told the scribe or secretary what he wished to say but let him write the actual wording for himself. The process of dictating some of the longer letters would have been quite cumbersome for someone with Paul's lively mind.

In several of Paul's letters he implies that the letter is not merely from Paul himself but has a collegial dimension. So, at the beginning of the first Letter to the Thessalonians he writes, 'Paul, Silvanus and Timothy'. These are trusted companions of Paul whom he wishes to associate with himself in the writing of the letter. It may well be that some of these figures brought the letter to the community concerned and read it or answered the congregation's questions on Paul's behalf. In the Letter to the Colossians 4:7-9, for example, Paul writes that he is sending Tychicus and Onesimus who will give them all the news. Modern congregations have to rely on the homilist to unpack Paul's meaning.



Conclusion: Paul's Legacy

Paul is a complex figure, who was able to inspire great loyalty and sustain long-lasting friendships among his co-workers, but who also generated a lot of opposition, both inside and outside of the community of Jesus-followers. This polarisation has continued, to some extent, in the way he has been understood by later Christians, especially after the Reformation. Nevertheless, his forceful personality was crucial to the early spread of the gospel, and his deep theological thinking, preserved in the legacy of his letters to the churches he founded throughout the Roman Empire, pervades the pages of the New Testament.



Paul's Letters in the Church Today

Catholics today will hear excerpts of Paul's letters proclaimed frequently at Sunday Mass, as the second reading in ordinary time. Each letter is read more or less continuously over a number of weeks. This practice follows the reforms of Vatican II, and the renewed emphasis on the importance of understanding Paul's thought. It opens up the opportunity for either a parish bible study group to work through the current letter, or for the homilist to preach about it in some depth. It is necessary to spend time reading about Paul and reflecting on his writings, because, as we have already seen, they are 'occasional' letters.

In other words, when we hear Paul read during Mass, we are listening to only one half of a conversation, and we don't know what the other side have been saying to Paul, so we have to try to pick up the issues which have prompted his response. Nevertheless, this effort is very worthwhile, because we can learn so much from the Pauline epistles about the context and culture in which the gospel message was first formed and spread. We may also find that the theological doubts and ethical dilemmas faced by these early followers of Jesus are not really very different from our own, so that we can find in Paul's writings a rich resource to develop our faith and spirituality. These questions might help you to see something of the relevance of Paul's letters for Christian communities today.



Questions for Reflection

Which of the various titles applied to Paul by himself or others (e.g. apostle, herald, prophet etc.) resonate most with you?

What qualities do you look for in a Christian leader?

How do you see your own relationship with the Jewish faith which nurtured both Paul and Jesus?

What does it mean to be a missionary today?

How can we more effectively create and nurture in our own church communities the kind of warm, supportive relationships Paul sought to embed in his house churches?

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*"For I am sure
that neither death nor life,
nor angels nor rulers,
nor things present nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us
from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord."
(Romans 8:38)*

