



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Foundational Teachings in Paul's Letters

A 10-Week Online Course by Rev. David J. Fekete, Ph.D.



April 2017

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Apostle Paul was crucial to the spread of Christianity all over the Mediterranean region. His place in the history of the Christian Church is unparalleled by other Apostles--at least so we can infer from his letters.

But aside from spreading the gospel message among the gentiles, his preserved letters have provided Christianity with some of its most powerful doctrines and teachings. Paul was a preacher, and most of his letters are doctrinal arguments. (Paul's style draws on schools of philosophy called Cynic or Stoic.) So Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, has drawn on Paul's letters to construct doctrines about who Jesus was, and how the process of salvation works. If Paul doesn't interest us for our own religious edification, Paul merits our attention because of the powerful influence he had on the history of Christian thought.

We will look at Paul from a Swedenborgian perspective. As a Swedenborgian, I am interested in truth wherever I find it. Although one can find disparaging passages in Swedenborg's writings about Paul, we need not assume prejudice against Paul, ourselves. As countless Christians affirm, in Paul there is beauty and truth. We will attempt to be a fair reader of Paul and of Swedenborg. When we find doctrinal opposition, we will lay out both sides of the argument. In this way, one will be able to see how and where Swedenborg's theology differs from Paul's, and where the two are in accord.

There is another problem one confronts when reading Paul. There is Paul as we find him in his letters, and there is Paul as Christianity has interpreted him. Some of the most problematic Pauline doctrines, from a Swedenborgian perspective, come from Paul as Protestant Christianity has interpreted him. But Paul is such a capacious writer that often doctrines that Protestants derive from Paul—such as the doctrine of the atonement or of salvation by faith alone—do not agree with other passages in Paul. In short, these doctrines are taken from sections of Paul's letters, while ignoring other passages that contradict such doctrines. Furthermore, some of these doctrines derive from an incorrect reading of Paul.

So we will read Paul as he appears in the letters, but with an eye to the history of the interpretation of Paul. We will also compare Paul with Swedenborg. Finally, Paul may not have written all the letters attributed to him. Scholars now agree that some of Paul's letters were written by the church a generation after Paul. These letters are called the "deutero-Pauline letters," among which is a sub-category called the "Pastoral Epistles."

While we will emphasize the genuine Pauline letters, we will also consider the deutero-Pauline letters. For in the history of Christianity, and in Christianity today, many religious denominations do not distinguish between genuine and deutero-Pauline writings.

The chart below lists the genuine Pauline letters and the deutero-Pauline letters.

GENUINE PAULINE LETTERS:

Romans
 1 Corinthians
 2 Corinthians
 Galatians
 Philippians
 1 Thessalonians

DEUTERO-PAULINE LETTERS:

2 Thessalonians
 (Colossians)
 Ephesians
 Pastoral Epistles:
 Philemon
 1 and 2 Timothy
 Titus

SYLLABUS

WEEK I: Paul's Authority and Biography

Readings: Acts 9:1-19; Philippians 3:4-10; Galatians 1:1-2, 11-24; 2:20; 1 Timothy 1:8-12; Philippians 1:7, 12-13; Colossians 4:3; 2 Corinthians 11:1-33; 12:1-6, 9-10.

WEEK II: Christology

Readings: Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9; Philippians 2:5-11.

WEEK III: The Doctrine of Reconciliation and Predestination

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5:17-19, 21; Romans 5:6-11; 8:3, 34, 28-30; 1 Timothy 2:5-7; Ephesians 1:3-11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

WEEK IV: Faith Part 1

Readings: 1 Corinthians 8:1-7, 10-13; 10:25-29; Galatians 2:3, 11-13, 15-17; 4:10; 5:2, 3, 12; 6:12; Romans 4:1-8; 1:17; 3:20-25; Titus 3:3-8; Philippians 2:12-13.

WEEK V: Faith Part 2

Readings: Galatians 3:6-14; James 2:14-26.

WEEK VI: The Life of the Spirit

Readings: Galatians 5:13-25; 6:9-10; Romans 2:6-10, 13-14; 7:7-25; 8:1-4; 12:9-21; 13:8-10.

WEEK VII: Old Self/New Self

Readings: Colossians 3:5-17; Ephesians 4:22-5:2, 8-14; Titus 1:5-9; 2:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24; 2 Timothy 2:22-26.

WEEK VIII: Love

Readings: Romans 5:9-10; 8:31-32; 5:1, 11; 5:5; 8:37-39; 13:8-14; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

WEEK IX: Sin

Readings: Romans 8: 1-17; 7:7-25; 6:1-2, 12-13; 5:12-19; Ephesians 2:1-10; Romans 6:1-2, 12.

WEEK X: Women in Early Christianity

WEEK I

PAUL'S AUTHORITY AND BIOGRAPHY

In this course we will attempt to give Paul his own voice. This is more difficult than may be imagined. Paul's letters are addressed to specific communities, usually in response to specific problems that arose in the early Christian churches in the Mediterranean region. Paul did not sit in a study and write out systematic theology. He attempts to pacify dissensions, persuade dissenters, and argue against theological opponents. So we often find in Paul what appear to be contradictions. Manifest contradictions.

Nevertheless, Paul may be more consistent than he appears. It is due to the way the Christian church has interpreted Paul that he appears to contradict himself. This is seen largely in relation to the subjects of Grace, Atonement, Works and the Law. We will look at these doctrines in subsequent lessons.

But who was Paul? And what credentials did Paul have to carry the gospel message and preach it to the gentiles?

Paul started life as an Orthodox Jew. In fact, he belonged to the scribal group called Pharisees. Paul was a zealous Jew and from good lineage. As he describes himself, he was "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5). He was from the tribe of Benjamin, which was one of the two remaining tribes after the many conquerors that came through Israel. Paul tells us also that he was as zealous in persecuting Christians as he was in following the Law of Moses.

Paul underwent a momentous conversion experience. On his way to Damascus, Paul saw a blinding heavenly light and he fell to the ground. He heard Jesus' voice, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When he arose, he found himself blind. Paul is told to go to the home of a certain Ananias. Ananias heals Paul's vision and Paul, converted to Christianity, is baptized.

Paul claimed to have been taught the Gospel directly by Jesus.

The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any

man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

He claims to be called to preach the gospel to the gentiles. And his travels take him all over the near east, Asia Minor, and even to Macedonia, Greece, and Rome.

His preaching brought him in conflict at times with Jewish Christians. In the early years of Christianity, the majority of Christians were practicing Jews. An early debate arose as to whether gentiles had to convert to Judaism and practice the Law before they could become Christians. Paul argued vehemently against this doctrine, and as the Apostle to the gentiles, Paul saw them as free from the law by the blood of Christ.

So in Paul we have numerous tirades against observing the law, and about salvation by faith and grace. In the history of Christianity, this has been interpreted to mean that Paul teaches that we don't need to do good works to be saved. "A man is not justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:15). I think that Paul does not include all good works in statements like this, but he means specifically those minute prescriptions that the Pharisees came up with as ways of observing the law of Moses. We will examine this debate in greater depth in Weeks IV and V.

His preaching brought Paul into conflict with the Roman authorities. There are brief statements from Paul about being in chains for the sake of the gospel. Rather than cause him embarrassment, Paul suffers willingly for the sake of the gospel. In one passage, he says that even the prison guards are becoming converted to the gospel.

The churches founded by Paul were vulnerable to threats from individuals who put themselves above the Gospel message. There were strict Jews, who wanted Christians to follow their ways. There were "super apostles" who seemed to have special gifts and dispensations from God. Against these, Paul bragged about being humble and God's fool. He talks about all the embarrassments he endured for the sake of the gospel, turning the arguments of the "super apostles" and Judaizing Christians upside down (2 Corinthians 11-12).

There is little reliable history that tells us how Paul died. The book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome. There he continued preaching. Tradition holds that Paul's martyrdom was at the hand of Nero who beheaded the great prophet to the gentiles.

Questions for Contemplation

1) What do we make of Paul's radical transformation from an "ultra Jew" to an "ultra Christian?" How can an individual who actually murders Christians come to be one of the greatest Christian evangelists?

2) Where does Paul get his knowledge of Christianity? He was not among Jesus' disciples while Jesus lived; he claims not to have learned Christianity from James or Peter in Jerusalem. Is Paul's claim that Jesus alone taught him credible?