

Lenten Adult Forum  
Spring 2020  
Paul's Letter to the Romans

**A Very Brief Introduction to the Apostle Paul and His Letters**

We are accustomed to thinking that there were 12 apostles, namely, the 12 disciples of Jesus. But this is not quite right. True, the disciples of Jesus became apostles, but so did others who had *not* been disciples of Jesus. Two such persons were James, the brother of Jesus, and Paul of Tarsus, neither of whom had been a historical disciple of Jesus. Remarkably, of the disciples of Jesus only three became highly influential as apostles: Peter, James and John. But more influential than any of them was Paul, who championed the Gentile mission.

Paul was unquestionably the most important and influential person in early Christianity, after Jesus himself. His importance lies in three facts. First, it was Paul who, with strenuous effort against strong opposition, opened Christianity to the membership of non-Jews, and thereby enabled it to become a universal religion, as distinct from a sect of Judaism. Second, Paul was the most literary apostle (and perhaps the only literary apostle): he wrote letters, lots of them (some have been lost). Of the 27 writings that make up the New Testament, no fewer than 14 (more than half!) have traditionally been ascribed to Paul, and whether or not he himself actually wrote all of them, they were all written either by him or under his influence. Third, Paul's letters are the earliest Christian literature to survive. They pre-date the earliest Gospel by more than a decade.

The letters of Paul have been part of Christian scripture since the end of the first century when the New Testament began to take shape. Their "scriptural status" tends to obscure a very fundamental fact about them: Paul's letters are *actual pieces of early Christian correspondence*, each written by the apostle to a specific, local Christian community, and dealing with its particular issues and problems. So, Paul's letters are highly revealing of what early Christian communities were like. We will get the most out of Paul's letters if we read them *as letters*, and *not* as sermons or theological essays or dogmatic treatises.

Paul was a Jew from Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor (modern SE Turkey), hence a Greek-speaking Jew of the diaspora (Jews who lived outside Palestine). A rigorous Pharisee, Paul never met Jesus, but was converted to Christianity several years after the death of Jesus when, famously “on the road to Damascus,” the risen Jesus suddenly appeared to him and commissioned him to be apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews). From that time on – probably the year 33 – Paul was an indefatigable missionary among the Gentiles. Working with a team of associates whom he recruited, he established Gentile Christian communities in towns and cities all along the northern edge of the eastern Mediterranean basin, across Asia Minor and Greece. He was finally arrested by the Roman authorities and was probably executed under the emperor Nero between 60 and 64 CE.

As an apostle, Paul was a community organizer, that is, he brought people to faith in Christ and into Christian communities – hence was a founder of churches. These early Christian communities were diverse: some were steadfast, peaceful and harmonious; others were fractious and unruly, requiring admonition and discipline. As the “spiritual father” of those churches, Paul gave them guidance, sometimes through personal visits, sometimes through letters, sometimes through visits by his associates. Because they are tailored to the issues and circumstances of the churches to which they were sent each of Paul’s letters has a distinctive character. For example, Galatians is terse and aggressive; 1 Thessalonians is nurturing and supportive; 1 Corinthians considers many practical issues; Philippians is joyfully celebratory; Romans deploys a sustained theological argument.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is distinctive in several other ways. It is his longest letter. It is also probably the last letter he wrote, composed about 58 CE. And it is the only letter Paul wrote to a Christian community that he himself did not establish. By the time Paul wrote to the Christians of Rome he had been engaged in his apostolic work for 25 years, during which he had achieved much, suffered much, dealt with many situations, and thought deeply about the meaning of the Christ-event. Romans in many ways represents Paul’s mature thought --

seasoned by experience, forged in controversy, fed by devotion, and refined by reflection. With this letter Paul aimed to introduce himself and his gospel to the Christians of Rome, and to secure their support for his work.

The letter to the Romans is full of theological freight, scriptural interpretation, rhetorical techniques, provocative arguments, surprising claims, and remarkable insights. It is also, in places, hard to understand. But careful reading, probing questions, and group discussion can enrich our understanding of it and inform our own religious outlook.

We will proceed by dividing the letter into four sections and taking one section per week for reading and discussion. So, the schedule will be as follows:

March 4: Introductory Discussion

March 11: Chapters 1-4

March 18: Chapters 5-8

March 25: Chapters 9-11

April 1: Chapters 12-16

Each week a sheet of “questions to ponder” will be distributed for the purpose of stimulating our thinking about the section to be read and discussed at the next meeting.

**It will be each participant’s responsibility to read and think about the chapters to be discussed.** And try to do “close reading” – making notes on words or concepts or passages or arguments that you don’t understand, or that seem particularly interesting, or that strike you as strange or objectionable. Calling attention to those things will help fuel our discussion.

#### Questions to Ponder for March 4

For our first meeting we’ll have an introductory discussion that focuses on Paul as an apostle and on the background of the letter to the Romans and the occasion of its being written.

In preparation, read Romans 1:1-15 and 15:14-33. Then think about the following questions:

Romans 1:1-7 constitutes the “prescript” or address of the letter. The prescripts of ancient letters are usually very brief (“A to B, greetings”), and Paul’s other letters have rather brief prescripts. But this one is very long. Why do you think that is?

Why does Paul want to pay a visit to the Christians in Rome, and what does he hope to gain from it?

Why does he need to go to Jerusalem first?

What is at stake in his visit to Jerusalem?