

Paul and Other Things

An Analysis of Paul's Teaching and Luther's Protestant Reformation
Leading to Present-Day Christianity

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While most think of Jesus when imagining the birth of Christianity, it is more appropriate to cite Paul as the one who shaped Christianity into what we know today. I will explain how Christianity emerged from Judaism, why Paul's religious experience was so critical, and how years later, Luther's experience of igniting the Protestant Reformation was similar to Paul's and drastically skewed the path of Christianity.

It is important to understand that the climate in which Christianity emerged from Judaism was not a calm one. The 2000 years since the supposed events in biblical history allowed time for many different movements within Judaism to form. The Hebrew Bible had not yet been collected, and every group that proclaimed to be modeling the only right way of life as a Jew also condemned the others as deviants (Esposito 138). In the beginning of the first century, some Pharisees started following the self-proclaimed Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who himself was a Jewish rabbi (Esposito 139).

This group of Pharisees was very critical of the Sadducees for attempting to live peacefully with the Roman Empire, an oppressive regime. During the Passover holiday season, a time of remembering Jewish liberation, the Roman guards were already tense. Then, when Jesus caused a disturbance by kicking over money tables in an attempt to bring attention to what he believed were acts that profaned Judaism, the Roman guards saw him as a criminal and a threat. His punishment, crucifixion, was commonplace among the Romans. They used their crossed criminals to line the roads entering cities to warn travelers of harsh punishments for breaking the law. It wasn't until after Jesus' crucifixion that Christianity started gaining larger following in two groups: those led by James, Jesus' brother, and more importantly those led by Paul. The most crucial question at the time was whether it was necessary to become Jewish to become Christian. Paul and James had different ideas (Lecture).

The lesser-known son of the *Virgin Mary*, James (he was older than Jesus, which presents a problem for those who equate virginity with *not having had sex*, instead of the more correct translation, *righteous woman*) led a group of radical Christians. James and his followers understood Christianity as part of Judaism and believed there was a distinction between Jesus and God. James soon became an enemy of Rome.

The other—and more memorable—leader Paul of Tarsus is what Esposito calls “essential to the emergence of Christianity from Judaism” (139). Paul was a Hellenistic Jew, born in present-day Turkey and educated in Jerusalem (Esposito 140). Initially, Paul was against the Christian movement and called it a “heretical form of Judaism,” persecuting its followers (139). Paul was on his way to Damascus when he had a vision of the risen Jesus saying “Why do you deny me?” (Lecture)(Esposito 139). This transformative experience made Paul realize that Christianity was not heresy but instead “a way for gentiles to share in the promises made by gods to the Jews” (Esposito 139). He hated James’s sect and specifically disagreed with his view on Jesus’ relationship to God. Paul brought Jesus to communities who had never heard of him and made a lasting impression (Lecture).

Although Paul had never met Jesus before he was crucified, he continued the pattern of many Hellenistic Jews by becoming a missionary (Esposito 139-140). Paul took Jesus’ message as a charge to reach the gentile population and bring them into Judaism as a “‘wild olive branch’ grafted onto the cultivated tree of Judaism” (NET Romans 11:16-18)(Esposito 140). He did this by establishing many churches around the area and writing letters (Epistles) to these churches or individuals, enforcing their faith, correcting practice, or attempting to open a new connection (Esposito 140). We can see Paul’s enthusiasm in these letters that make up about one fourth of the New Testament and are titled for the city that is home to the established or future church. It

is interesting to note that today we can only see one side of the communication, for only some of Paul's letters survived. The rest we must deduce from context and insights from the known history of the first century (Lecture). Paul's efforts ensured the spread of Christianity to the masses and gave it the widespread following it has today.

Of the 21 Epistles in the New Testament, seven are undisputedly written by Paul. Two that are important and informative are Romans and Galatians, important because they have been proven to be among the earliest written pieces of the New Testament, written in the '50s.

Paul's letter to Galatia (a region in present-day Turkey) shows his harsh reaction to hearing that the church he established was questioning some of his teachings after an outside group convinced them otherwise. The main issue he addresses in his very angry letter is circumcision. When Paul was with the people of Galatia they loved him, but when some group interacted with Galatia and used the Jewish Bible to argue that circumcision was necessary, the Galatians began to question the completeness and validity of Paul's other teachings. He responded with fury, expressing that he was "astonished that [they] are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are following a different gospel" (NET Galatians 1:6). In the midst of the outrage, Paul explains why it is unnecessary to get circumcised in order to be a Christian. This is one of many examples of Paul showing his view (the one still widely accepted today) that one need not become a Jew or follow all of the Jewish customs in order to be Christian (Lecture).

Paul's argument in Galatians is that *faith* is the most important part of being Christian and circumcision is just a *seal*, not the grounding of the religion. Furthermore, he argues that in Genesis, Abram (later Abraham) and all of his descendants were blessed, and since Christ is an offspring of Abram, everyone, one in Christ, is blessed (Lecture).

Paul's letter, Romans, tells a bit of a different story. Written at the height of his career,

Romans is the source of many doctrines still used today and is a great insight into what Paul was like. Romans is the longest Epistle by Paul and contains a very long theological argument. Paul wrote to establish a new church and argued claims such as “God is revealed through the law” and “God will give what people deserve” (Lecture).

We can see that the arguments Paul makes in Galatians and Romans are revolutionary and far more inclusive to the gentile population (Lecture). He uses the same text in an entirely new way. His interpretation of the religious texts becomes the most widely accepted tradition. Even today, the core principles of Christianity have ties to Paul.

Almost 300 years later, the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire, mainly as a political move after seeing a vision of the cross and then winning a battle. Regardless, he was confused about the relationship between Jesus and God. He decided to convene the Council of Nicaea to unify the beliefs of the Church (Lecture). Many differing opinions were floating around at the time, but the nearly 300 bishops who attended the council decided (written in the Nicene Creed) that “the Word through which all things were created was ‘the same’ as God” (Esposito 143). At this point in time, we can see the great impact Paul has had on the world: a giant empire is adopting the religion that he is preaching with a massive following.

During the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Christianity did not stop growing, and centuries of mass illiteracy allowed the Catholic Church to become corrupt. The priest, seen as God, was one of the few people who could read from and interpret the Bible (Lecture). Many examples of unsettling behavior resulted. For example, in 1516 the church began selling indulgences, or passes to heaven (Esposito 159). With the Renaissance, however, came the invention of the printing press and an easier distribution of the Bible. As more people became literate, more opinions on the religious text began coming out into the open (Lecture).

On October 31, 1517, a German Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, posted his *Ninety-five Theses Against the Sale of Indulgences* on the Wittenburg Castle door, hoping to cause public debate (Esposito 159). He unknowingly set off a huge revolution that we know today as the Protestant Reformation. Paul argued that gentiles should reject the standard Jewish teachings and become Christian under a different set of guidelines; Luther argued for the re-examination of current church practices and wanted people to be Christian with sensible and personal practices. He convinced many to seek an individual relationship with God. What followed was a transition from the Church-centered Catholicism to a Christ-centered *Lutheranism*. This blew the door wide open; many people began questioning, which led to the ubiquitous Christian diversity seen today. Mass individualization led to the birth of capitalism and only 100 years later, the enlightenment (Lecture). Effects of this religious change are seen in our increasingly secular society.

We can see that Christianity would not be where it is today without the efforts of Paul and Luther. Their world-changing work can be seen by the casual observer. I can walk home from the corner store and pass three Christian churches, all practicing differently.

Works Cited

Esposito, John L., et al. *World Religions Today*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

New English Translation (NET) Bible. Biblical Studies Press, 2001.

I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in all of my academic work and have
not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Lunn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.