

The Authority of the Writings of Paul

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It is more and more common in our churches to hear it said, “I believe the words of Jesus more than the words of Paul.” The question we face today is this: Are we to relegate the Scripture writings of Paul to a lower level than the teachings of Christ? Is it true that Paul, instead of being the “prince of apostles,” was really an ugly little Jew?

C. S. Lewis was asked to write the introduction to the Phillips’ translation of the New Testament epistles. In that introduction (Letters to Young Churches/1956), C. S. Lewis speaks of the present-day misconceptions concerning Paul’s writings. He says:

“A most astonishing misconception has long dominated the modern mind on the subject of St. Paul. It is to this effect: that Jesus preached a kindly and simple religion (found in the gospels), and that St. Paul afterwards corrupted it into a cruel and complicated religion (found in the epistles). This is really quite untenable... there is no real evidence for a pre-Pauline doctrine different from (that of) St. Paul’s.”

Paul wrote some things which are distasteful to the modern mind, and therefore a number of teachers and scholars are saying that what Paul wrote in his epistles is not to be taken very seriously by Christians today. Some of those less palatable teachings include:

- the process of salvation, which Paul says involves “justification by faith,” a term which JESUS never used,
- citizens of a given country are to be obedient to the laws of the state,
- men are to have short hair, and praying women are to have long veiled hair,
- women are not to take on positions of authority in the collective assembly of God’s people,
- those who continue in homosexual practice (and illicit heterosexual relationships) shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Largely because of these (and other) “hard sayings,” many (with a sense of pride) are saying, “We go by what Jesus says, not by what Paul teaches.” And because of these “tough teachings,” Paul is looked upon, as some describe him –“an ugly little Jew”—a man who was bound by the culture of his time. And to give examples of these attitudes which are commonly held about the Apostle Paul, we note the following two quotes—one from a totally secular source, and the other from literature used among our Church of the Brethren youth:

1) The religion page of *Newsweek* magazine (February 29, 1988) says, “A new generation of Scripture scholars is challenging many of the commonplace assumptions about who Paul was and what his teachings meant.” The writer says that recent information indicates that Paul was a “counselor who never expected that his ad-hoc advice would become sacred Scripture... scholars now tend to de-emphasize Paul’s admonition to women to ‘be silent’ in church (**I Cor. 14:34**), as a relic of his Jewish background.” (These sentences are found in the article entitled, “How to Read Paul, 2,000 Years Later”).

2) In a study of the Corinthian Letter, found in the *Youth Bible Series*, used by the Church of the Brethren in conjunction with the United Methodist Publishing House, the following words are found: “Paul said women have a lower position in the church since they are secondary to men. Here again (Paul) reflected ancient tradition. He said the woman is created to serve man; she should show this by wearing a veil and long hair. ...(Paul) reflects a negative view of women which he had gotten from the Jewish interpretation of **Genesis 2** ...His stress on the subordination of women is extreme. Paul is custom bound in his discussion of women in the church. He is a product of his time...Because he reflects the custom of considering women inferior to men, his counsel to the Corinthians is contrary to the essential spirit of Christianity.”

In light of the above teachings, which are held commonly in many parts of the Brotherhood, it is no wonder that we have to develop strategies to keep young adults in the Church of the Brethren! (For plans regarding young adults in the Church of the Brethren, see the *Minutes of the 1990 Annual Conference* in Milwaukee).

The question of Paul’s authority is an important item for every Christian. The epistles of Paul have shaped the faith of Christians for nearly 20 centuries, and if Paul was merely writing his own opinions about life here and the life hereafter, then we had better start to search for a more reliable source of information than what we find in the New Testament. Notice three facts:

1. THE STATEMENTS OF JESUS

Jesus spoke to his disciples just before His suffering and crucifixion (recorded in **John 14,15, 16**), and told them some important things before they were confronted with the crisis of the Cross. Among the instructions which Jesus gave to the apostles, was a pre-authentication of the entire New Testament. **John 14:26 and John 16:13** are the key passages. In those two portions of Scripture Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit (who will do three things):

- a) “bring to your remembrance all that / have said to you”—that is, events associated with the life and death of Christ as we find them in the Gospel accounts.
- b) “will teach you (explain to you) all things”—that is, the Holy Spirit will give you an interpretation of the historical facts as we find them in the Epistles.
- c) “will show you things to come”—that is, the Holy Spirit will show the great events associated with the end of the age, as we find them in the Revelation.

Jesus promised these things to His apostles just before His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. And so the New Testament is not a record based on the fallible memories of the human apostles, but the entire New Testament contains the truth which is a revelation of the infallible Holy Spirit. This promise of the Holy Spirit’s oversight includes the epistles of Paul. Jesus said to the apostles, just before He ascended into Heaven, that what they recorded would be superintended by the divine Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Thus what the apostles wrote was pre-authenticated by Jesus.

2. THE WITNESS OF PETER

In **2 Peter 3:15-16**, the Apostle Peter speaks of the longsuffering nature of God and says that Paul also wrote about this subject in his epistles (see **Romans 2:4**). Then Peter says, “**There are some things in them (in Paul’s epistles) hard to understand, which the unlearned and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the other scriptures**” (**2 Peter 3:16**).

Notice that Peter considered the letters of Paul a part of the “scriptures”—the God-inspired sacred writings. And Peter refers to those who quibbled about the authority of Paul’s writings as being spiritually illiterate and undependable! The Revised Standard Version says they are “ignorant and unstable.” This is an important insight which tells how the early church viewed the writings of Paul and the other apostles.

Paul's letters were placed on a par with "the other scriptures." What Paul had to say was accepted as the Word of God. Christian writings (including Paul's letters) were being read in churches (alongside the Old Testament), and these were rated as equal in value to the Psalms, the Pentateuch, and the Prophets.

3. THE TESTIMONY OF PAUL

The Apostle Paul himself claims divine inspiration for his writings. The Gospel which Paul preached was not of human origin, but it was received directly from the Lord. He says, "For I would have you know that the gospel which was preached by me, is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (**Galatians 1:11-12**). This is an emphatic statement which insists that Paul's message is completely divine in nature. He received it as a direct revelation from Christ, not as a tradition handed down from the past.

Another aspect of Paul's own testimony is found in **1 Thessalonians 2:13**. In the first letter Paul ever wrote to a new congregation, he thanked God that the message he preached was accepted "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." The New Revised Standard Version says, "When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word." Paul was conscious of the fact that the authority by which he spoke was divinely imparted.

Still another aspect of Paul's testimony is found in **1 Corinthians 14:37**. The testimony of Paul is this: "The things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord." That is a strongly worded statement about Paul's authority as an apostle. Paul claimed that everything he taught about God, about the Gospel, and about the church—was God's own teaching. The things which I write unto you, says Paul, are the commandments of the Lord.

And so, we see that all these sources — the statements of Jesus, the witness of Peter, and the testimony of Paul—are evidences that Paul's authority came from Christ. What Paul conveyed to the church through his preaching and writing is indeed trustworthy, and we had better pay attention to what he says.

There is one frequently misinterpreted passage. It is found in **1 Corinthians 7:12,25**. In **1 Corinthians 7**, Paul gives some answers to questions which the Christians at Corinth had asked him about singleness and marriage—and then in verse 10 of the chapter, he says, "to the married, I give charge, not I, but the Lord: A wife should not separate from her husband." There is no problem with that statement; it is a quote from the Lord Jesus. But in **verse 12**, Paul says, "But to the rest speak I, not the Lord"—(and Paul goes on to make the statement) "if any brother has a wife who does not believe, and

she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.” And in **verse 25**, Paul says, “Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord; yet I give my judgment as one who has obtained mercy of the Lord.”

Some say that the instructions of **1 Corinthians 7** are merely Paul’s private opinions and are not a part of the authoritative Word of God. After all, Paul says, “**But to the rest I say, not the Lord...**” (**verse 12**). And concerning the unmarried, “**I have no command of the Lord, but I give my judgment...**” (**verse 25**).

But keep in mind that the contrast here is not between inspired teaching which God gave, and uninspired ideas which Paul was presenting, as some have wrongly supposed. In **verses 10-11**, Paul is repeating in essence something already taught by Jesus (recorded in **Matthew 19:3-5**), but in **verses 12, 25**, Paul is dealing with a situation not covered by our Lord’s specific teaching. When Paul says, “**To the rest speak I, not the Lord**” — he is not suggesting that his command is any less inspired of God—than what he had quoted from the words of Jesus. These words are not a denial of inspiration nor an indication that Paul is only giving his own human opinion. (He is simply saying that there are no direct words from the lips of Jesus on the subjects of **verses 12 and 25**). In fact, instead of disclaiming divine inspiration for what he writes, Paul states the teaching in **verse 25**, and then actually claims for his own words, the same authority as for the words of Christ himself. In **verse 25**, he concludes, “**But / give my opinion—(but finish it)—as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy**” (quoted from the RSV).

Picking apart the Scriptures has become a cherished pastime for some modern theologians. A favorite sport these days is to shoot down the authority of Paul. It is often said that the words of Jesus are after all more important, and therefore more binding, than the words of the Apostle Paul.

But think for a moment! How do we know what Jesus said? Jesus never wrote a book; He didn’t write the Gospels. It is the Gospel “according to” Matthew, and “according to” Mark, and “according to” Luke, and “according to” John. Matthew and John were apostles. Mark and Luke were Paul’s helpers. They wrote what Jesus said. Jesus didn’t write it. And where did they get their information?

There are three ways by which the writers were able to record the words of Jesus:

- 1) from personally hearing many things that Jesus said
- 2) from writing down what others told them He said
- 3) and some of Jesus’ words were revealed directly to them by the Holy Spirit. (For example, there is no way that anyone could humanly ever know the words that Jesus

prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane— because the disciples were asleep—and no one else was around. The words, “**Father, I pray, Remove this cup from me**” [Luke 22:42] had to be revealed to the New Testament writers by direct revelation).

So, the point is this: Those who take the words of Jesus above the words of Paul are apparently forgetting that we are not matching Paul’s words against the words of Jesus. We are matching Paul’s words against the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—who were also apostles—and even helpers of Paul! (The same Holy Spirit who guided Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, also guided and guarded the Apostle Paul in what he wrote).

For those who insist that some of Paul’s writings are not authentic, I ask then, Which of Paul’s writings are we allowed to quote as valid? May we quote from Paul’s chapter on the resurrection (**1 Corinthian 15**)?

Is Paul’s teaching about the communion service (as an ordinance to be kept)—is that valid for us today? (Jesus mentioned the Communion but did not command it as an ordinance to be kept).

What about Paul’s description of spiritual gifts (in **Romans 12 and Ephesians 4**)

May we rejoice in the truth which Paul lifted up in **Romans 8:39**? (“**Nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord**”).

And what about **1 Corinthians 13** (the great love chapter)? Shall we accept it, or must we reject it as culturally naive?

Today, many people take their religion *a la carte*, accepting what they want to believe and rejecting what they cannot accept. The new cafeteria-style approach to the Scriptures will never stand the test of the Judgment Day! Those who choose to accept parts of the Bible, and to reject other parts, are trifling with the Word of God, and I fear, with their eternal destinies.

The things which the Apostle Paul wrote about and taught, are commandments of the Lord, and are to be accepted with the same authority—and practiced with the same diligence—as any other part of the Word of God. No matter what their position or training or experience or talents—Christians who reject the authority of Paul’s teachings—are rejecting God’s teachings. We have no right to reduce or streamline or reinterpret or revise Paul’s writings. Paul’s words are God’s words, and they may not be altered by sinful human beings.