



Paul, Power, and Practice

Understanding the Apostle Behind the Epistles

NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

PAULINE SCHOLARSHIP

When You Hear "Apostle Paul"... What Comes to Mind?

Before we dig into scholarship, let's be honest about where we're starting. Paul is one of the most influential — and most contested — figures in the entire New Testament. Depending on who you ask, he's a hero, a theologian, a source of confusion, or even someone whose letters have been used to cause harm.

Hero?

Tireless missionary who planted churches across the Roman Empire

Theologian?

Deep thinker whose letters shaped Christian doctrine for centuries

Confusing?

Dense, layered writings that even Peter found hard to understand

Problematic?

Texts misused to justify slavery, silence women, and enforce hierarchy

All of these responses are valid starting points. This study invites us to move beyond simple answers and wrestle honestly with the complexity of Paul.

**"There is not just one Paul in the New Testament...
there are multiple portraits of Paul."**

This is one of the central insights of modern Pauline scholarship. Just as the four Gospels give us four distinct portraits of Jesus, the letters attributed to Paul — and the narrative of Acts — give us several different versions of who Paul was, what he believed, and what he stood for. Recognizing this is not a threat to faith. It is an invitation to read more carefully, more honestly, and more deeply.

Why Does This Framework Matter?

Understanding that "multiple Pauls" exist in the New Testament is not an academic exercise — it has real, practical consequences for how we read scripture and how we live our faith.

1 Explains Contradictions in Scripture

Why does Paul seem to say different things about women, the law, or the end times? Recognizing multiple voices helps us make sense of apparent conflicts.

3 Deepens Biblical Understanding

Engaging seriously with the historical and literary context of these letters makes us better, more faithful readers of God's Word.

2 Prevents the Misuse of Paul

When we can identify which "Paul" is speaking and in what context, we are less likely to lift verses out of context to justify harm or oppression.

4 Strengthens Faith, Not Weakens It

Truth does not fear honest questions. Wrestling with complexity has always been part of the Black church's theological tradition.

Who Was Paul?

Before his letters, before his journeys, before his theology — Paul was a man shaped by multiple worlds. Understanding his background helps us understand the complexity of everything he wrote.

Jewish Pharisee

Trained in the strictest tradition of the Torah — deeply committed to the Law of Moses

Roman Citizen

A rare privilege that gave him legal protections and access across the Empire

Native Elite/Talented Tenth

Studied under the great rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3)

Persecutor Turned Preacher

Once hunted followers of Jesus — then became their most zealous advocate



Paul's Conversion: The Turning Point

Everything changes on the road to Damascus. Paul — then called Saul — was not looking for Jesus. He was on his way to arrest followers of Jesus when something extraordinary happened. *"Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him."* (Acts 9:3, NRSVUE)

1

Persecutor

Saul hunts down and imprisons followers of the Way with zeal and legal authority

2

Encounter

A blinding vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus — unplanned, undeniable

3

Preacher

Paul rises as the most passionate voice for the gospel he once tried to destroy

This encounter becomes the bedrock of Paul's authority. He did not learn the gospel from human tradition — he received it through direct revelation. That claim would define — and defend — his apostleship for the rest of his life.

The Four Pauls Framework

Pauline scholars have identified at least four distinct "portraits" of Paul found within the New Testament. Each has its own literary style, theological emphases, and historical context. Think of it like four artists painting the same subject — each capturing something true, but no single portrait telling the whole story.



1. Authentic Paul

Letters widely accepted as written by Paul himself — passionate, urgent, deeply personal



2. Debated Paul

Letters whose authorship scholars debate — more structured, less urgent theology



3. Institutional Paul

The Pastoral Epistles — focused on church order, hierarchy, and sound doctrine



4. Paul in Acts

Luke's narrative portrait — a heroic missionary whose life mirrors that of Jesus

PORTRAIT 1

The Authentic Paul

These seven letters are almost universally accepted by scholars as genuinely written by Paul. They give us the most direct window into his mind, his heart, and his struggles.

The Seven Undisputed Letters

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians & 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- 1 Thessalonians
- Philemon

What Makes These Letters Stand Out?

Passionate and Urgent

Paul writes as if his communities are in crisis — because often they are

Focus on Grace and Inclusion

"There is no longer Jew or Greek... slave or free... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

Real Community Struggles

Arguments about food, division, sexuality, money, leadership — these letters address real people, real problems

Authentic Paul: Core Theology

The undisputed letters reveal a consistent theological vision that is radical, grace-centered, and community-focused. These are the ideas that Paul would likely own as his own — his theological DNA.



Justification by Faith

Right relationship with God comes through faith in Christ — not through strict observance of the Law alone



Unity of Jew and Gentile

The dividing wall between peoples is broken down in Christ — a radical social vision for the ancient world



Expectation of Christ's Return

Paul believed the return of Christ was imminent — this urgency shapes the tone of everything he writes



Spirit-Led Community

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to all — the community, not an institution, is the primary locus of God's presence

The Debated Paul

Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians carry Paul's name — but many scholars believe they were written by later followers writing in his tradition. This practice, known as *pseudepigraphy*, was common and respected in the ancient world. It was a way of honoring a teacher by extending his voice into new situations.

The Three Debated Letters

- Ephesians
- Colossians
- 2 Thessalonians

More Structured Theology

The ideas feel more developed, more systematized — less like a letter dashed off in crisis

Less Urgency

The sense that Christ is returning *right now* has faded — there is more settling in for the long haul

A More Cosmic Christ

Christ is described in grand, universal terms — the head of all things — rather than the intimate Lord of a struggling community

Debated Paul: Reading the Context

Why would someone write a letter under Paul's name after his death? Because the situations facing Christian communities were changing — and the community needed guidance that felt authoritative. These letters represent a community asking, "What would Paul say to *us*, in *our* moment?"

Paul's Active Ministry

Urgent letters to specific, struggling communities
— Christ's return is imminent

Delayed Return of Christ

The community must adjust — how do we
organize ourselves for the long term?

1

2

3

4

Paul's Death (~64 CE)

The apostle is gone, but his communities live on
— and they still need leadership

Deutero-Pauline Letters Written

Followers extend Paul's voice to address new
needs — more structure, more order

📖 This is not forgery in the modern sense — it was a recognized literary form honoring a revered teacher by applying their wisdom to new circumstances.

The Institutional Paul: The Pastoral Epistles

First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus are known as the **Pastoral Epistles**. Most scholars believe these were written well after Paul's death — perhaps as late as the early second century. They represent a church that has grown up, become more formal, and is now deeply concerned with maintaining order.

Order and Leadership

Detailed instructions for bishops, deacons, and elders — the church is becoming an institution with defined roles and expectations

Sound Doctrine

Guard against false teaching — protect what has been handed down. Orthodoxy is now a primary concern

Rules for Behavior

Instructions for different groups — older men, younger women, widows, slaves — structured social codes for the community

Institutional Paul: Where the Tension Lives

The Pastoral Epistles represent the sharpest departure from the Authentic Paul — and they are the texts most frequently misused to limit the voices of women and to enforce rigid hierarchy in the church. Understanding their historical context is not optional — it is a matter of justice.

What Institutional Paul Emphasizes

- Structured church offices and hierarchies
- Control over who may speak and lead
- Restrictions placed on women in assembly
- Conformity to social norms of the Roman world

What Gets Left Behind

- The charismatic, Spirit-led community of the authentic letters
- The radical equality of Galatians 3:28
- The urgency and intimacy of direct apostolic relationship
- The disruptive, boundary-crossing grace of the early movement

❏ The AME tradition has long insisted that the Spirit moves through all people — this is a deeply Pauline instinct, drawn from the *authentic* Paul.



PORTRAIT 4

Paul in the Acts of the Apostles

Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts is the version most of us grew up hearing. It's dramatic, inspiring, and cinematic — shipwrecks, prison escapes, courtroom speeches, miraculous healings. This Paul is a **missionary hero**, striding across the Roman world with confidence and divine backing.



Missionary Hero

Paul travels from Jerusalem to Rome, planting churches and preaching boldly — a model of apostolic mission



Calm and Unified

Luke's Paul rarely shows the emotional turbulence, anxiety, or conflict visible in the authentic letters



Defender of the Faith

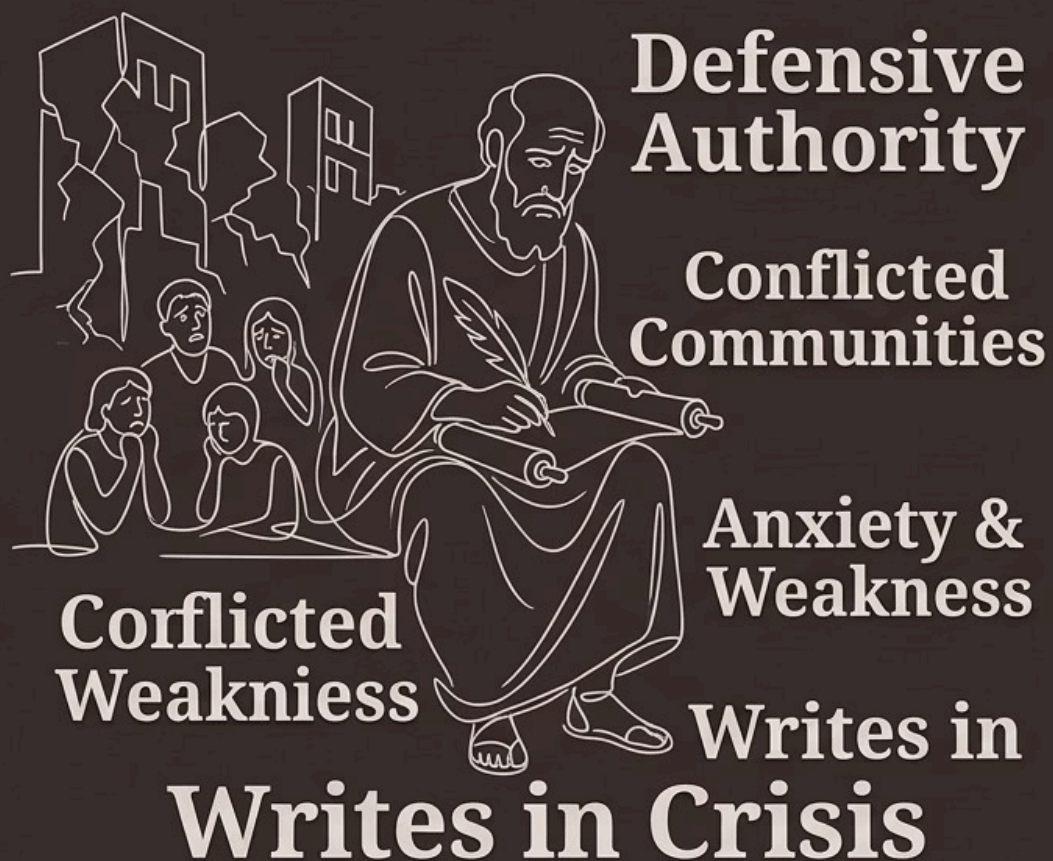
Paul stands before governors and kings, articulating Christianity as a legitimate, law-abiding movement within the Empire

Acts vs. The Letters: Two Very Different Pauls

When you place Luke's Acts side-by-side with Paul's own letters, the contrasts are striking. Neither portrait is false — but they are shaped by different purposes, audiences, and authors. Reading both together gives us a fuller, more honest picture.

Paul in His Letters

Emotional and Raw



Paul in Acts

Smooth & Composed



The Paul of his own letters admits: *"I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches."* (2 Corinthians 11:28, NRSVUE). The Paul of Acts rarely shows this side. Both are true — and both are worth knowing.

Paul Mirrors Jesus in Luke's Telling

One of the most fascinating literary patterns in the book of Acts is how carefully Luke structures Paul's story to echo the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. This is intentional theology through narrative — Luke is making an argument about who Paul is and where his authority comes from.

Rejected by His Own

Both Jesus and Paul are rejected first by those closest to their tradition — their own people turn against them

Arrested and Tried

Both face formal legal proceedings before religious and Roman authorities

Declared Innocent

Roman officials find no guilt in either Jesus or Paul — *"This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."* (Acts 26:31)

Mission Continues

Neither death nor imprisonment stops the movement — the Word of God cannot be chained (2 Timothy 2:9)

Why Did Luke Create This Parallel?

Luke was a master theologian and narrator. The Jesus–Paul parallel in Acts serves three important purposes that shaped how early Christianity presented itself to the Roman world and to future generations of believers.

1 Legitimizes Paul's Authority

By mirroring Jesus, Luke argues that Paul's ministry carries the same divine authority — even though Paul never walked with the earthly Jesus

2 Shows Continuity with Jesus

The movement is not fractured or invented — it flows directly from Jesus through his appointed witnesses

3 Makes the Movement Non-Threatening

Both Jesus and Paul are repeatedly found innocent by Rome — this is a message to Roman authorities: *we are not a political threat*



Luke the Evangelist

Author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, Luke wrote for a Gentile audience navigating life under Roman rule. His theological agenda was always pastoral and political — helping a vulnerable community survive and grow.

The Jesus vs. Paul Debate

This is one of the oldest and most important debates in Christian theology — and it matters deeply for how we understand what we believe and why. Some scholars and theologians argue that Paul did not simply pass on the teachings of Jesus — he reframed them.

Jesus Emphasized

- **The Kingdom of God** — a transformed social order breaking in now
- **Justice for the poor and marginalized** — the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes
- **Lived, embodied teaching** — parables, healings, table fellowship
- **Challenge to religious and political power** — turning tables, confronting hypocrisy

Paul Emphasized

- **Theology of the cross** — the death and resurrection as the center of salvation
- **Church formation** — how communities should organize, worship, and live
- **Doctrine and belief** — defining what Christians hold as true
- **Mission to the Gentiles** — expanding the movement beyond its Jewish roots

Neither emphasis is wrong — but understanding the difference helps us ask: *What is the core of our faith?*

The Tension We Must Sit With

"Did Paul interpret Jesus... or reshape the movement?"

This is not a question that has one clean answer — and that is okay. The Black church tradition has always known how to hold tension. We have had to distinguish between the Jesus who walks with the oppressed and the Paul whose letters were read from slave-master pulpits to justify bondage. That discernment is a spiritual gift, not a problem.

Paul as Faithful Interpreter

Paul encountered the risen Christ, was called by God, and genuinely believed he was extending Jesus's mission to the whole world — including people the original disciples had not yet reached

Paul as Shaper of the Movement

Paul's particular cultural location — elite, educated, Roman citizen — inevitably shaped how he framed the gospel. His is one voice, not the only voice

Paul's Apostleship: A Contested Question

The question of Paul's apostolic authority was not invented by modern scholars — it was contested in the first century, by the earliest communities. Acts 1 actually lays out the official criteria for apostleship in the Jerusalem community, and Paul does not meet them.

Acts 1 Requirements for Apostleship

"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us... one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." (Acts 1:21–22, NRSVUE)

- Must have **walked with Jesus** during his earthly ministry
- Must be a **witness to the resurrection**

Paul's Position

By every traditional measure, Paul should not qualify. He never met Jesus in the flesh. He was, by his own admission, persecuting Jesus's followers when Jesus was raised. And yet — Paul became the most prolific voice in the New Testament.

- ☐ 🙌 Paul doesn't meet the Acts 1 criteria — and he knows it. His letters show him constantly defending his right to be called an apostle.

Paul's Defense of His Calling

Paul does not shy away from the challenge to his authority — he meets it head-on, again and again, throughout his letters. His defense is consistent: his authority did not come from human beings or human institutions. It came directly from God.

1

A Vision of Christ

"Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Corinthians 15:8, NRSVUE) — Paul claims the same category of resurrection appearance as Peter and the twelve

2

Direct Calling from God

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." (Romans 1:1, NRSVUE) — His commission came from above, not below

3

Spiritual Authority Verified by Fruit

"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts... a letter of Christ." (2 Corinthians 3:2–3, NRSVUE) — The transformed lives of his communities are his credentials

Two Types of Authority

Paul's story raises a question that the church has wrestled with ever since: *What makes someone's authority valid?* This tension between two types of authority did not end with Paul — it runs through the entire history of the church, including the AME tradition.

Institutional Authority

- Verified through recognized structures — ordination, succession, credentials
- Accountable to the community and its established leaders
- Provides stability, continuity, and protection against error
- Risk: can become a barrier rather than a bridge

Experiential / Prophetic Authority

- Rooted in a direct encounter with God — a call, a vision, a transformation
- Often disruptive — challenges what is settled and comfortable
- Reflects the prophetic tradition of Scripture from Moses to the AME founders
- Risk: can be self-serving without accountability

📖 Richard Allen didn't wait for institutional permission to start the AME Church — he responded to a Spirit-driven calling. That's the tradition we stand in.

Who Was Paul, Really?

After examining all four portraits, we can offer a more complete picture of this complex, brilliant, and sometimes contradictory figure. Paul was not a saint on a pedestal — he was a real human being whose particular life experience shaped everything he wrote and every community he built.



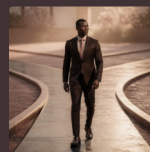
Elite Background

Paul's privilege as a Roman citizen and trained Pharisee gave him access, vocabulary, and rhetorical tools that most people in his world simply did not have



Cultural Translator

Paul moved fluently between Jewish, Greek, and Roman worlds — making him uniquely suited to carry a message across cultural boundaries in ways others could not



Radical Convert

His conversion was not gradual — it was violent, disorienting, and total. That experience of dramatic reversal shaped his entire theology of grace



Movement Organizer

Paul was not only a theologian — he was a practical builder of communities, networks, and relationships that kept the early church alive and growing

Let's Be Clear 😂 — Paul Did NOT Write Hebrews

For centuries, the Epistle to the Hebrews was attributed to Paul — which is why it appeared in many Bibles right after his other letters. But this attribution has been questioned since the earliest days of the church, and modern scholarship is nearly unanimous: **Paul did not write Hebrews.**

"As for who wrote it, God truly knows."

— Origen of Alexandria, 3rd century CE

Different Vocabulary

Hebrews uses Greek words found nowhere else in Paul's letters — the literary style is entirely distinct

Different Theology

The priestly imagery and the treatment of Jesus as High Priest reflect a different theological tradition than Paul's undisputed letters

No Greeting from Paul

Every genuine Pauline letter opens with Paul identifying himself — Hebrews has no such opening

Hebrews is a powerful, profound piece of early Christian writing — it just doesn't come from Paul. And that's okay. The canon is richer for it.

"Paul didn't create the movement — but he helped shape what it became."

The church was already alive before Paul arrived on the scene. Communities were gathering in Jerusalem, in Antioch, in households across the Roman world. Paul did not invent Christianity — but his letters, his journeys, his arguments, and his passion profoundly shaped the direction of the early church. Understanding that distinction is liberating. It means we can appreciate Paul's remarkable contribution while also holding his limitations honestly — and returning again and again to the One who is the center of it all.

What Paul Gave Us

A theology of grace, a vision of radical inclusion, a model of courageous community-building across cultural lines — gifts that belong to the whole church

What We Must Hold Lightly

The culturally conditioned instructions, the institutional arrangements, the restrictions that bear the marks of Paul's time and place — these deserve honest, contextual reading

Discussion Questions

Take these questions into your small groups, your Sunday school class, your dinner table, or your own prayer time. These are not questions with easy answers — they are invitations to deeper discipleship.

01

Liberator or Organizer?

When you read Paul's letters, do you encounter someone who is primarily setting people free — or someone who is primarily building structures? Can a person be both? What does your answer reveal about how you read scripture?

03

When Scripture Has Tension

When you find two passages in the Bible that seem to contradict each other — especially on issues of justice, gender, or authority — how do you decide which one speaks most faithfully? What tools do you bring to that discernment?

02


Jesus or Interpretations of Jesus?

In your own faith tradition and congregation, do you feel like you follow Jesus directly — or do you primarily follow Paul's interpretation of Jesus? Is there a meaningful difference? Does it matter?

04

Paul and the Black Church

The AME Church was born as an act of prophetic resistance — very much in the spirit of the authentic Paul. How do we reclaim Paul's liberating voice while being honest about the ways his letters have been misused against us?

 **Take-Home Challenge:** This week, read Galatians 3:26–29 and Philemon side-by-side. Ask yourself: what does the authentic Paul believe about human dignity and freedom?