

Preparation Paper Four
Western Heritage II: Classical Christian Era
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There is more of Paul's writing preserved in the New Testament than writing by any other writer. This paper will discuss some of the facets of Paul's writing, beginning with how Paul's letters differ from those in his day. The chronological order and purpose of each of Paul's books will be provided. How Paul wrote the Gospel to the Romans will be explained and this paper will conclude with an explanation of Gnosticism.

There are differences between Paul's letters and those common in his day. First, Paul's letters are much longer in the number of words (Gundry, 1994). Most letters of the day were between ninety and two hundred words in length while Paul's letters were between three hundred thirty five and a little over seven thousand. The limitation of length was usually as the result of the size of the papyrus sheet on which the words were written, and by the size of the writing (Gundry, 1994). Paul got around this limitation by joining together papyrus sheets to form a roll. The process was a difficult one, so common for writers of his day, Paul probably dictated his letters to a professional scribe, who at times may not have been able to keep up, so from time to time the writing jumps from one subject to another (Gundry, 1994).

In general, the structure of Paul's letters, like those of his counterparts of the day, opened with a greeting that included information about the sender and recipient. The writer would usually wish good health, success, and assurances of prayer in the greeting as well (Gundry, 1994). Then the letter would have a body whose text contains the message the writer is trying to convey followed with a farewell, containing a brief ending message and a signature (Gundry, 1994). These letters were usually not dated. Letters were delivered by travelers to their intended recipient since there was no postal service like that that exists today.

The letters that Paul wrote will now be discussed in chronological order beginning with the early epistles, continuing with the major epistles and concluding with the prison epistles. The early epistles that Paul wrote are Galatians and 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Gundry, 1994). The

epistle to the Galatians was written to explain how justification is by faith and faith alone, not by any works of man. First Thessalonians was written to explain the second coming of Christ. Second Thessalonians was written to further boost the spirits of the persecuted Thessalonians, and correct some of their misunderstandings about the second coming mentioned in the first epistle.

The major epistles written by Paul are 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans (Gundry, 1994). First Corinthians was written to point out some of the moral issues that were taking place at Corinth. They had erred by constantly fighting among themselves, even to the point of having to turn to pagan courts to settle the disputes. They were committing sexual immorality, they were abusing the meaning of the Lord's supper, and they were teaching incorrectly about the resurrection. In general, they were a bad testimony to those outside the church. Paul first heard of these issues from people visiting him who had been to the church at Corinth. The second epistle to the Corinthians was to refute allegations by false teachers about Paul's authority. The epistle to the Romans was written to the church in Rome to explain the Gospel, God's salvation plan.

It is believed that there were four letters written to the church at Corinth (Gundry, 1994). This is based on statements that exist in 1 & 2 Corinthians as we have them today. First Corinthians refers to a previous letter that the people had misunderstood (1 Corinthians 5:9, NIV). After a brief visit, a second letter that is now lost, referred to as the sorrowful letter (2 Corinthians 2:4, NIV) was written to command the church to discipline an individual. Each lost letter was written previous to the existing two letters, one before the first and one before the second.

When Paul wrote to the Romans, he was not trying to put a stop to a sin or some errant practice, but to give the Gospel (NIV, 1984). He began by explaining the unrighteousness of

man. He then explained how man can be justified, and have righteousness imputed on them by faith in Jesus Christ. With this righteousness, man can have freedom from sin and the law and be sanctified, or set apart for holy living.

The prison epistles include Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians (Gundry, 1994). The epistle to Philemon was a personal letter written to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Its purpose was to ask Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Colossians was written to refute their false teachings about angels, ceremonies, and reliance on human wisdom and tradition, among other things. Ephesians was written to expand the believers' knowledge of the things of God and His church. Philippians was written to thank them for their gift to Paul while he was at Rome. He also updated them on his situation and gave them encouragement.

The last of the epistles, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, are referred to as the pastoral epistles (Gundry, 1994). In the first epistle, Paul instructs Timothy to refute false teachings, how to deal with difficult people, and church administration. The second epistle was written to express Paul's desire to see Timothy and to express his concern for the churches. Titus gives instruction regarding faith, conduct, and warnings of false teachers.

Gnosticism was a major problem in Paul's day (Lockyer, 1986). Like many at the church at Colosse, many believed that knowledge was the way to salvation. In doing this, God's deity was not recognized, as He should be. For example, they believed that God created everything first in a perfect state, but as other subordinate gods controlled each successive generation, corruption developed (Lockyer, 1986). In addition to this, they believed that the earth was surrounded by spheres or regions controlled by these subordinate gods and that knowledge was needed to pass through them. Knowledge, not faith, was the means to which a person's spirit was reunited with God (Lockyer, 1986). An ultimate knowledge or secret knowledge, formulas

revealed only to the initiated, was needed to make this journey. Paul and others warned often that faith was needed, not knowledge (Lockyer, 1986). With just knowledge of God and not faith, Heaven can be missed by eighteen inches!

This paper has discussed some of the facets of Paul's writing, beginning with how Paul's letters differ from those in his day. They were discussed in chronological order with more detail on how many letters to the Corinthians there really were and how Paul wrote the Gospel to the Romans. Gnosticism, a belief very prevalent in Paul's day, was also discussed.

References

The NIV Study Bible. (1984). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Gundry, Robert H. (1994). A Survey of the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Lockyer, Herbert (1986). Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.