INTRODUCTION

The first problem facing anyone attempting a commentary on Paul's letters is that of authorship. There are thirteen letters in the New Testament that claim Paul as their author, but some scholars claim that half of them were composed by disciples of Paul who wrote in his name. If these scholars are right, we would have to conclude that some of the letters attributed to Paul tell us what Paul's disciples thought but cannot be used to give us direct evidence of Paul's own ideas. As each letter is introduced, it will emerge why this commentary favours the opinion of those scholars who accept all thirteen letters as coming from Paul's hand. We will come back to this issue shortly.

To attempt a commentary, even an introductory commentary such as this, is quite an ambitious project, for the aim is to express in terms that a modern reader can grasp how Paul's letters would have been understood by those who read them or heard them proclaimed nearly two thousand years ago. Paul writes clearly and his success as a communicator is measured by the fact that his letters were so popular. They were copied, translated, preserved and treasured wherever Christians were to be found. The difficulty lies not with Paul but with us. For us to understand what he wrote there is a good deal of work that must be done. We need to know how the Greek words which Paul uses were understood in the first century. Furthermore, we need to know something of the culture in which he and his readers lived, for it was in many ways quite different from ours. Then there is the fact that we are dealing with letters. Reading letters is rather like listening in to only one side of a conversation. Furthermore, it is not easy, especially from this distance, to grasp the context within which Paul is writing. A study of the letters themselves gives us considerable help in this regard, and, as our knowledge of first century Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece increases, we are gaining insight into the Jewish and Gentile cultures of the day and the meanings and values that informed their way of life.

The Acts as history

Of particular interest to us is another book of the New Testament, the *Acts of the Apostles*, a large part of which is devoted to Paul's journeys and speeches. A problem immediately arises. There are scholars today who question the reliability of *Acts* as a historical document. They argue that the aim of the author was to express inspired insights into the meaning of Jesus and into the significance of the Christian life as lived in the various communities of the first century, and that he chose to do so *in the form of* a history. They acknowledge that *Acts* was successful in engaging interest, with its dramatic scenes and equally dramatic speeches, but they claim that it cannot be taken as a reliable source for historical details. We need to look into this matter carefully, for while our understanding of Paul comes primarily, of course, from the letters, if we can trust *Acts* as history, we have the advantage of having an outline of Paul's ministry as well as an inspired contemporary insight into his ideas.

A number of documents from the closing years of the second century agree in recognising *Acts* as the second part of a composite work which includes one of the Gospels. They identify the author as Luke, a companion of Paul who is mentioned in Paul's letters as being 'the beloved physician'(Colossians 4:14) who is one of Paul's 'fellow workers' (Philemon 24; see also 2 Timothy 4:11).

In the Muratorian Canon, dated c.180, we read:

> Luke was a physician. After the ascension of Christ, when Paul had taken him along with him as one devoted to letters, he wrote the Gospel under his own name from hearsay. for he himself had not seen the Lord in person.

Writing at about the same time, Irenaeus quotes Paul's references to Luke and identifies Luke as the author of the Gospel and *Acts* (*Against the Heresies* 3.1.1 and 3.14.1-4). His is the earliest text in which we find the book called '*The Acts of the Apostles*'(AH 3.13.3). Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 200, also speaks of Luke as being the author of the Gospel (*Stromata* 1.21) and *Acts* (*Stromata* 5.12). We also have the following from an early prologue:

> Luke was a Syrian of Antioch, by profession a physician, the disciple of the apostles, and later a follower of Paul, until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, without a wife and without children. He died at the age of eighty-four in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit. Though gospels were already in existence, the Gospel according to Matthew composed in Judea, and the Gospel according to Mark in Italy, Luke was prompted by the Holy Spirit and composed this gospel entirely in the regions about Achaia [southern Greece] … Later the same Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles.
>
> – *Prologue to the Gospel*, c.200

After 200, the attribution to Luke of the Gospel and of *Acts* is common. Tertullian, writing in the first decade of the third century, states that it was Paul who inspired Luke to write. He even speaks of Luke's Gospel as 'the Gospel of his teacher, Paul'(*Against Marcion* 4.5.3). In spite of the amount of writing devoted to the subject, I have found no convincing reason to set aside this early and uniform tradition which identifies the author of *Acts* as a close companion who was in a position to know Paul well.

Furthermore, as we will now demonstrate, Luke explicitly states that he is interested precisely in history. While Luke has his own particular perspective, which is not identical with Paul's, he has much to offer anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Paul's writings. In introducing his two-part work, Luke writes:

> [1] Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account
> of the events that have been fulfilled among us,
> [2] just as they were handed on to us
> by those who from the beginning
> were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,
> [3] I too decided, after investigating everything carefully
> from the very first (or 'from above'), to write an orderly account for you,
> most excellent Theophilus,
> [4] so that you may know the truth
> concerning the things about which you have been instructed.
>
> – Luke 1:1-4

It is clear from this that Luke presents his work as that of a historian. He is interested in 'events', in 'eyewitnesses', and in 'investigating everything carefully'. He is interested in the significance of events, and, as with historians then and now, it is events and their significance that guide his selection and arrangement of his material. His aim is to reassure Theophilus, and through him others who will read his text, that what they have been taught is solidly based on what actually happened. As a historian, his intention is to do this precisely by chronicling events accurately. The more we come to know about the times which Luke is chronicling, the more impressive as history does his writing become.

It is true that some of Luke's sources may not have shared his interest in writing as a historian. The existence of a Western text which is much longer than the Alexandrian text which we will be following shows that what Luke wrote was not simply copied and handed down, but that it was edited, updated, and adapted, which means that the text as we will be presenting it here may well have been through an editorial process of some kind. The complex history of the text, however, while encouraging caution, does not support scepticism about the reliability of *Acts* as history.

Today we have strict expectations of the style and method which we judge appropriate for historians. We do not expect poetry or drama from them, nor contrived rhetorical flourishes intended to impress. While we expect historians to be imaginative in the way they arrange their material, they should present the 'facts' without adornment. The prevalence of propaganda as well as the insidious nature of prejudice and unsuspected assumptions alert us to be wary of what is actually put forward as history, but we do have strict criteria which we expect historians to follow.

We need to recognise that this was true also of the ancient world. The Greek historian Polybius (died c.122BC) in *The Histories* sums up what was expected of a historian in his day. He asserts that it is best if a historian writes about matters which he has personally witnessed. However, he acknowledges that this is not always possible:

> Since many events occur at the same time in different places, and one man cannot be in several places at one time, nor is it possible for a single person to have seen with his own eyes every place in the world and all the peculiar features of different places, the only thing left for a historian is to inquire of as many people as possible, to believe those worthy of belief, and to be an adequate critic of the reports that reach him.
>
> – The Histories 12.4c

Polybius is critical of a contemporary historian, Timaeus, who 'diligently pursued the reading of books, but was very remiss in his interrogation of living witnesses … Personal inquiry is the most important part of history'(12.27). He is not impressed by those who 'after spending a long time in libraries and becoming deeply learned in memoirs and records, persuade themselves that they are adequately qualified for the task'(12.25e). Flavius Josephus, writing in the first century AD, for all his tendency to exaggeration, insists that it is the duty of a historian to have an accurate knowledge of the facts 'either through having been in close touch with the events or by inquiry from those who knew them'(*Against Apion* 1.10.53). The focus is on immediate contact with the facts rather than on critical study of written material.

Historians then, as now, were quite aware of the propensity of people to put on record only what they wanted people to read and to select with this in mind. Careful historians judged it easier to assess critically an oral statement face to face than to assess a written document. Hence Luke's insistence on 'eyewitnesses'. Luke does not claim in his Prologue to be himself an eyewitness – after all, he was not an eyewitness of Jesus' public ministry, death or resurrection, nor was he an eyewitness of the events in the early Jerusalem community. However, there are sections in the Acts where he introduces the word 'we', and as early as the second century this has been understood as an indication that Luke himself was with Paul and personally witnessed some of the events which he chronicles (Irenaeus AH 3.14.1). If this is the case, Luke journeyed with Paul from Troas to Philippi (see Acts 16:10-17), from Philippi to Jerusalem (see Acts 20:5-15; 21:1-18), and from Caesarea to Rome (see Acts 27:1-28:16). The time which he spent in Palestine and in Rome would have given him ample opportunity to do the careful investigations of which he speaks. It would be naive to assume that Luke got every detail exactly right, but there is no justification for dismissing what Luke has to say about the events that he records.

One feature of the Acts requires special attention. Luke has five speeches by Peter, one by Stephen and six by Paul. Together these twelve speeches make up twenty-two percent of the whole work. If we add the rest of the material that is in direct speech, we find that it comes to over fifty percent of the content. Everyone agrees that the speeches as presented are composed by the author. The question is whether he was free simply to create them as a means of expressing his understanding of the significance of the occasion, or whether, as a historian, he was expected to base his composition of speeches on careful investigation of what was actually said on the occasion.

To discover what was expected by ancient historians, we turn first to Lucian of Samosata (died 180AD). In his '*How to write history*', he agrees with modern historians in stating that 'the sole task of the historian is to tell things just as they happened'(n.39). However, a little later (n.58) he gives greater latitude than would modern historians when it comes to the composing of speeches. He writes:

> If someone has to be brought in to give a speech, above all let the language suit the person and the subject … It is then that you can exercise your rhetoric and show your eloquence.
>
> – Lucian, *How to write history*, 58

Thucydides (died c.400BC) allows historians to compose speeches, but only after careful investigation and only with the aim of giving 'the general sense of what was actually said'(*Histories* 1.22.1). Polybius has this to say:

> If writers, after indicating to us the situation and the motives and inclinations of the people involved, report in the next place what was actually said, and then make clear to us the reasons why the speaker either succeeded or failed, we shall arrive at some true notions of the actual facts.
>
> – *The Histories* 12.25i

No doubt Luke uses the speeches to emphasise those insights that he particularly wants to convey to his readers. However, since there is ample evidence, especially in the material concerning Paul, that Luke has, indeed, 'investigated everything carefully', we should begin with the presumption that Luke was careful in questioning Paul as well as others who were present as to what Paul said on the various occasions that Luke chronicles. By way of conclusion, we can say that there are good grounds for accepting the verdict of those scholars who claim that Luke was a good historian, and that, as a close companion of Paul, he was in an especially good position to write about his journeys and teaching (see chapter 8 of 'The Book of Acts in the setting of Hellenistic History' by Colin Hemer, Eisenbrauns, 1990).

Paul as the author of thirteen New Testament letters

In 367, Athanasius of Alexandria included all thirteen letters in the canon, as did Pope Damasus in 382. In the nineteenth century, however, scholars began to question the authorship of a number of letters, and today one frequently finds the opinion expressed that six of the thirteen letters that claim to be written by Paul were in fact composed after his death. Later writers, it is claimed, used Paul's name, either to have their work accepted, or because they judged that they were giving an authentic account of Paul's thought and so were keeping his thought alive in the changing circumstances of a later generation.

From the outset it should be noted that, though this opinion is widespread, throughout this long period of research and of argument and counter-argument there have always been scholars who argue in favour of Paul being the author of all thirteen letters. It seems to me that there are sound reasons in favour of this traditional view, and for reasons that will be explained when we come to each of the letters I shall be treating all of them as having been composed by Paul. Of course one cannot claim certainty in a field that is so disputed. However, this view, though a minority one, is supported by sound scholarship.

At first glance the very existence of the argument may come as a surprise. After all we are dealing with writings that have been accepted by the church into the canon of inspired scripture. How could this be if a letter's claim to be written by Paul is false? If a writer set out to pass his work off as being written by Paul in order to deceive his readers into accepting his ideas, we can be confident that, in the providence of God, such a writing would not have been so successful as to become part of the canon of scripture. It is wisely said that God writes straight on crooked lines, but to imagine God using a forgery as a means of revelation stretches belief beyond breaking point. We rightly expect sacred scripture to have been born in prayer and to convey to us divine revelation. Could such a pure flower grow in such a polluted bed? One might also wonder why it has taken till modern times to discover the forgery when those much closer to the language and culture within which it was composed failed to pick up the clues.

Another theory is that after Paul's death and in a way that was obvious to his contemporaries, a disciple, far from wanting to deceive, set out to present an authentic statement of Paul's thought. He chose this form in order to get people to reflect on what Paul had actually written (elsewhere) and to see in this new document a statement of what Paul would have written in changed conditions were he still alive.

If such a practice sounds rather strange to a modern reader, we should know that it was quite widespread and quite accepted in Jewish circles and had been for some time. Interpretations of the Torah were attributed to Moses. Psalms were attributed to David. Wisdom writings from a later time were attributed to Solomon. Disciples of the great prophetic figures of Israel's history had no scruple in adding later insights to the prophetic scrolls.

The writings of all these groups were accepted by the community as authoritative interpretations of the mind of those to whom the writings were attributed. After all, they considered that they were dealing with the word of God, a word which was living and active and contained guidance for different generations living in different circumstances. When interpreters searched the sacred writings in prayer and discovered meanings there that applied to their own times, and when they added these to the scrolls, they were not claiming, as it might appear, that Moses or Isaiah, for example, actually composed the words which they were adding. Rather, they were claiming to give an authoritative interpretation of the implications of the revelation given to Moses or Isaiah by God. By placing later writings in the scroll of Isaiah, for example, the scribes were not trying to deceive by passing off their writings as having been written by Isaiah. They were making a claim to express Isaiah's inspired thought in an authoritative way. Their additions were accepted as a valid expression of revelation because of the value of their content.

Another example is the Book of Daniel. Composed during the persecutions under Antiochus IV and drawing on legends about a prophet called Daniel from the period of the Babylonian exile, this writing invites its readers to reflect back on their history and to see how God has always been faithful to those being persecuted. The Book of Daniel gave rise to a spate of spiritual writings that invited the reader to reflect on the revelations given to great figures of the past. In the Testaments we have advice especially from the patriarchs and Moses. In the Apocalypses we have speculations about the afterlife. Enoch is a favourite figure in these. As regards the fate of Jerusalem, Baruch, Jeremiah's secretary, was chosen; as regards regulations of the law they selected Ezra. Of these writings, only the Book of Daniel and some additions to the prophetic scrolls became part of the Jewish canon of scripture. The others were more or less popular depending on the judgment of those who considered them to be truly in accordance with tradition or not. Here, as in the additions to the Torah, to the prophetic writings, or to the Wisdom literature, the use of the name of a famous person of the past was not a claim to literary origin but to an authentic interpretation of his experience, a re-expression of the living word that had been confided to him by divine revelation and inspiration.

It is along these lines that some claim that some of the New Testament letters that name Paul as their author were actually composed after his death. They claim that a disciple of Paul in new circumstances was offering to the Christian community an authoritative interpretation of what Paul would have written were he still alive. Furthermore, it was not only Paul's thought that he wished to present. He also wanted the community to know that Paul was still with them, guiding them from his communion with the Lord. This accounts for the personal touches that we find in these letters.

Paul's letters were, after all, a way of Paul being present in spirit with the communities. As he wrote to the Corinthians: 'Though absent in body, I am present in spirit … When you are assembled, my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus'(1Corinthians 5:3-4). The personal reminiscences and expressions of personal emotion that are expressed in the letters are intended to pick up the spirit of Paul and reinforce for those reading the letter the memories which they had of Paul or the stories which they had been told about him. In this way the anonymous author was trying to secure the Pauline heritage.

The acceptance of such a letter into the canon is not to be read as a guarantee that Paul is, indeed, the author of the written text. Rather, it is a guarantee that in the judgment of the church, the letter is an authentic statement of inspired truth and of Paul's thought. It is as though a Jesuit today were to compose a 'Letter from Ignatius of Loyola to his sons'. Everyone knows that it is not an actual letter from Ignatius. When its author copies Ignatius's style and when it is received as re-expressing Ignatius's charism, it may be received with gratitude and preserved as an inspired and truly 'Ignatian' writing. If this is what we are dealing with , there is nothing inherently problematic in the claim that these letters were not actually written by Paul. However, such an hypothesis does imply that what was transparent to the contemporaries of the anonymous author, since it was never declared in writing, had the result that within a few generations others failed to recognise the literary form being employed and accepted the letter as written by Paul himself, and it took till the nineteenth century for people to begin to suspect the mistake.

If we accept that there is nothing inherently contradictory about a letter written in this way being considered inspired and being accepted as part of the canon of scripture, we still have to examine the text to see if there are grounds for making such a claim. Unless the evidence is convincing, we should surely assume that what seems to be the case is the case, and that a letter which claims to be written by Paul was in fact composed by him. As noted earlier, I find no convincing argument against Pauline authorship of any of the thirteen letters. My reasons will be given in the introduction to each of the 'disputed' letters. I will be treating them all as being from Paul's hand and as providing direct evidence of Paul's thought.

Dating Paul's life and ministry

If we accept all thirteen letters as having been composed by Paul, and if we accept *Acts* as an historically reliable document, arguments can be brought forward to support the following as a reasonable time line for Paul's life and ministry. Claudius's expulsion of Jews from Rome and Gallio's period as proconsul in Corinth enable us to place Paul in Corinth in 51AD. Other dates are established by working backwards and forwards from that date.

33	Jesus' crucifixion
34	Paul's conversion and preaching in and around Damascus
37	Escape from Damascus and short visit to Jerusalem
37	Paul leaves Jerusalem and goes to Tarsus
45	Paul joins Barnabas and others in Antioch
46	Paul and Barnabas visit Jerusalem where they have an important conference with Peter, John and James
47-48	Missionary Journey to Cyprus and Southern Galatia
49	The Jerusalem Conference
49 spring	Journey through Syria-Cilicia and Galatia, to Troas
49 autumn-winter	Paul in Philippi with Silvanus and Timothy
50	Mission in Thessalonica, Beroea and Athens
50 autumn	Paul begins an 18-month stay in Corinth
52 spring	Paul leaves Corinth for Jerusalem
52 summer	Visit to Antioch and journey through Galatia to Ephesus
52-55	Three year mission in Ephesus
55	Paul leaves Ephesus for Troas and Macedonia
56	Mission in Macedonia and Illyricum
56-57	Paul spends the winter in Corinth
57	Journey through Macedonia and Troas, to Miletus and Jerusalem
57-59	Paul is held in custody in Caesarea
59-60	Sea voyage via Crete and Malta to Rome
60-62	Paul is in Rome awaiting trial
62-67	Mission in (Spain?), Asia and Greece
67	Paul's second imprisonment in Rome and martyrdom

Dates and place of composition of Paul's letters

The following is offered as indicating what seems to me the most likely places and dates for the composition of the letters. The list is constructed in three columns. Strong arguments can be presented for the placing of those in the first column. The place and timing of Galatians and Philippians is much more controversial, and for the placing of Ephesians in Caesarea I am going on little more than a hunch. The reasons for my choice are given in the introduction to each letter.

1. Galatians		Antioch 48	
2. 1Thessalonians	Corinth 50		
3. 2Thessalonians	Corinth 51		
4. 1Corinthians	Ephesus 53		
5. Philemon	Ephesus 54		
6. Colossians	Ephesus 54		
7. 2Corinthians	Macedonia 55-56		
8. Romans	Corinth 57		
9. Ephesians			Caesarea 58
10. Philippians		Rome 62	
11. Titus	Macedonia 65		
12. 1Timothy	Macedonia 65		
13. 2Timothy	Rome 67		

In the following chapter we will be examining what is arguably Paul's earliest extant letter, his Letter to the Galatians. It will be suggested that it was composed in Antioch in late 48 after his return from his first major missionary journey and prior to the Jerusalem Assembly in 49. Let us now pause to piece together from Paul's letters and *Acts* what we know of Paul's life prior to his conversion and in the years between his conversion and the composing of his first letter.

1. Paul's Life prior to his encounter with the risen Christ (c.4BC to c.34AD)

Paul was 'born in Tarsus in Cilicia'(Acts 22:3). According to Jerome (died c.420), Paul's parents emigrated there from Gischala in Galilee (*Commentary on Philemon* 23-24). He inherited Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). He was a Jew, 'a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews'(Philippians 3:5). As a Jew, he was circumcised when eight days old (Philippians 3:5), and given the name 'Saul'(Acts 7:58).

Luke calls him Saul up to the point where he meets the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:7). It is at this point that Luke informs us that Saul was 'also known as Paul'(Acts 13:9). Paulus ('Paul') was a well documented Roman family name. Was it just a coincidence that Saul and Sergius shared the same name, or did Saul accept the patronage of the proconsul and so his name? In either case, Luke calls him 'Paul' from this point on, and, since it was customary in the Roman world to address a person by his or her family name, it is this name and not Saul that Paul uses in all his letters.

When was he born? In his letter to Philemon (verse nine), which was probably written about 54, he refers to himself as 'an old man'(Greek presbutäs), which suggests that he was in his late fifties. This would place his birth at about the time of king Herod's death in 4BC and would make him an almost exact contemporary of Jesus. It would also mean that he was in his middle to late thirties at the time of Stephen's martyrdom, which fits with Luke's description of his being, at that time, 'a young man'(Greek neanias, Acts 7:58). As to his education, his letters demonstrate a good grounding in the kind of schooling that he would have received in Tarsus, where he probably also learned to work with cloth and leather, a trade that was to stand him in good stead throughout his journeys (Acts 18:3), for there was always a need for awnings to shade the shops in the market place, as well as tents and harnesses for the caravans. He was possibly in his early twenties when he left Tarsus for Jerusalem where he studied under Rabbi Gamaliel, 'educated strictly according to our [Jewish] ancestral law'(Acts 22:3).

That others of his family also lived in Palestine is indicated by the presence there of his sister's son (Acts 23:16). Paul was a Pharisee, a member of a movement noted for its concern for total fidelity to the prescriptions of divine will codified in the Jewish law (Philippians 3:5; Acts 26:5). His familiarity with the Greek and the Jewish world stood him in good stead in his mission which was to translate the Christian message, born within the Jewish culture, into the language and thought patterns of the Greek world. He was 'intensely zealous in persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it' (Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6; Acts 9:1-2; 22:4; 26:9-11). A dramatic change of direction in his life occurred as he was on his way to Damascus, hunting down members of the Christian community. Though the Jerusalem establishment had no jurisdiction in Damascus, they could well have given their backing to this determined young zealot (Acts 9:2; 22:3-5; 26:12).

2. Pauls' life from Damascus to Antioch (c.34-49)

After giving a dramatic description of the encounter between Christ and Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), Luke has Paul himself describe it again to the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22:6-16), and to King Agrippa in Caesarea (Acts 26:13-18). Paul tells the Galatians that he received the gospel 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ'(Galatians 1:12), when 'God revealed his Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:16). He declares to the Corinthians: 'Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (1Corinthians 9:1), and recalls how the risen Jesus 'showed himself also to me'(1Corinthians 15:8).

Paul, of course, is aware of our need for conversion (see Romans 1:4). It is interesting, however, that he never speaks in this way of his experience on the road to Damascus. It was, rather, something that is prior to and more fundamental than conversion. It was a revelation – a new way of seeing God because of Jesus. It is also interesting to reflect on the many changes that must have happened in Paul over the fourteen or so ensuing years before we have our first direct glimpse into Paul's life from his earliest extant letters. Paul spent the next three years in the area of Damascus. This included what seems to have been a brief and unsuccessful attempt to proclaim the gospel in 'Arabia', that is to say, in the Nabataean kingdom to the west and south of Damascus (Galatians 1:17; Acts 9:20-22; 26:19). Forced to flee from Damascus (2Corinthians 11:32; Acts 9:23-25), he went to Jerusalem 'to visit Cephas'(Galatians 1:18). It took Barnabas to persuade the Christian community there to accept Paul, but even so his stay was brief and he managed to stir up a lot of opposition (Acts 9:29-30; 22:17-21). One has the feeling that the Jerusalem community were pleased to see him leave and go home to Cilicia, where he seems to have spent a further period (perhaps again without much success) 'proclaiming the faith' (Galatians 1:23), 'among the Gentiles'(Galatians 2:2), until, once again, it was Barnabas who sought him out in Tarsus (Acts 9:30) and took him to Antioch (Acts 11:26).

We can only guess at the amount of suffering that Paul must have undergone in the prolonged period of isolation. One factor may have been that others did not trust him, but it may also have been that Paul carried over into his new life the same kind of insensitive zeal that made him a leader among the young Jews who opposed the Christians. He had learned that God, as revealed in Jesus is a God of love. We know from his earliest letter that he came to know also that his mission was not dependent on his zeal, but that it was Christ living and loving in him. Was this dependence and humility the fruit of years of suffering and failure? Perhaps so. What we do know is that by his early fifties Paul has lost none of his courage and passion, but he has matured into one who has the most profound respect for what God is doing in people's lives and the freedom to let anything go which is an obstacle to people living the gospel in the way which God calls them to live it.

The only event recorded by Luke from these early years of Paul's Antioch ministry is when news reached Antioch that the community in Jerusalem was suffering because of a severe famine, and the church decided to send some relief which was delivered in person by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:30). It it possible (and from my reading of the argument, likely) that it was on this occasion that a discussion took place between Paul and the Jerusalem leadership concerning the conditions for acceptance of Gentiles into the community (see Galatians 2:1-10). Some time after his return from this visit to Jerusalem, the Antioch community decided to send Barnabas and Paul on a missionary journey to Cyprus and the cities of Southern Galatia (2Timothy 3:11; Acts 13:1 – 14:28). After Paul's return to Antioch, some Jewish Christians came down from Jerusalem to Antioch (and probably at the same time to the communities in Galatia). They insisted that Paul was wrong not to insist that his Gentile converts be circumcised and be obliged to follow Jewish law. For reasons that will be explained in the following chapter, it is possible that this was the occasion for the writing of Paul's first extant letter, written back to the communities he had just evangelised: his Letter to the Galatians.

We will leave Paul in Antioch in 48 as he composes his Letter to the Galatians just before the Jerusalem Assembly, and pick up the thread of his life as we work our way through his subsequent letters.

Points of contact for proclaiming the gospel

From the information which we pick up from Paul's letters and from what Luke has given us in the *Acts*, we can get some idea of the different settings in which Paul carried out his ministry. From the number of Jews among Paul's collaborators, from Paul's description of the harsh treatment which he received at the hands of some Jews (2Corinthians 11:24) and from various other statements made by Paul, as well as from Luke's account, we can conclude that Paul remained committed to trying to reach out to Jews through preaching in the synagogues of the various cities which he visited (see 1 Corinthians 9:20).Through the synagogue he made contact with non-Jews who were interested in Judaism and who were welcome to attend the synagogue. These contacts gave him one entry into the Gentile (non-Jewish) world.

His work as a tentmaker also provided an opportunity for contact with workers and traders in the market squares of the various centres which he visited. He often speaks about his determination to support himself by his work. In a letter to the church in Thessalonica he writes: 'You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God' (1Thessalonians 2:9). We know that he worked with Aquila and Priscilla when he first came to Corinth (Acts 18:3). Either he shared a stall with them in the marketplace and spoke of Jesus with those frequenting the market while he worked away at his trade; or they shared a section of an *insula*, with a shop on the ground level facing the street and living quarters above or behind the shop.

Homes were important gathering places where converts with means welcomed their fellow Christians. One thinks of the home of Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:0), of Jason in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5), and of Titius Justus (Acts 18:7), and Gaius (Romans 16:23) in Corinth. We know that he taught for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (Acts 19:9-10), and in rented quarters while in Rome (Acts 28:16,30).

One of the favorite entertainments of the populace in the Greek cities was gathering to hear and pass enthusiastic judgment upon the many travelling orators who came their way plying their 'philosophies' as well as their thoughts on events of the day. It is hard to imagine Paul not taking the opportunity when it presented itself to take his stand on the public platform and proclaim the gospel. Whether in public or in private, out of doors or inside, to formal audiences or informal gatherings, Paul proclaimed Jesus, and some responded in faith.

Paul's key convictions

Paul's letters give us direct, if partial, entry into the way in which he perceived what was happening in the various churches to which he wrote. We listen to him as he attempts to instruct, correct and encourage people in their lives and in their mission as communities living 'in Christ Jesus'. For the most part his letters are his response to a particular situation. Most of the time he is accenting points that he judges are being overlooked or that need stressing because of problems that have arisen, or questions which he is being asked. Sometimes it is because other people are teaching things that Paul is convinced need correcting. To discover Paul's motivating convictions we need to watch for the ideas that repeatedly underlie his writing. Romans is especially helpful because Paul writes on his own initiative and to a community for which he is not directly responsible. However, the letter is not free of argument, so even here he is reacting to false positions and defending himself against those who are misrepresenting his gospel.

The letter which most clearly reveals the meanings and values that inform Paul's personal and apostolic life as well as his writing is the so-called Letter to the Ephesians, which is probably a circular letter sent to the largely Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor before he left for Rome and for what he envisaged as a new mission field in the west. While Romans and Ephesians have a special place among Paul's writings, each of his letters has something to offer us as we seek for the mind and heart of this great Christian apostle.

Libraries have been written on Paul's thought. Before we begin our journey through his letters, I thought that there may be some value in my sharing with you what have come across to me as the key motivating convictions that find expression in what he writes. Again and again his letters witness to the fact that Paul was in communion with a reality that transcends thought and so defies definition. His key motivating conviction cannot be confined within the limited categories of his own thoughts, let alone ours. However, some aspects are clear. One key fact is that Paul is a Jew who sees himself as striving to be a faithful member of his people. We cannot grasp his insights and we will distort his thought if we fail to recognise this.

As a Jew he is a monotheist, and he is convinced of God's fidelity to the promises made to Israel. Paul is a Christian missionary because he is convinced that God has chosen to reveal himself and to fulfil his promises in the crucified Jesus whom he raised to life. This radically changed Paul's previous understanding of monotheism and of God's action in the world. He came to see that God is indeed one, not in the singleness of transcendent Being, but because God is communion in love – the communion that is revealed in Jesus and is experienced, though not yet perfectly, by all who are drawn by the Spirit of Jesus into the Christian community. Paul sees everything about God in terms of love. God's power is the power of love, and so, astonishingly and paradoxically, is revealed in the apparent weakness of the cross. It is the same for divine wisdom.

When it comes to God's action in the world, Paul remains convinced that God has chosen Israel as his own possession. He came to see that God has fulfilled his promises to Israel in the Messiah, Jesus.

Furthermore, through Jesus, Paul came to see that God, the Father of all, has chosen all peoples and gives his love to all peoples, drawing them into the divine communion which is God's very being. God does so by drawing them into communion with Jesus. Paul came to see that to be faithful to the covenant as a Jew he must share the faith of Abraham. He came to see that God always intended divine communion for all peoples. To cling to the Jewish law, as Paul had done before his conversion, without sharing Abraham's faith, cannot be termed fidelity.

It is this conviction of the universal dimension of God's love that drives Paul to the ends of the known world. It is this that motivates him to do all in his power to gather all into the one community of faith, respecting God's gift of difference and rejecting all human claims to favouritism or privilege of any kind. Far from rejecting Judaism, he took up the challenge to see its promise fulfilled in the communion of love which is offered to all 'in Christ Jesus'. His struggle, the 'thorn in his flesh', is with Jews who refuse to give up their imagined privileges and who attempt to limit God to their traditions. Paul continues to invite them, as he invites everyone, to turn their eyes to look at what God has done in Jesus.

What has struck me most in my journey with Paul through his letters is the depth and intimacy of his communion with Jesus and his concern for the unity of the church in which Jew and Gentile, man and woman, free and slave, welcome each other, acknowledge each other's diverse gifts and together build a community of love inspired by the Spirit of Jesus. It all comes back to love – the love that God is, as revealed in the crucified and raised Christ. God has kept all his promises. In the communion of love which is the Christian community, we experience freedom from the only real enemy – sin, which corrupts the human heart and which makes death an instrument of separating us from the communion with God for which we are all created.

Paul's core experience was of being loved by Christ, and it left him with a conviction of the radical importance of love. Nothing we think and nothing we do can produce good fruit unless it flows from love. This becomes especially important when we think or act in God's name. And by 'love' Paul did not mean any kind of love, but precisely God's love as expressed and made real for people in Jesus. Everything, including faith and adherence to truth, must be tested by love. Only God's love, the love of Christ poured into our hearts by his Spirit, has the power to transform the world.

Paul's writings make it clear that he understood that his mission was to tell everyone that there is a place for them in God's loving design. Thanks to Jesus, there is no need for anyone to continue in ignorance about who God really is. There is no need for anyone to remain lost in the distraction and destructiveness of sin. Each person, just by being a human being, whatever his or her social or religious background, has something to contribute to the building up of community. If they are Jews, like Jesus' first disciples and Paul himself, they are called to gather up the riches of their religious heritage as fulfilled in Jesus and to share these with the larger world of the Roman Empire. If they are not Jews, that is, if they are what the Jews called 'Gentiles', whether Greeks or Romans or any other people, they are called to bring all that is rich in their heritage into the community of Jesus' disciples.

In a way that captured the imagination of many of his contemporaries Paul saw, as many others did not see, that God really is the Father of all, and that God reveals in Jesus his will to draw everyone into a community in which race, social class and sexual identity would be gifts to be shared, and not inflexible realities behind which festered various forms of hatred, envy and injustice.

The need to portray the real Paul

One reason for my attempting this book is the desire to highlight the importance Paul places on love, and the fact that he saw that the revelation of God in Christ was meant for everybody. The other reason is concern over those who claim Paul in support of their doctrines, but quote him out of context, and in ways that are at variance with his true thought and intention. This is having two serious and unfortunate consequences. The first consequence is that some use Paul for easy, readily memorised answers to the most complex human problems. Truth is not attained by such behaviour. The second consequence is that some, tired of being continually bombarded with this propaganda, dismiss Paul himself as being sexist, moralistic, narrow minded and irrelevant.

It is one thing to have differences of interpretation struggling in scholarly dialogue for a more penetrating understanding. It is another to claim Paul to back up one's position, while ignoring the genuine and established conclusions of the collaboration of saintly and wise disciples of Jesus over centuries of study and prayerful reflection. Furthermore, Paul's writings are inspired words which God can use to invite us into communion with himself, and through which God can reveal to us his will. They are not meant to be a substitute for taking an honest look at what is actually going on in our own or other people's lives and applying our faith and our intelligence to working out what is to be done.

The real Paul succeeded, with clarity and passion, in bridging the enormous gap between the Jewish and the Greek world, and in drawing on the magnificent riches of each to contribute to the building of a world characterised by love. This Paul is evident from a careful reading of his letters. These letters must be allowed to speak in their magnificent breadth. They must not be constrained behind the barriers that narrower people have erected around them.

Some further observations

People are being encouraged these days, more than ever before, to have a Bible of their own, which means having ready access (usually in translation) to the thirteen extant letters that Paul wrote between 48 and his death around 67. This encouragement is to be praised, provided that people are also advised as to the difficulty of correctly interpreting the meaning of letters written long ago in a culture different from ours, written in the Greek language but expressing ideas that often have their roots in Judaism. If, to grasp Shakespeare's meaning, we need some knowledge of the political, economic and social world of his day as well as the usage of words at that time, how much more will this be necessary if we are to avoid misunderstanding Paul? We find Paul complaining that his readers are failing to understand his true meaning. If they could fail to understand, are we not much more likely to do so?

The Bible is written in human words, and so necessarily bears all the imperfections consequent upon this fact. As we see clearly from the life of Jesus, knowledge of the Old Testament can co-exist with the religious misunderstandings that Jesus himself countered with such energy. It was Paul's encounter with Christ that enabled him to find in the sacred writings of his people the first glimmerings of a revelation that was only completed on the cross. We, too, need to read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus. The powerful yet fragile words of the New Testament contain a special treasure. They present us with portraits of Jesus and with records of his words and actions, of his example and his teaching. They present us also with the reflections of the first generation of Christians on the significance of Jesus. The writings we have were treasured and preserved because those who knew Jesus judged them to be authentic expressions of the real Jesus. This does not mean that they belong to some imaginary, ethereal existence that makes them somehow relevant to every time because they belong to none. They are first century documents, powerfully relevant to the conditions and questions of the first century. If they are to have meaning for our times, we must first discover their meaning for their own, and then attempt to discover what they have to say to us.

The Bible should not be cut off from the living faith of the community within which it was written, the community that treasured it, and the community within whose experience of living faith it belongs. It is a rich depository of divinely inspired wisdom that can guide our present searching and our present listening to the living Spirit of the living God.

My aim is to write an introductory commentary. There are plenty of scholarly works available for those interested, works by devoted students from all the Christian communities who believe in the need for genuine and collaborative study. I want to try to bring some of the fruit of this study to the ordinary reader who does not have the leisure to read such works. I do not want to give the impression that Paul's letters are of their nature complicated and obscure. Paul writes clearly, forcefully, passionately, and he is writing for simple, ordinary people like you and me. The complications come from the fact that we are dealing with letters that were not written directly to us; so we have to do some work to understand the people to whom Paul was writing, the situations in which they lived and the questions Paul was addressing. The complications come from the fact that we are attempting to understand Paul across an enormous cultural gap. One should not expect this to be an easy task.

However, once the ground is cleared, once the situation is established, once the words are understood as they were by Paul's readers, much of what Paul has to say is simple and straightforward and sheds light on our human situation which is, in many ways, similar to theirs. Furthermore, the same Spirit who inspired Paul in his writing is poured into our hearts to help us see reflected in his letters what the risen Christ wishes to speak to us today in our circumstances. We must humbly acknowledge our need for scholarly help if we wish to grasp the riches of Paul's thought, but we must also read Paul in prayer, for it is a sacred text, and only a heart that is open to divine illumination can hope to discover the inspired insights of this great disciple of Jesus.

Prayerful reading and studying of Paul

In his introduction to a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church'(1993), Pope John-Paul II writes:

> To arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit and it is necessary to pray for that, to pray much, to ask in prayer for the interior light of the Spirit and to accept that light with docility, to ask for the love that alone enables one to understand the language of God who 'is love' (1John 4:8,16). While engaged in the work of interpretation, one must remain in the presence of God as much as possible.

I have tried to take this to heart and could offer no better advice to you, the reader. The reason is obvious. Paul wrote in obedience to inspiration. He trusted that God would move the hearts and minds of his readers when the letter was proclaimed at the community gathering. Only by reading his words in the Spirit in whom he wrote them can we hope to hear what God was saying to the churches through Paul.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum,* 1965), the fathers of the Second Vatican Council declared that 'in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to his children and talks with them'(*n.21*). They also said that 'growth in insight … comes about through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience'(*n.8*).

My task is to be as faithful as I am able to the work of the scholars and the tradition of wisdom that is available to the student. My prayer for you is that you abide in Christ as you read these pages, and that you take Paul's words, plus whatever help I am able to offer, into that sacred place where God is teaching you about himself, where the risen Christ is revealing to you his love and calling you to share in the same magnificent mission for which Paul gave his life.

I thank the Provincial Administration for their kindness in granting me the space needed to complete this work. I thank also Henry Bertels of the Society of Jesus for making available to me the resources of the library of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and the Italian Provincial and community of the MSC for welcoming me into their home. I thank the many scholars whose painstaking research has helped me to find some answers to my questions, and without whose devotion to scholarship this commentary could not have been written. Finally, I thank the publisher for adding this to the number of books on which we have collaborated. If this book does anything to enrich your reading of Paul, all these people deserve remembrance in your prayer.