



## PAULINE EPISTLES

### Chapter Six: Paul's Theology A Dozen Fundamental Convictions

1. Paul was an evangelist, a pastor, a spiritual director, a community builder, a person deeply in communion with God. He was not primarily a theologian, although his theology runs through all of his letters.
2. Paul operated with a set of clear convictions which he consistently and creatively communicated in his letters. He was clear and persuasive, sometimes praising, sometimes exhorting, sometimes taking to task, the communities to whom his letter was addressed. He was a "pastoral theologian" in that his theology was not theoretical but always practical.
3. To understand Paul's theology and his pastoral approach, proceed letter by letter with twelve fundamental Pauline convictions, his basic theological tenets. They are narrative statements, and all of his letters are built upon this narrative framework.
4. By searching across contingent letters, we can see the development of Paul's theology, even though specific situations occasioned the letters. The texts chosen to illustrate Paul's twelve "big ideas" highlight key dimensions of Pauline theology - they do not exhaust it.
  - a. **Covenant God of Israel** - God chose, covenanted, and tabernacled with His Chosen People who were meant to be a Divine blessing to the nations. God is an impartial judge who expects obedience to the Law of Moses or to the natural law (*covenantal nomism*). Israel is faithless and disobedient; the Gentiles are idolatrous and immoral. God therefore makes a New Covenant.  
**Illustrative texts:** ROM 1:18-3:20; Jer 31:31-34; 2 COR 3:6; 1 COR 8:6; ROM 3:29-30; ROM 2:9-13; GAL 3:8.
  - b. **Power of Sin and Powerlessness of the Law** - Sin operates as a power within and upon the human race. It manifests itself in *sins* relating to God or to others, on an individual level and on a national level. Sin enslaves people; we are *covenantally dysfunctional*. The Law of Moses told us what to do and what not to do, but it could not empower us to do so; it could not free us from enslavement to sin AND could not forgive sins. We needed a Savior! **Illustrative texts:** GLA 3:21-22; ROM 3:9; ROM 8:3.

- c. **Righteousness of God: Faithfulness to Israel and Mercy to Gentiles - *Hesed*** - God's covenantal faithfulness and saving power, manifested in God sending His Son even though we were sinners, Jew and Gentile alike, fulfilling the promise to Abraham that in him, all nations would be blessed. **Illustrative texts:** ROM 1:16-17; ROM 3:3-4; ROM 3:21-26; GAL 3:29
- d. **Revelatory, representative, and reconciling crucifixion of Jesus, the Messiah** - For Paul, Jesus' death by crucifixion has a rich, polyvalent, inexhaustible significance. Three of the most important dimensions are: (1) Jesus' death on the Cross **reveals** the faithfulness, love, and power of God; (2) As Messiah, Jesus dies as the faithful, obedient **representative** of Israel and all people; He is the New Adam who counteracts Adam's sin. His death echoes the Father's **hesed** - faithful covenantal love; and (3) Jesus' death **reconciles** us with God and repairs the relationship, elevating us to adopted children, bestowing forgiveness for sins and freedom from sin. **Illustrative texts:** ROM 5:12-21; 1 COR 1:22-25; ROM 5:8; ROM 5:15; GAL 2:20; 2 COR 5:14, 19 -
- e. **The Lordship of Jesus** - Paul affirms the pre-existence and Divine status of Jesus. When Paul speaks of Jesus' Lordship, he refers to the exalted status He received from the Father because of His faithful obedience to the Father's Will. God's raising Jesus from the dead vindicates Him as the Messiah of Israel and Lord of all. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not, nor is any god. Jesus is to be confessed as Lord and obeyed as God. Those who live "in Him" share in His grace. **Illustrative texts:** Philippians 2:9-11; Isa 45:23; 1 COR 12:3; Philippians 2:9-11.
- f. **Climax of the Covenant and the overlap of the Ages** - In Christ, all God's promises are fulfilled. The New Covenant is established in the Paschal Mystery. Christ becomes the lens through which Paul interprets the Scriptures. Jesus is the goal and focus of the Law and the Prophets. His Incarnation, Passion, death, and Resurrection usher in the New Age, the Age to Come, the New Creation - even as this Age continues. We are in the here-but-not-yet-there phase, an in-between overlap of the ages. Christians live with an eye to the future (Second Coming) while we celebrate the past (His Incarnation and Paschal Mystery) in the present (in the Mass). **Illustrative texts:** ROM 10:4; 2 COR 1:20; 1 COR 10:11; 2 COR 5:17; 1 COR 11:25.
- g. **Justification by grace through faith - *Dikaiosyne*** can mean justification or righteousness. Paul draws from three primary spheres for its significance: (1) God's character [righteousness, holiness, fidelity, salvation]; (2) the covenant with its expectation of righteous conduct; and (3) the law court with its idea of a verdict of acquittal. Paul would define "justification" as: "the establishment or restoration of right covenantal relations with God, including fidelity to God and love for neighbor, with the certain hope of acquittal on the day of judgment." Justification is reconciliation with God and inclusion into His covenant community. God takes the initiative by giving us His **grace** and we respond in **faith**: trust, obedience, and confession of faith. This is an ongoing covenantal relationship with God. **Illustrative texts:** Philippians 3:9; ROM 3:28-30; ROM 5:1-2; ROM 6:11; ROM 8:3-4.
- h. **Trinitarian experience of God** - Paul knows God in three realities: **Abba**, Father; **Messiah**, Son of God; and **Holy Spirit**, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Christians are adopted by God the Father; they live in the Crucified, Risen Messiah in the power of the Spirit. **Illustrative texts:** GAL 4:6; 1 COR 12:4-6; 2 COR 13:13; ROM 8:9-11.
- i. **Cruciformity, the law of Christ** - Christians must conform themselves to Christ, which means acceptance of suffering - cruciformity. Twice Paul refers to this as the "law of Christ," the narrative pattern of the Crucified - faith working through love which is rooted in the Cross where the Son of God expressed His faithfulness and obedience by His self-giving love. This is Paul's

master narrative: faith toward God, love toward others. Faith oriented toward the future is hope; and there you have the theological virtues. **Illustrative texts:** GAL 6:2; 1 COR 9:21; GAL 5:5-6; GAL 2:19-20; Philippians 2:1-11 and 3:10-11; 1 THES 1:2-3.

- j. **The Spirit as Promise fulfilled and hop guaranteed** - The New Age brings the promised outpouring of the Spirit which would renew Israel and bring all nations to worship the One True God. The Gentiles' experience of the outpouring of the Spirit is proof that the New Age had begun which would come to full fruition in the future. All Christians possess and can be guided by the Spirit if they listen to Him. **Illustrative texts:** GAL 3:13-14; 2 COR 5:5.
  - k. **The Church as alternative (countercultural) community** - The Church is a covenant community, holy, set apart, distinct from the culture/society. It exists in continuity with Israel and against the pagan Roman Empire. Within the Church should be an ethos of harmony, humility, and love toward all. **Illustrative texts:** 1 COR 6:9-11; 1 THES 4:3-5; 1 COR 12:12; Philippians 3:20; 1 THES 5:14-18.
  - l. **The Parousia, the Resurrection, and the final triumph of God** - Paul was an apocalyptic Jew and a Pharisee; therefore, he saw Jesus' Resurrection as representative of the general resurrection. Jesus was the "first fruits" and the assurance of God's final definitive defeat of sin and death and the restoration of all creation. God will be "all in all." The Divine plan will have been fulfilled. **Illustrative texts:** 1 COR 15:20; 1 COR 15:28; Philippians 3:10-11; 1 THES 4:16-17; 1 COR 15:20-28; ROM 8:18-21.
5. This list of twelve can be condensed into three overarching themes of **covenant, cruciformity, and community**. Paul's letters are instruments of his mission: "to create a network of multicultural communities obeying and glorifying the One True God of Israel by living lives of cruciform faith, hope, and love in Christ Jesus the Lord by the power of the Spirit."
  6. For Paul, there was nothing wrong with Judaism, but there was something wrong with humanity - and only the God of Israel, acting in the Messiah awaited by the Jews through the power of the Holy Spirit can fix the problem. Judaism is the solution for Paul - Judaism which recognizes the Messiah for whom it has long waited - a converted Judaism whose hearts are filled with faith, hope, and love for friend and foe alike; Jews who welcome the stranger into the eschatological community; Jews who live in the Spirit and by the letter of the New Covenant. When Paul disassociates from his past life in Judaism (GAL 1:13-14), he affirms his ongoing ministry on behalf of the God of Israel to bless and unite all the world in the worship of the One True God.

The letters in the order in which they may have been written:

1 THES, 2 THES; GAL; 1 COR, 2 COR; ROM; Philippians; Philemon; COL; Ephesians; 2 TIM; 1 TIM; Titus