

## Biography of Apostle Paul By Jonathan Hill

One man dominates the picture of first-century Christianity like no other, save Jesus Himself. Indefatigable missionary, forthright debater, theologian of extraordinary originality - the genius of Paul would shape Christianity for the next 2,000 years.

The main source for Paul's life and thought are the book of Acts, whose second half is dominated by accounts of his travels, and Paul's own letters which dominate the New Testament itself. The two sources are not always easy to reconcile, but both agree that Paul came from Tarsus, a city in Anatolia not far from Antioch. He was probably born at around the same time as Jesus (approximately 5 years), although he never met him. Paul was one of the Jews of the diaspora, a strict Pharisee, and his name was Saul ('Paulos' was the Greek form of his name, and it was understandable that he preferred this version, since 'Saulos' in Greek means a provocative wiggling of the hips!). He was a skilled manual worker, probably a tentmaker, but he also studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, one of the leading Pharisee teachers.

Both Acts and his own letters confirm that in the early days of Christianity Paul hated the new religion. In fact he was a leading figure in the attempt on the part of the Jewish authorities to suppress it. Acts describe him as present at the death of Stephen, guarding everyone's coats and approving while they stoned the martyr. But, while travelling to Damascus in the course of these activities, Paul had an extraordinary experience: according to Acts 9, he was temporarily blinded by a celestial light and heard the voice of Jesus. According to his own account, he met Jesus himself. The church's worst enemy had become a Christian.

Almost immediately Paul began to preach about Jesus, first in Arabia and Damascus, where he escaped arrest by being let down out of a window in a basket, before going to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and then returning to Tarsus, apparently for several years. After this, beginning probably in the mid-40s, Paul began what are often called three great missionary journeys. In reality, they were one long journey back and forth throughout the eastern empire, a journey that probably ended only with Paul's imprisonment and death. Each of the three main legs of the journey took him through Anatolia, before passing through Jerusalem and Antioch; the second and third also saw Paul traveling down the Greek peninsula. Major cities that he visited included Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Philippi. After the third leg of the journey Paul was attacked by a mob outside the Temple in Jerusalem and arrested. Pleading his rights as a Roman citizen, Paul was taken to Rome for trial and put in prison. And there our early sources fall silent.

Paul apparently hoped to be released and extended his work in the western empire, and some later traditions indicated that he did just that, making it all the way to Spain or even Britain. However, it seems more likely that he was executed for his faith in Rome, in the early mid-60s.

Paul was accompanied in his work by various companions, notably Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, and his physician, Luke. During his travels he supported himself by the labor of his hands. He spoke to churches that had already been established, but increasingly he founded new churches - presumably as time went by he became more effective at speaking. He was concerned not only to win converts for Christ, but also to raise money for the church in Jerusalem: this 'collection' was important since it symbolized the unity of all the churches. After

he left his churches, he wrote letters to them, urging them to keep the faith. Some (not all) of these letters survive, and they make up a major part of the New Testament. Thirteen letters bear Paul's name, although most modern scholars agree that at least some are not his work (Hebrews for example). Those which are almost universally accepted as genuine are the letters to the Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philipians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, and the shorter personal note to Philemon.

Paul's letters testify to his theological concerns, which arose directly from his experiences as a preacher. Many of his ideas were worked out as responses to pastoral or theological problems raised by his congregations, but the touchstone for everything he wrote was the role of Christ in the history of salvation. Paul was convinced that the God who sent Christ was the God of the Jews, and that salvation came through him - but what role did this leave for the Jewish law and the Jewish people? Paul never abandoned his convictions that the Jews were God's chosen people, but in different letters he tried different ways of reconciling this with his faith in Christ. He expressed more clearly than any other New Testament writer the centrality of the death and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, Paul was convinced that Christ was a living reality in his own life and in that of all Christians. He urged the Roman Christians, for example, to 'not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2). This notion that Christians should live a different kind of life, one that was an example to others would resonate for centuries.

Paul has sometimes been called the true founder of Christianity, obliterating the original message of Jesus and the apostles with his own distinctive religion, especially his emphasis on the person of Christ instead of his teaching. We should be wary of such claims. In his lifetime, Paul was just one of a number of Christian missionaries: the spread of religion during this period was certainly not solely due to his efforts. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul goes to considerable effort to stress his equality with the apostles (even calling himself an apostle), indicating that many people did not see him as so important. It is only with hindsight that Paul looms so large, mainly because of the enormous influence of his letters. These letters were apparently collected, edited and circulated among the churches after his death, and they became a great inspiration for them. Paul's theology would become the starting point for most Christian theology in the years to come. In particular, his letter to the Romans, in which his ideas were worked out most fully, would be a major influence on theologians from Augustine to Luther to Barth. Paul was not simply the first great Christian writer: he has remained as a constant and living influence upon the church for nearly two millennia.