

Paul and His Christian Mission

Includes Study Guide

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Michael Azad A.G. Haykin

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Front cover: This image of Paul writing comes from an early ninth-century manuscript, written in the Monastery of Saint Gall (St. Gallen), Switzerland, now housed in Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart. This is believed to be one of the earliest depictions of the apostle Paul in a European manuscript. It follows an early medieval tradition of depicting the author of a text as seated and writing. The inscription says: *S(AN)C(TU)S PAULUS sedet hic scripsit* (“Saint Paul sits here [and] writes”). *Wikimedia Commons*

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Michael Azad A.G. Haykin

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In thankful memory of

Bruce Woods (1931–2022),
a Pauline father in Christ

&

Richard N. Longenecker (1930–2021),
a Pauline scholar *par excellence*

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Preface

This book on the Christian mission of the apostle Paul originated in a series of talks given in July 2011 at Muskoka Bible Centre in the Muskokas, Ontario. I am deeply thankful to its director, John Friesen, for the privilege of speaking on that occasion, and indeed, for a longstanding involvement in the summer ministry of this remarkable Christian endeavour.

My first time on the grounds of Muskoka Baptist Conference (what Muskoka Bible Centre was then called) was in the summer of 1977. My wife Alison and I had been married in November of the previous year at Stanley Avenue Baptist Church, Hamilton, by Pastor Bruce Woods. The following summer, Bruce's eldest son, Mark Woods, and his wife Shelley invited Alison and me, along with another couple of friends, Peter and Sandy Fodor, to join them on a canoe trip in Algonquin Park. We were to meet at the Woods' cottage, which was on the grounds of the Muskoka Baptist Conference. We stayed just a few hours at the cottage, but it was the beginning of a long love affair with this part of Ontario.

Given this book's link with Muskoka Bible Centre, it is appropriate that one of those to whom I dedicate this book is Bruce Woods; I owe him an enormous debt. I came to Christ under his ministry at Stanley Avenue Baptist Church in 1974. He baptized me in April of that year and gave me opportunities to teach and speak publicly at the church. He gave me sage advice on theological matters such as the work of the Holy Spirit and eschatology. (He had been to Dallas Theological Seminary but was moving

away from classical Dispensationalism.) When I sensed a call to vocational ministry in the church at the time of my conversion, he very wisely encouraged me to go to Wycliffe College, which was such a blessing in so many ways. He officiated at my wedding, as noted above, and when I finished seminary, he played a key role in helping me get a teaching position at Central Baptist Seminary in 1982. When I decided to go to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary full-time in 2006, his was one of two voices of counsel I consulted; the other was Bob Holmes. I treasured Bruce's advice, as I knew he approached the matter without bias. In later years, we would meet for tea/coffee at Tim Hortons near his home in Ancaster, Ontario. (Ancaster is right next door to Dundas, where I live.) These meetings were always a joy. I loved his sanguine outlook on and zest for life, his zeal for Christ and winsome boldness in sharing his faith, his creativity and fearlessness and his Pauline passion for the spread of the kingdom of Christ. I shall be forever grateful to God for his deep impact upon my life.

Indeed, it was under Woods' ministry that I first learned about the apostle Paul, who, undoubtedly, is one of the most influential thinkers in Western culture.¹ In what follows, we shall explore six aspects of Paul's missionary passion. The books on this area of the life of the apostle Paul are literally legion. Two have been especially important to me. First, there is Eckhard J. Schnabel's *Paul the Missionary*, which I consider the definitive modern monograph on this subject. Then, there is an older study, which did much to shape my early thinking about Paul's ministry: F.F. Bruce's *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, a superb work based on a lifetime of study of the Pauline texts and the Lukan account of Paul's mission in Acts.

One Pauline scholar whose lectures and seminars also profoundly shaped my reading of Paul and his mission was Richard N. Longenecker (1930–1921). When Pastor Woods encouraged me to attend Wycliffe College, little did I know the remarkable scholars under whom I would study. One of them, who taught me

¹ I am indebted for this thought to the comment by Douglas A. Campbell: "Paul is the most influential political philosopher in the USA today, and arguably in the rest of the world as well, and this surely makes him one of the most important figures in human history" (*Paul: An Apostle's Journey* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2018], 1).

most of my New Testament courses, was Dr. Longenecker.² I was but twenty when I began my studies under him, far too young in many ways to appreciate the remarkable scholar that he was, not only in terms of learning but also in terms of character.³ The passing years have deepened my appreciation of having been tutored by such a fine Pauline scholar, who not only taught me about Paul's thought but also modeled how to be a Christian scholar.

In this book, I explore six aspects of Paul's mission that were essential to its success. These six aspects of the Pauline mission lie at the very foundation of the church in the Mediterranean basin, a key matrix of Christianity. First, there is his focus on conversion, which, in turn, is grounded in the dominical commissioning of Paul to go to the Gentiles "to open their eyes." Then, there is the way Paul's mission was tied very much to his love for the people of God. Third, Paul was also an activist, who maintained an evangelistic zeal at white-hot flame all his life. Fourth, Paul knew that without prayer his mission would come to nothing. Moreover, at the heart of the Pauline mission was what scholars call the Pauline circle. Nothing of what Paul accomplished could have happened without this body of co-workers. Finally, Paul's mission was fundamentally reliant on the Holy Spirit and his grace. If Paul had adopted a Bible verse as the motto for his mission, Zechariah 4:6 would have fit it to a tee: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."

What I do not consider in this book is the heart of Paul's preaching, namely, the gospel, the glory of God in the face of the crucified and risen Christ. But doing justice to the apostle's preaching would require another book.

² See especially his *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971) and his *Paul, Apostle of Liberty: The Origin and Nature of Paul's Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2015).

³ In his "Foreword" to the second edition of Longenecker's *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, Douglas Campbell notes that Longenecker was "justly revered as much for his kindness as for his erudition" (*Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, xvi). For a beautiful tribute to Dr. Longenecker's scholarship, see James Ernest, "In Memoriam: Richard N. Longenecker, 1930–2021" (<https://verbasparsa.org/2021/06/11/in-memoriam-richard-n-longenecker-1930-2021/>; accessed March 25, 2022).

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Dundas, Ontario
Easter Week, 2022

Conversion

By any standard, the apostle Paul lived an incredibly eventful life. He was transformed from a violent, pugilistic individual, prepared to kill for his religious beliefs, into a man of love, ever ready to die for his Saviour, Christ Jesus, who had died for him and loved him with an everlasting love. He survived assassination attempts, a number of shipwrecks, various stonings at the hands of mobs and corporal punishment meted out by Roman soldiers. He was the central driving force in the establishment of Christian communities around the shores of the Mediterranean, travelling some 25,000 kilometres during his ministry according to one estimate and planting a dozen or more churches.¹ And, of course, he penned thirteen books of the New Testament canon.

George Whitefield (1714–1770), the indefatigable evangelist of the eighteenth century, rightly asked of Paul: “Was he not filled with a holy, restless impatience and insatiable thirst of travelling, and undertaking dangerous voyages for the conversion of infidels?”² Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), a remarkable historian though liberal in his theology, wrote this tribute about Paul:

¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press; Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 121–122.

² George Whitefield, *Some Remarks on a Pamphlet, Entitled, The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd* (London: W. Strahan, 1749), 26.

What missionary is there, what preacher, what man entrusted with the cure of souls, who can be compared with him, whether in the greatness of the task which he accomplished or in the holy energy with which he carried it out? He worked with the most living of all messages, and kindled a fire; he cared for his people like a father and strove for the souls of others with all the forces of his own; at the same time he discharged the duties of the teacher, the schoolmaster, the organizer. When he sealed his work by his death, the Roman Empire from Antioch as far as Rome, nay, as far as Spain, was planted with Christian communities.³

But how did Paul come to be such a missionary of Jesus? How did he accomplish all that he did? What does all of this mean for us today? This small book seeks to answer these questions by looking at certain aspects of his mission: love as the motivating force for his mission; his plans for a mission to Spain; the centrality of prayer in Paul's mission; his co-workers; and finally, his reliance on the Spirit of God. But first, we must begin with his conversion.

Paul before his conversion

Let me begin with the obvious: Paul was a Jew. He never lost sight of the fact that as a member of the Jewish people, he was the recipient of an incredible heritage. As he makes clear in Romans 9:4–5, to the Israelites “belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises...the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever.” God had intended these gifts—the gift of the covenants and the law, the Scriptures and the promise of the Messiah—to be a means to help the rest of the world come to know the living God, the God of Israel. However, the Jewish people had by and large kept themselves separate from the nations, grown to despise them and saw the one true God as only *their* God and not the God of the Gentiles. In other words, the grace God had shown Israel became a matter of ethnic pride.

³ Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons; London: Williams and Norgate, 1908), 202–203.

In Philippians 3:4–6, we see very clearly some of the things in which Paul, before his conversion, took great pride. There was the fact that he was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin” in his hometown of Tarsus (Acts 9:11; 21:29a).⁴ Through the act of circumcision, which was established by God 2,000 years earlier as part of the covenant God made with Abraham, Paul was included among the people of God.

Then, he was “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” Most Jews outside Israel did not speak Hebrew, the ancient language of the people of God; they used Greek, the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean. Paul could speak Hebrew as if he had grown up in Israel.⁵ As a young boy, probably when he was twelve or so, his family took him to study and live in Jerusalem with one of the most prominent rabbis of the day, Gamaliel, the son or grandson of Hillel. As Paul says in Acts 22:3:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.⁶

Third, Paul was “as to the law, a Pharisee.” He grew up in a very conservative Jewish family, demonstrated by his parents taking him to Jerusalem when he was twelve, as well as Paul’s statement that he was “a Pharisee.”⁷ Also, Paul’s family was probably a fairly well-to-do family of high social standing since they could afford to support him in Jerusalem as he studied.⁸ Paul was so committed a Pharisee that he believed he was “blameless” in keeping the law (Philippians 3:6; see also Galatians 1:14: “I was advancing in Judaism

⁴ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 40–41; Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus: After Jesus*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2008), 27–30. Paul also possessed Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28), which meant that his father must have been a citizen. It is interesting in this regard that Paul generally ministered in towns that were key centres of Roman power and influence.

⁵ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 41, sees this phrase as having a linguistic implication; Barnett, *Paul*, 33 disagrees and sees it as a further reference to a strict upbringing.

⁶ On Gamaliel, see Barnett, *Paul*, 34–36.

⁷ In Acts 23:6, Luke quotes Paul as saying, “I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.” See also Acts 22:3.

⁸ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 43.

beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”) This is important. Paul did not seem to have wrestled with a guilty conscience prior to his conversion. As far as he was concerned, he was above reproach. It is also important to note that Paul would have been in Jerusalem during the ministry of Jesus, since he was formerly a contemporary of Christ. In Paul’s eyes, the crucifixion of Christ would have meant that Christ was forsaken by God because of the well-known truism he states in Galatians 3:13: “Cursed is every-one who is hanged on a tree.”

Finally, Paul was “as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church.” In Galatians 1:13, Paul recalls how, in his former life in Judaism, he “persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” In 1 Timothy 1:13, he states that he was a “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.” That final word implied he had actually killed Christians. We know Paul was present at the death of Stephen, the first martyr. In Acts 8:1, we read that Paul “approved of his execution.” Did Stephen’s death give Paul remorse? There is no indication it did. Luke mentions Paul’s presence to demonstrate the extent of his zeal for Pharisaism, not so much to indicate what might have been taking place within the mind and heart of the Pharisee Paul. In fact, it may well be the case that the killing of Stephen was the catalyst that launched Paul on his career as a persecutor.⁹ For Paul, zeal for the law entailed an unconditional commitment to maintain Israel’s distinctiveness. Paul was forceful and violent if necessary against both Gentiles and fellow Jews, whom he regarded as either apostates or not zealous enough.¹⁰

The conversion of Paul

Turning to Acts 9, we see that Paul’s conversion is one of the most important events, if not the most important event, of the Book of Acts. How can we say this? Well, first of all, the story is recounted three times—in Acts 9, 22, 26—each time from a slightly different perspective. One of the issues uppermost in the mind of any ancient author was the size of the book or scroll he was writing.

⁹ Barnett, *Paul*, 45–53. See also Acts 22:20.

¹⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1998), 351–352.

The Book of Acts was at the maximum length for a scroll in the ancient world. If Luke did not consider the narrative of Paul's conversion tremendously important, he would never have taken up valuable space by recounting it no less than three times. In fact, it is noteworthy that the second account is somewhat longer than the first account and the third account is even longer than the second. Perhaps the significance of the event is meant to grow in the mind of the reader.¹¹

Paul received letters from the high priest that gave him authority to arrest Christians, like Stephen, in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. Damascus was an important commercial centre 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It had a considerable Jewish population, and as it lay on the main route from Egypt to Mesopotamia, it could easily become a key centre for the dissemination of the Christian message. On his way there, around midday, when the sun was its brightest, Paul saw a blazing light "brighter than the sun" (Acts 26:13). In the Old Testament, appearances of God were usually accompanied by a bright light.¹² In this case, Christ appeared—an implication of his deity.

The effect on Paul was so powerful that he lost his bodily strength and fell to the ground.¹³ According to Acts 9:4–6 (similarly Acts 22:7–10), he then heard a voice. In Acts 26:14, Luke tells us the voice spoke in Hebrew: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul was confused by the question. He wasn't attacking God. In his mind, he had been serving God; it was the apostate Jewish followers of the accursed Jesus that he was rounding up for possible execution who were attacking God. Hence, he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The term "Lord" (*kyrios*) is clearly a divine title. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." As Jesus identified himself, one can only imagine what a traumatic shock it must have been for the Pharisee Saul. He now had the horrible realization that his zeal, instead of being approved of by God, had actually been against God.¹⁴ Saul's

¹¹ It is also good narrative technique to reserve some details for the later accounts.

¹² See, for example, Isaiah 60:1–3, 19; Ezekiel 1:26–28; 10:1–4.

¹³ Many depictions of this aspect of Paul's conversion, show him falling from a horse. But there is no mention of a horse in the text.

¹⁴ The phrase in Acts 26:14, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" is a Greek proverb. It depicts a goad, a wooden stick with metal spikes against which it was useless to kick since one would only hurt oneself. What is the meaning of the proverb in this

resulting “blindness was obviously due...to the sudden shock of being confronted with the glory of the one whom he thought of as a blasphemer.”¹⁵ This was not simply a *vision* of Jesus: Paul actually saw the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:8).

Is Paul converted at this point? No. But the experience on the road had begun a process that would surely result in a full conversion. Proof of that conversion was that he received the Spirit—see Acts 9:17—which is *the* proof of genuine conversion in the Book of Acts.¹⁶ That day on the Damascus Road and the two days that followed saw the conversion of Paul from a persecutor of Christians and a man filled with hate and violence to a devoted follower of Christ and a lover of both Jew and Gentile. But there was more for Paul: there would be a call to be a missionary.

The calling of Paul as a missionary

Acts 9:10–19 recounts the way Ananias, a Christian disciple from Damascus,¹⁷ had a vision and was told to go to “Straight Street,” today Darb el-Mostakim. However, unlike Paul, Ananias knew who was speaking to him, as he said, “Here I am Lord” (verse 10). Despite some profound misgivings about the likelihood of real change in Paul, Ananias was obedient and went to see him. Thus, Ananias was there when Paul received the Spirit, which would have confirmed to Ananias the reality of Saul’s conversion. It was probably Ananias who baptized Paul—though this is not explicitly stated. As found throughout Acts, baptism followed conversion.

Ananias also conveyed to Paul Christ’s calling of him to be a missionary, as we read in Acts 9: 15–16: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Acts 26:16–18 gives us a fuller version of the commissioning of Paul as a missionary

context? It emphasizes that it is ultimately “fruitless to struggle against God” (Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co.; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998], 311). It does not refer to conviction of sin in Paul’s conscience.

¹⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 75.

¹⁶ See the argument of Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*.

¹⁷ Acts 22:12—“a devout man according to the law.”



Dominus Deus fortitudo mea | The sovereign LORD is my strength