

Paul and Religion

Paul and Religion demonstrates the continuing and contemporary relevance of the most important and most controversial figure of early Christianity. Paul W. Gooch interrogates the Pauline writings for their meaning as well as their implications for religion as an entire form of life, a stance on the world expressed in distinctive practices. Bringing a philosophical approach to this topic, he connects Paul's ideas to lived experience. In a conversational style, Gooch explores Paul's experience of grace and his dismissal of characteristic markers of religious identity in favour of love as binding together a community. Contrary to common expectations, he finds within Paul's letters material for conversations about the issues of our day, such as gender and sexuality. From his close reading of the letters, Gooch argues that the Pauline religious form of life is not identical with institutional Christianity. Indeed, his conclusions may be welcome to those who belong to other faiths.

Paul W. Gooch is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Partial Knowledge: Philosophical Studies in Paul* (1987) and *Reflections on Jesus and Socrates: Word and Silence* (1997).

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Unfinished Conversations

PAUL W. GOOCH

University of Toronto



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*For Pauline
who lives with grace and love for this Paul
in gratitude*

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Preface

I have lived with my namesake Paul all my life. But not the same Paul: three different ones, as it turns out.

My first Paul was the hero of the Gospel to the whole world, including my world. He was the Paul of the Book of Acts, the intrepid travelling missionary who suffered dangers and imprisonment. He was the Paul in the storybook I received, probably as a Sunday School prize, titled *Come before Winter*, which I can locate only in dim memory – it was wrapped in those covers we made from brown paper bags, corners taped, and titles lettered in a childish hand.

My second Paul came into focus early in my philosophical career as I brought to Paul's text issues in the philosophy of religion in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. That work resulted in a series of studies of 1 Corinthians, *Partial Knowledge: Philosophical Studies in Paul*, published more than three decades ago. In more recent years I have published essays dealing with Paul and the mind of Christ, and exploring texts in Paul having to do with our knowledge of God and with conscience.¹ This was a Paul who was brought into philosophical conversation regardless of what he himself might have thought about the enterprise.

And now there is this Paul.

Until this assignment came along, I had not attempted to ask myself directly what Paul might offer, by way of conversation with our own times, for the understanding of religion and what I call here the religious form of life. That is a different endeavour from interrogating his texts for what they might yield of philosophical interest on a particular topic or issue. It requires stepping back from close readings in order to find

¹ 'Paul, the Mind of Christ, and Philosophy' in 2009, 'Faithful Knowing' in 2012, and 'Conscience and the Voice of God: Faithful Discernment' in 2016.

a perspective on his deepest concerns and on the problems he wrestled with. It also requires a recognition that our perspective is located in the twenty-first century, and in my case, in a society of wide religious and cultural diversity. This third Paul is not the Protestant champion of faith versus works of my youth; he is not the interlocutor in my exploration of our knowledge of God, or conscience, or theological ethics. Of course elements of these personae persist, but now the overriding concern is to discover what, if anything, Paul may offer a world that is conflicted, consoled, and confused by religion – when it does not condemn or ignore it. I have discovered that, beyond the Pauls of recent uncritical disdain or devotion, emerges a fascinating and complex figure whose insights (or maybe I should say revelations) might make us pause to rethink our relationships, not just to our own stance on the world, but also to the faiths of others.

The primary concern of this study is not with what religion meant to Paul twenty centuries ago. Many scholars read Paul's letters with historical or sociological questions guiding their work, but I am not setting out in that direction. Others attempt to offer theological arguments in favour of certain normative beliefs and practices; they may seek to extract a coherent account of the human condition in relation to God, constructing a Pauline theological system that will guide the faith and conduct of Christian believers. That is not my aim here. I do not intend to contribute to the standard scholarship on Paul, though I make grateful use of small bits of the vast number of articles and books available at a few keystrokes to anyone who has access to research libraries.²

Instead, in the following pages I wish to engage in what I have elsewhere called 'interrogative conversation' with Paul's writings. The point of the exercise is to bring questions to Paul's texts and to permit those texts to interrogate us as readers. 'Interrogation' is not always a friendly term (as a glance at the Wikipedia entry for 'interrogation room' will confirm), but here I mean only to signal that the book brings perennial and current questions to these ancient letters, letters which themselves cause us to reflect upon the conditions of our own lives. To bring Paul into a contemporary conversation is not unusual, of course; Paul is often

² One indication of the vastness of the literature on Paul is the fifty pages of bibliography in N. T. Wright's two-volume study, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*; almost all of the entries to which have been written in the twenty-first century. Let us all be grateful for the digitized standard works, reference books, and online journal publications available during the 2020 pandemic, when much of this was written or revised.

quoted at Sunday services. Even when it is done memorably, as in Martin Luther King's sermon 'Paul's Letter to American Christians', that is not the exercise for this book.³ Paul must be interrogated, not just quoted.

My approach, then, is to engage in conversation with Paul – that is, with the ideas, claims, passions, and commitments living in his one-way correspondence that has survived these long centuries. His writing is a start, a goad, to a conversation that is forever unfinished. We do not have any clear information about what his readers said to each other when his letters were read out in their gatherings, or about what they said back to him.⁴ And the conversation keeps on going, as new generations of readers listen, reflect, and talk among themselves.

Letters by their very nature are addressed to particularities of person and of circumstance. When they are read by those who are not their directly intended recipients, their content has to be interpreted according to different particularities. So even if the original conversation is finished, new conversations require their own conclusions. Conversations with Paul, then, are always unfinished. Which brings us to our own time and to our own questions.

Some of the issues of the twenty-first century have endured for a long time; many human concerns exercised our forebears, and their forebears through the generations as well. But other complex issues with religious import continue to emerge in contemporary society – undoubtedly a motivation for this Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society series. One of those issues, prominent in Christian denominations but also in Islam and Judaism, concerns gender and sexuality. Paul is not silent on such matters. Another issue, especially in our globalized urban world, is religious diversity and pluralism. Paul, both a Jew and a Christian, can be invited into that conversation. What, though, about other pressing concerns in our own particularities? The unsettling of the world by an unseen virus? The environmental crisis? The baneful blessings of artificial intelligence? The ascendancy of greed? The exposures of racism?

Paul says little or nothing on these burning issues. Given such striking differences between Paul's world and ours, some may not approach his

³ Delivered on November 4, 1956, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and available on YouTube.

⁴ Except, perhaps, for a little glimpse in the Corinthian letters, when he writes about his previous correspondence with them (see 1 Cor. 5:9 and 2 Cor. 2:4–18; 7:8–13 – on which see the section 'Problematic Insiders' in Chapter 8).

letters with high expectations of their relevance. Indeed, his style of arguing and his apparent preoccupation with his own status may be as off-putting as some of his views. But it is worth asking what in the human experience has given his letters their enormous influence across the centuries, and to begin the encounter with the usual courtesies of good conversation, not just telling the other what you think, but also with a willingness to listen and learn.

It may help readers to anticipate what lies ahead, if only to guide them to places of particular interest. The book's chapters unfold as explorations of eight questions, and the final chapter points to ways in which the conversation might continue.

What Does Paul Have to Do with Religion? Beginning the Conversation. Chapter 1 takes account of the obstacles to the very enterprise of discussing religion with Paul and proposes that, rather than seeking a noncontroversial tight definition of religion, we think of the 'religious form of life' as providing the way into this study.

What Kind of Religious Interlocutor Is Paul? Understandings and Misunderstandings. The second chapter looks at the material we have to work with, setting out some common impressions of Paul and sorting through misunderstandings about his 'conversion' and religious experience, his personality, his views about gender and sexuality, and his authority.

What Is the Religious Form of Life for Paul? Going Wrong and Getting Right (Chapter 3). Answering this overarching question reveals how Paul thinks about what is wrong with us and how we can come right. He sees us all 'in Adam', flawed and mortal, disobedient and messed up. We cannot help ourselves. We need to be recreated 'in Christ', provided with a new status and stance.

What Does a Pauline Religious Form of Life Have to Do with Death? Amazing Grace (Chapter 4). Paul's famously puzzling claim is that he has been crucified with Christ. It turns out that this has much to do with his experience of grace and with the love which raises him to new life.

What, for Paul, Is the Nature of Religious Community? Body, Family, Love (Chapter 5). Paul employs two images in his letters: the new community 'in Christ' is *body* and *family*, all of whose members are valued. What holds them together, we will find, is agapic love.

How, for Paul, Should Life 'in Christ' Be Lived? Love and Do What You Will (Chapter 6). The religious form of life is usually governed by rules of conduct, but for Paul, it is about getting the heart right, having the mind of Christ, living in the freedom of the Spirit, and again, love.

What, for Paul, Are the Marks of Membership? Bodies and Hearts (Chapter 7). Membership in a religious community is signalled by distinctive practices. Paul writes extensively about the identity markers of food, sacred time, and circumcision, and argues that it is circumcision of the heart that counts.

How, for Paul, Does a Religious Community Relate to Others? Insiders and Outsiders (Chapter 8). Inside, there are problematic members; outside, society and the state may be hostile. Paul addresses these issues, but it is not easy to know if he provides hints about how a community ‘in Christ’ should relate to other communities of faith.

The book comes to an end with *Paul and Religion: The Conversation Continues* (Chapter 9). After summarizing the key elements of a Pauline religious form of life, we can point to ways in which the conversation may continue over pressing concerns of faith and society. The Pauline form of religious life turns out to be not completely identical to Christian forms of religious life. Issues of sex and gender as well as religious pluralism come up once more.

What the reader has here, then, is my side of the conversation with Paul. Paul cannot answer, of course. Nor will readers of my text have much opportunity to interact with me. The conversations remain one-sided, unfinished. But in situating my reader to eavesdrop, as it were, on these conversations, I hope to provide occasion for much more talk about what Paul may have to do with religion in our day.