

Study Guide

St. Paul: From Saul of Tarsus to the Apostle of the Lutheran Reformation

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This resource was originally designed as continuing education for pastors **and** can also be used by motivated congregational groups that want to go deeper in understanding Paul and the Lutheran Reformation.

For those using this course in a small group setting here is a list of reminders to help facilitate small group formation and learning:

- The facilitator should view the session in advance to prepare for the discussion.
- Double-check the equipment the day of the study to make sure that everything is working. Technical difficulties derail even the most enthusiastic group.
- During the viewing make sure that everyone can see the screen. After the viewing, if at all possible, rearrange the seating to a semi-circle or a circle so that participants can see each other to better facilitate conversation.
- Provide nametags and/or have participants introduce themselves before beginning the discussion. Remember that a newcomer is less likely to return if they are not made to feel welcome through some form of introduction or inclusion. Whether a church is large or small, not knowing 'how things are done here' can make a participant feel uncomfortable. The more the facilitator can be clear about the process and hospitality the more comfortable people will feel.
- Open and close with a short prayer.
- Set ground rules for discussion. If you have a stable group that meets weekly, you may only have to mention these the first session. If people move in and out of the group you will have to make these reminders at each session. It is OK and welcome to have differences of opinion.
- If anything personal happens to be shared that information stays in the room unless the person who spoke gives permission to speak outside the group.
- Look over the discussion questions and highlight the ones that you want to make sure to cover. Depending on how lively the discussion is you may have to cut down the number of questions you cover.
- If you have more than 12 people in the class you may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion purposes and then pull the class back together before the end of the session to glean themes from each group.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to move the discussion on to a new question if the group is stuck and/or to keep any one person from dominating the discussion. One technique in the latter situation is to insert yourself with something like, "That is very interesting; what do some of the rest of you think about this issue?"

Questions for Study and Reflection

(Select those that are most interesting and helpful to you)

I. Session 1

Lecture 1A: Introduction

These brief comments set the stage for the lectures that follow.

- Many of us are inclined to think of Paul's letters in terms of the words he wrote and the meaning of those words. How might our mental images of Paul and his ministry affect how we understand him and what he did?
- In light of this, how might Paul's letters relate to the stories of Paul in the book of Acts?

Lecture 1B: Paul and Judaism

We focus here on the recent scholarly conversation concerning what kind of Jew Paul was before his experience on the Damascus Road and how that changed after he became a follower of Christ. The way these questions are answered affects the way justification by faith and Paul's Gentile mission are understood, together with the ways Christians might think about Jews and Judaism.

- When we think about Paul and Luther, why is the question of Paul and Judaism so important?
- Which of the scholarly arguments presented ring most true for you (E.P. Sanders? James D. G. Dunn? Krister Stendahl? Mark Nanos? Danny Boyarin? Terence Donaldson?)?
- How did Paul's mission to the Gentiles relate to his understanding of Judaism and of the church?
- What are the problems with the view that the church replaced or superseded Judaism which was basically thought to be a legalistic religion devoted to achieving righteousness by works.
- According to recent scholarly conversation, did Paul become a follower of Christ because he sought to escape the legalistic burdens of Torah? Why or why not?
- After two thousand years of church history, why might the issues of Paul and Judaism, Christianity and Judaism still be important?
- How might St. Paul address the church today on issues such as Jewish-Christian relations, legalism and grace, and the inclusion of people who are too often excluded from the community of faith?

Lecture 1C: First Century Greco-Roman Context

In this presentation we seek to situate Paul in his first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts. The assumption that underlies this lecture is that to understand Paul fully he must be seen in his wider cultural and social contexts. A further assumption is that his context is neither Luther's 16th century context nor our 21st century context and that this has important consequences for understanding him and his letters.

- What are three basic attributes for describing Paul?
- What are some of the important features of Paul's Greco-Roman world and why might these be important for understanding him and his message?
- What might it mean that Paul preached Christ in a Roman imperial context? What might it mean today to think about Paul and to preach Christ in a global context (In the western hemisphere? In the southern hemisphere?)?

II. Session 2

Lecture 2A: Greco-Roman Context (continued)

This lecture continues the previous one by thinking about the social contexts of Paul and his early churches and the ways these contexts inform and govern various aspects of his life in the Roman Empire.

- If we want to understand Paul and his ministry, why might it be important to understand his social context? Why might it be important to think about our own social contexts when reading or preaching Pauline texts?
- How might we think about, perhaps even distinguish, that which is universally applicable in Paul's letters from that which is culturally conditioned?

Lectures 2B & C: The Damascus Road, a Call or a Conversion

Understanding the religious meaning and significance of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is critically important. How we think about this important religious event in Paul's life and the language we use to describe it are critical for understanding and making sense of his mission to the Gentiles and his ongoing understanding of Judaism. This is also important for thinking about righteousness based on faith, as well as the historic relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

- What kind of Jew was Paul before his experience on the Road to Damascus?
- Before becoming a follower of Christ, was Paul a guilt-ridden Jew overcome by his failure to live up to God's expectations of him?
- If we call Paul's experience on the Damascus Road a conversion, what religious group did he convert from and what group did he convert to?
- Did Paul become a Christian when he became a follower of Christ? Did he turn against Judaism?
- If Paul as a follower of Christ believed he was called to carry the gospel message to the Gentiles (non-Jews), how did he think the Gentiles could become part of the church? On the basis of Torah obedience? On the basis of faith?
- If Gentiles were to be included on the basis of faith, what did that mean for Paul's understanding of the Jewish law? If the Jewish law was not an entrance requirement for inclusion in the church, what was the place and role of the law for the church according to Paul?

- What was Krister Stendahl's argument and how does it relate to the so-called Lutheran view of Paul? How do you react to his argument?
- If Stendahl is correct, did Luther simply misunderstand Paul? Or did he re-contextualize Paul's understanding of law, faith, and righteousness for his own day? What are the implications of the different answers we might give?

III. Session 3

Lecture 3A: Context of Paul's Mission

In this presentation we investigate a series of important concepts in Paul's theology: Theology and Christology—Continuity and Discontinuity, Sin and Redemption, God's Covenant with Israel, Flesh and Spirit, and Paul and Law.

- Describe each of these Pauline concepts in your own words and why they might be significant for Paul's thinking and for the church.
- How would you describe the role of righteousness (justification) by faith for Paul?

Lecture 3B: The Pastoral Epistles

1 & 2 Timothy and Titus are all attributed to Paul, but most modern-day scholars think they are likely to have been written by someone else, someone in the early Pauline tradition. But apart from the issue of authorship, perhaps the most interesting thing about these letters is that they represent a series of issues that will persist in the life of the church for generations, indeed centuries, to come. This lecture will focus on what these three letters might tell us about the early church and about the church beyond.

- What are the main issues that appear in the Pastoral letters (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) and what do they tell us about the development of the church in the 2nd and 3rd centuries?
- How does the organization of the church in the Pastoral Epistles begin to reflect new forms? What church leadership positions are mentioned in these letters?
- How is the "true faith" described in these letters and how is it to be preserved?
- What is the function of Scripture according to 2 Timothy 3:15-17?
- How are women presented in these letters? What is the meaning of the difference between 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Galatians 3:28?
- Do we see any hints of asceticism in the Pastoral Epistles? If so, what might this suggest about the development of the church and its orientation to the world?
- Do the letters reflect dissension over Jewish practices and Jewish teachers? If so, what might this suggest?
- What is the role of suffering according to 2 Timothy?

Lecture 3C: Ignatius and Polycarp

Ignatius and Polycarp were two bishops in Asia Minor in the second century of the church, both of whom were martyred. These two men were important for many reasons, but two of the most important for our purposes are that they both revered Paul and his memory and that they in their letters give us glimpses into the development of the church and its ministry. This lecture focuses on these two Pauline heirs.

- Who was Ignatius? Polycarp? How do they relate to Paul and why were they important?
- What role in the church did these two men occupy? What does that tell us about the development of the church in the 2nd century in Asia Minor?
- How did these two men meet their end and what does that tell us about the early church?
- How is our situation in the contemporary North American church and its relationship with the civic realm similar or different from that of Ignatius and Polycarp? What might be some of the implications of these similarities or differences?
- How might the contemporary church resist the state? Or how might it accommodate the state?

IV. Session 4

Lecture 4A: Irenaeus and Tertullian

Building on the previous discussion, we now explore the ways these two late second century thinkers came to understand and describe the early Catholic church, especially the “rule of faith” and “apostolic succession.” This would develop eventually into the church, with all of its enormous ecclesiastical power, that Luther knew and protested against.

- Was there a so-called “Pauline silence” (a widespread disinterest in Paul, his letters, and his theology in emerging orthodox Christianity) in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the church?
- What is the “rule of truth” or “rule of faith”? What role did this play in Irenaeus’ attempt to refute those he considered heretics?
- What did apostolic succession mean for Irenaeus and Tertullian, and how did it come to define the church? How is this understanding of the church different from a Lutheran understanding of the church?
- What does apostolic succession say about the authority of the church and who holds it?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of different understandings of the church and the way authority and theology are represented?

Lecture 4B: Paul, Thecla, Marcion and the Gnostics

There were a number of the counter voices in the early church: Thecla (women), Marcion (his notion of two different gods and his desire to dispense with the Old Testament), and the Gnostics (with their strange notions of god, the world, and redemption). Each of these challenged the church with alternate theological perspectives and were ultimately rejected by the emerging orthodox church.

- Who was Thecla and how did she relate to and interact with Paul?
- What does the story of Thecla tell us about patriarchy in the early church and the way it seems to have been resisted?
- How does the Thecla story relate to what is said about women in Galatians 3:28 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15? How should the contemporary church deal with these different images of Paul and his words as it seeks to live faithfully in the present?
- Who was Marcion and how did he deviate from the theology of emerging orthodox Christianity? Even though Marcion's position was rejected by the early church, has Marcionism persisted to the present day in the church? If so, what might be evidence of this?
- How did Tertullian reject Marcion's position and what was an enduring consequence of this?
- Was early Christianity anti-Judaic? anti-Semitic? How might this relate to some of the things Luther said about the "Jews and their lies"? What is the position of the ELCA regarding Luther's harsh statements about the Jews? Is anti-Semitism still a problem in society and in the church?

V. Session 5

Lecture 5A: Luther and Paul, Respective Contexts

This brings us to the culmination of our course with a comparison of Luther's experience and Paul's experience, Luther's questions and Paul's questions, Luther's church and Paul's fledgling churches. The underlying issue in this discussion is the way Luther reinterpreted Paul in his 16th century context and how that re-contextualization influenced the ways Luther heard the Pauline voice.

- Luther appeared on the scene in late medieval Germany almost 1500 years after Paul. How had the church, its theology, and its problems changed by the time of Luther (to name only three, Christianity and Judaism were now separate religions, Gentile inclusion into the church was no longer a burning issue, and St Augustine had left a powerful and pervasive legacy in the western church for a thousand years)?
- Luther was an Augustinian friar. How might this have affected his view of the world and the human condition?

- What caused Luther's sense of angst and despair? How did Paul address his despair? See Romans 1:17.
- How do Paul's and Luther's struggles compare? How are they similar or different? What does Krister Stendahl say about this? Do you agree with Stendahl?
- Did Paul live with a troubled and guilt-ridden conscience before God, unsure about his own salvation?
- Was the issue of Gentile inclusion still an issue for Luther as it was for Paul? Were their Jewish contexts similar for Luther and Paul?
- Are our struggles and sense of the human condition today the same as Paul's or Luther's? If not, what does that say to us about how to read and think about Paul's letters or Luther's writings? If yes, what might that mean?
- My own view is that no matter how hard we try to understand Paul on his own terms or try to understand Luther on his own terms, we in fact see ourselves, our world, and our position before God very differently than they did. What might some of our modern day struggles be: Meaninglessness? Isolation and alienation? Individualism versus a sense of social connectedness? Competing narratives of meaning and importance, i.e., science/technology and commercialism? Disorienting accelerations of modern life? Poverty? Injustice? Suffering in one way or another?
- How might the writings of Paul and Luther nevertheless speak to these kinds of issues?

Lecture 5B: Paul's Legacy

This brings to a close this series of lectures by thinking about how certain issues have tended to persist in the life of the western church and how in each new age they have been reconfigured: 1st century, 16th century, 21st century. This raises the question of how we might think about change and continuity in the life and theology of the church, a question that can stimulate and bedevil us all at the same time.

- Would you agree with the following statement made toward the end of this lecture? Why or why not?
- In my book, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church*, I make the claim that "...A comparative analysis of theological patterns illustrates that even as the Pastoral Epistles represent Paul and his theology in new contexts, they also reflect and foreshadow the significant issues confronting the church in the first two centuries. Among these issues are the nature of the **true faith, the relationship of the church to Judaism, Christian asceticism, the prospect of church unity and the threat of disunity, the formation of the canon, the balance between Scripture and tradition, the place of women, and the role of authorized leaders in preserving the true faith and practice of the church.** These are pressure points of early Christian debate, and the Pastoral Epistles mark all of them in varying degrees. In this sense, the Pastorals serve as a kind of sourcebook for identifying, and in some cases detailing, the points of contention that characterize the church in the first three centuries. Perhaps no other set of documents in the New

Testament point to such a broad range of conflicted issues in the early church as do the epistles of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus.”

- Let me now work this out a bit more broadly and say that virtually all of these issues have persisted in one configuration or another throughout the 2000-year history of the church. And they are all there from the early post-Pauline period of the church, the second and third centuries. This is not to say, however, that they reappear in anything like the same forms that they appeared in the early church. But Paul, his letters, and his memory, if not front and center, are virtually always hovering around these issues and their later configurations. And the Reformation that Luther inaugurated now 500 years ago is no exception. We think of (1) the relationship of the church to Judaism (mentioned above), (2) the prospect of church unity and the threat of disunity (inherent in the Protestant schism itself), (3) the balance between Scripture and tradition (part of the debate about what is finally authoritative), (4) the place of women (still an issue in the church today), and (5) the role of authorized leaders in preserving the true faith and practice of the church (clearly an issue for Luther and the protestant reformers of the 16th century and probably still an issue today in many corners of the church).
- How does Luther’s hymn, *Out of the Depths I Cry to You*, (ELW #600), which reflects Psalm 130, express Luther’s angst? Our own?
- In what ways might the metaphor of a river as something ever changing and yet continuous be helpful for understanding the historic church?