**Session 18: The Pauline Letters**

**Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon**

**Letters:**

This next section of the New Testament opens a style of writing that we have yet to encounter in Scripture: the letter. Although the concept of the writing style called letters seems intuitive to us, some of the details in interpreting letters can easily be overlooked. Letters are unlike the others styles of writing that we have encountered. Letters are written to a specific community or a specific purpose. For example the Letter to the Galatians was written to the Christian community in Galatian to chastise them for forsaking the ways of the Gospel. The other difficulty we will face in reading letters is that we are reading into an open dialogue. Other letters were sent and received of which we do not have access. Therefore we must make a guess regarding the historical and social context of the people, the situation the author is writing about, the author himself, and the type of community he is writing to. Fortunately for us, Paul is relatively clear about what the problems are and he gives us a lot of information regarding him. The most important elements of a letter to remember are, they are writing to a specific community with a specific problem.

One other important characteristic of letters is their style of writing. Although this may seem obvious, letters begin with a greeting and end with a salutation. In St. Paul’s letters, and many of the other letters, the letter greets the community with an apostolic greeting: “Paul, an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father…grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:1,3). This style of greeting was common in the ancient world and is preserved in the greeting at our liturgies. In each greeting the writer of the letter will introduce himself and then greet the specific community. Usually in the midst of these greeting we can uncover the issue which prompted the letter.

Most letters, especially those written by Paul, have a very defined structure. The letter begins with a greeting or exhortation. After the greeting is a section of thanksgiving, usually for the people or for what they have done. The thanksgiving section is followed by the body of the letter in which the author indicates the reason for writing the letter. Normally the author writes for the sake of correcting issues or exhorting the community for something. The letter can go through a few cycles of thanksgiving and exhortation, but more than two cycles is very uncommon. After the exhortation is complete, the author encourages the community once again and concludes with a salutation.

**St. Paul:**

St. Paul is a fascinating character for many reasons. Throughout his letters he gives us a lot of information about himself and, when he writes, he includes a lot of details about the people to whom he is writing. I cannot overstress the importance of St. Paul in the early and modern Church. He was the great evangelizer who started many of the community which became the core centers of Christianity. On top of that, his letters became the source for many of the Christian doctrines which would shape the world for centuries. During the Protestant Reformation, the reformers turned to Paul, not the Gospels, to understand the way to live a Christian life and as a source for Christian doctrines. No one in Christianity, except Jesus, has influenced Christianity more than St. Paul. The Acts of the Apostles tells us some about Paul’s earlier life. He grew up in the city of Tarsus, which is in Turkey. Since he grew up in Turkey, he was not part of a Jewish community in Israel but part of one of the exiled communities since the diaspora of the late revolutions, namely the Roman revolts. Tarsus was one of the great cities of Turkey and one of the great intellectual capitals of the world. This city was where Cleopatra and Mark Anthony lived. The name Paul needs some attention. The name Saul is of Latin origin, reminiscent of a Latin speaking city such as Tarsus. Paul, on the other hand, is a name whose origin intersects Romans, Greek, and Jewish cultures. Paul says in the Acts of the Apostles that he was “brought up in this city,” namely Jerusalem and studied under Gamaliel. Studying under a teacher of the law was not only common but the expected norm for anyone who aspired to be a rabbi. Therefore Paul was a rabbinic student under Gamaliel. Gamaliel was taught by the great Rabbi Hillel who was known for strict orthodoxy and a close following of the Mosaic Law. Paul, therefore, was raised in a very strictly orthodoxy style of Judaism and reading of the Law. In addition to his studies in the Law as he prepared to become a rabbi, Paul was a tent maker (Acts 18:3). We can easily dismiss this detail and think of him as a poor laborer or a simpleton. But the contrary is more accurate. The city of Tarsus was known for a special kind of sheep that produced world-renown wool. This wool sold for very large sums of money and made world-class tents. Paul was probably rather wealthy and skilled as a tent maker. Another one of the reasons why he succeeded wherever he went to evangelize: he always has a trade he could use.

**Paul’s Conversion:**

If there is one thing that almost everyone knows about Paul, besides his letters, it’s his conversion. Paul began his life as a Christian by persecuting and killing the people who confessed “The Name”, which is another term for Christians. As we know from the books of Acts, Paul consented to the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the Church (Acts 8:1). He continued to persecute the Christians to the point that they were afraid of him. One day, and we probably all know the story, Paul was riding into Damascus to destroy another group of Christians when Jesus appeared to him. He fell down (it says nothing about him being on a horse. This additions was made by medieval authors.) and Jesus spoke to him. The others in his party heard the voice but didn’t see anything. Paul, after the event, was left blind. A man named Ananias, who was a Christian, was sent to heal Paul’s eyes, but he didn’t want to. Ananias knew of Paul’s history and didn’t want to die. But he went. Paul recovered his sight and because one of the greatest Christians missions of all time.

**Paul’s travels:**

Paul’s journey to spread the message of Jesus is slightly confusing. Scholars have created two different travel maps to map Paul’s journey because of some of the discrepancies between the Book of Acts and the Letters of Paul. Tradition states that Paul led three missionary journeys. During his first journey he sailed with Cypriot Barnabas to Antioch, Syria, crossed Cyprus and went to Salamis and Paphos finally ending in Turkey. While in Turkey he went to Attalia, Perga, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. On his second journey he traveled with Timothy to Lystra, Anatolia, Troas, Macedonia Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, and Corinth. During his third journey he went to Antioch, Ephesus, Macedonia, Troas, Miletus, Tyre, Jerusalem. Although all of these lists have many names, Paul visited many more cities than on these lists. These lists only contains the major cities. His final voyage was as a prisoner to Rome. Some accounts say that Paul journeyed to Spain where he founded a church.

**The person of St. Paul:**

St Paul was a masterful evangelizer. If you ever need some inspiration or feel confused about how to spread the message of Jesus, read his letters. One thing that set St. Paul apart from the rest is his ability to meet the people and use their culture to spread the message. When St. Paul started preaching in Ephesus, he noticed something that completely changed his message. Ephesus was a city dominated by the cult of Artemis. Artemis was the Greek goddess of the hunt and female warriors. The cult had only female priestesses. Yet, in the temple of Artemis was an altar to an unknown god. Paul pointed that out and said, I know who this god is. This insight completely changed his efforts in Ephesus. Paul is also a brilliant thinker and masterful with Scripture and Law. Having been trained under some of the best scholars of his time, he could use Scripture in a way that seems unparalleled. The ability to know Scripture and interpret it well was a huge part of his missionary zeal and success. But he was not always successful. Paul was known to have quite a temper. His letter to the Galatians is a prime example of his ire. Having defied his teaching and went a different route, Paul is mad. He leaves none of his ire out of his rebuke of the Galatians: “Would that those who are upsetting you might castrate themselves” (Galatians 5:12).

**The Pauline Letters:**

You may be confused as to why I chose these seven letters as opposed to the other letters of the New Testament. The letters of the New Testament are divided into four groups (each group will consist of one session). The books of this session are known by scholars to be authentically Paul’s writings – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. The second group are called deuteron-Pauline letters. These letters are Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. The Dutero-Pauline letters, sometimes called non-Pauline letter, were probably written by the students of Paul. Each of these letters are stylistically different from Paul’s style and are thematically different. The third group of letters are called the Catholic Letters. These letters include Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, and James. These letters are called the Catholic Letters because they normally only appear in Catholic versions of the Bible. The letters are sometimes included in other versions, and now are more common than they used to be. The Catholic Letters are stylistically very different from the other letters.

**The First Letter to the Thessalonians:**

The First Letter to the Thessalonians was the first letter written by Paul. As we progress through his letter, the style of Paul’s writing and the clarity of his understanding of Jesus increases. Therefore, I find it helpful to start from the beginning. This letter is the oldest Christian text that we have. I think this is worth noting. One of the characteristics that we will find throughout Paul’s letters is the care and concern he shows for each community. This care is very common in the First Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul calls the Thessalonians his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The city of Thessalonica was a predominantly Jewish city marked by a multiplicity of cults. Paul came to Thessalonica after he tried, and failed, to found a church in Philippi. The new Christians were from pagan religious cults, namely the cult of the state. Therefore, they nearly committed treason for their actions of going against the state. Yet, these Christians remained faithful to the teachings of Christ. Strangely, Paul has two messages for this community. First, good job you have done well in maintaining the faith. He encourages them strongly to maintain the teaching and commends them for staying faithful. Then, he teaches them further. It seems that Paul hadn’t finished his work of teaching the Christian message to this community, so he is continuing his work through letters. These two messages give this letter a more hopeful and happy tone.

Passages:

1 Thessalonians 1:1-2: Paul’s Greeting

A detail we can easily miss in these two verses is how Paul connects Jesus to God. We are so used to this language that these details are often missed. This detail, however, was a huge issue for the early Christians. They could easily be seen as polytheistic, and just like the pagan cults, if this language was not clarified.

1 Thessalonians 2: 13-16: Paul’s thanksgiving

**The Letter to the Galatians**:

This letter is a clear shift in style from Paul’s first letter – the Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul ignores the normal section of thanksgiving and gets right to the point: he is mad. After founding the community at Thessalonica, Paul began a church in Galatia. After Paul left, a group of Jews from Jerusalem came to Galatia and preached a different message. The Galatians liked this message and joined the new group. Paul is in a rage in this letter. He is mad at the Galatians for forsaking the message of Christ and he lets them know. Not only does he berate them on multiple occasions in this letter but clearly instructs them in their errors. Due to Paul’s unique expression of anger, this letter is drastically different in style and tone to the other letters.

Galatians 1:11-24: Paul’s autobiography

Galatians 3:1-6: Paul’s anger

Galatians 5:12: The epitome of Paul’s anger

Side note: a large amount of scholarship has been written about a phrase found predominantly in the Letter to the Galatians: faith in Christ. In Greek this phrase is rather peculiar and can mean any of the following: faith in Christ, faith of Christ, faithfulness of Christ. The debate on how to translate this phrase divided the Protestants and the Catholics: is faith in Christ primary?

**The Letter to the Philippians:**

Although not the only letter, this letter is one of the few letters that Paul wrote from prison. Having been imprisoned for teaching the message of Christ, Paul used this time to exhort and encourage the communities that he had founded. The community at Philippi was one of his earlier communities, much like Thessalonica and Galatia. After Paul had left, the community at Philippi was struggling. Paul names three groups who are causing dissention in the Philippian church. An internal group was pushing their own interests and trying to change the direction of the community. A group from the outside was putting ideological pressure on the group causing internal squabbles. Finally, another external group was encouraging them to follow the ways of the Jews. In this letter Paul responds to all three of these groups and further encourages the Philippians to stay firm in the Gospel.

Philippians 1:12-18: the Problem

Philippians 2:6-11: Christological hymn

We tend to ignore the internal structure of Scripture. In these few verses Paul preserves one of the oldest examples of Christian hymnody we have. These few lines indicate the earliest beliefs structure of the early Christians and shows the way they passed down the faith.

**The Letter to Philemon:**

This letters is one of the oddest of Paul’s letters. Unlike the other six letters, this one is not written to a community but to a person. Further complicating this letter, the letter seems to endorse slavery. In this relatively short letter of one chapter, Paul is writing to his brother in Christ Philemon. Philemon ran a house church, and since he was a house owner, owned slaves. One of his slaves, Onesimus had run away. Knowing this much about the story we would probably assume that Paul would tell Onesimus that he did the right thing for seeking the freedom of Christ and that Philemon shouldn’t punish him. Paul does the opposite. He encourages Onesimus to remain in slavery and that Philemon is required to treat him well. Paul will not go against the dominant political system of the time which is built on slavery. Yet, Paul sees both of them as brothers in Christ and should recognize this commonality when they talk about slavery.

**The First letter to the Corinthians:**

The two letters to the Corinthians are from two different points in Paul’s journey. The first letter was written earlier between the letter to the Galatians and the Philippians. The second letter was his second to last letter. Although they were written at different times, Paul is speaking to the same community – those in Corinth. The city of Corinth is a large and historic Greek city. They were known for their intellectual sophistication, much like the Athenians. In the first letter Paul is addressing issues of divisions and factions that were forming in the community. Other people had arrived in Corinth spreading different messages and thus confusing the fledgling Christian community. This led to internal divisions and ecclesiastical debates. Paul, in his first letter, is addressing the debates that the Corinthians are having over the matters of faith and doctrines. Thus, it is an intellectual letter.

Passages:

1 Corinthians 1:10-16: the problem

1 Corinthians 2:6-10: speaking to the learned.

St. Paul is known for knowing his audience. In this passage he is speaking to a people who are intellectual and wise. Therefore he can be more descriptive and lofty than he would be to the Galatians or Philippians.

1 Corinthians 11: 23-34: the oldest institution narrative

Although we primarily think of the Gospels as the source of the text for the prayer of consecrating the Eucharist, the text is drawn from St. Paul’s words which are older than the Gospels.

**The Second Letter to the Corinthians:**

This letter is slightly different from the previous letter. Paul is asking the Corinthians for money. They, intern, challenge his apostolic authority. This letter was written quite late in Paul’s life, towards the final days before he was sent to Rome for execution. Therefore the community in Corinth is well established by this time. Paul is now speaking much more eloquently than he was in the First Letter to the Thessalonians: his points are clearer, his theology more distinguished.

2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Paul begins to speak about his impending doom

2 Corinthians 7:5-16: A autobiographical account about Paul’s travels

**The Letter to the Romans**

The letter to the Romans is the only letter that Paul wrote to a community that he has not visited. Paul is not only writing to the community, who probably first wrote to him, but also to the community that he is about to visit, namely be taken to for execution. Throughout this letter Paul speaking about his impending martyrdom and exhorts the people as one who is excited about this death. This letter seems to not respond to any specific issue but more of summarize the theological reflections of Paul. The letter has a lofty tone to it. Many of the themes that are part of this letter – justification by faith, judgement, sin – became the core teachings for the Protestants of the 16-18th centuries.

Romans 3:21-31: justification by faith

Romans 15:14-33: Paul’s final plea