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Dissertation

**An Exegetical and Theological Exploration of Paul's Self-Identity in Consideration of
Modern Social Sciences**

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by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

The Apostle Paul possessed a multifaceted background unusual for the period in which he lived. It is now well-known by scholars and laypeople alike that Paul was a Hebrew, Pharisee, Roman citizen, persecutor of the church, Christian, and Jew who hailed from Tarsus (Acts 21:29).¹ Paul utilized each distinct portion of his background to advance the gospel. Throughout the New Testament, the apostle sets the example of using everything at his disposal for the cause of Christ. Paul himself writes that he became “all things to all people” with a direct purpose in mind that he “might save some” (1 Cor 9:22 ESV). Thus, his method for the advancement of the gospel becomes clear. The famed apostle sought to bring many to salvation, and his words indicate that he was willing to use every resource God had provided him with to reach those goals.

Paul's background is far more evident than his self-identity and the origins of that identity. If it can be seen that he uses his differing backgrounds to spread the gospel message, then in which of those varied backgrounds did Paul most identify? When working toward understanding Paul's identity, it is possible to have a more profound knowledge of the detailed theology available to New Testament readers. Dunn writes, "If theology is measured in terms of articulation of Christian belief, then Paul's letters laid a foundation of Christian theology which have never been rivaled or superseded."² Paul's theology is clearly unmatched. However, his

¹ All biblical references will be in the ESV unless otherwise noted.

² James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 3.

diverse background can leave his admirers scrambling to pin down the source of his identity. Did Paul identify with the Judaism of Jerusalem or the Hellenistic culture in which he was surrounded? Moreover, what is identity, and can identity be determined through the words, social circumstances, and actions of a long-passed first-century theologian?

When examined through the lens of what identity truly is, the apostle Paul's identity is not inherently tied to any particular aspect of the apostle's background; instead, as modern social science research teaches and the Bible informs us, it is a conglomeration of Paul's sociological and religious experiences, leading to an entirely new person who utilizes his background to advance the kingdom of God. This new person of Paul is born of the "new creation" that one becomes when one encounters and accepts Christ (2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15). Dunn writes that Paul's conversion was not a simple turning around on a road but was instead a transition to something different.³ The "new creation" that Paul speaks of in his writings indicates a complete change in identity and the very core of a person. Paul's writings will be instrumental in determining what he deemed worthy of fashioning his identity around, especially considering the myriad of options surrounding him.

In his discussion on growth and self-identity, Ortberg writes, "Before Paul met Jesus, he was a brilliant, passionate zealot who persecuted people. Afterward, he was a brilliant, passionate zealot who sacrificed himself for people."⁴ Few would find it reasonable to dispute Ortberg's statement. However, from these words, one could assume that little changed from the Paul of Judaism to the Paul of Christianity, with the man remaining much the same, changing only how he treated those around him, refraining from persecuting anyone further. However, as noted

³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 179.

⁴ John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 15.

above, Paul spoke of the new person that is born when one accepts Christ, with Colossians 3:9-10 referring to both the “old” and “new” self, indicating that a clear contrast exists between the two.

Differing understandings aimed at the great apostle's life, person, theology, and identity have swirled through scholarly circles with the best intent. Young writes that many scholars and regular readers of Paul arrive at differing understandings of his writings because they do not understand or esteem his Jewish faith.⁵ In Watson's view, Paul is difficult to understand due to his sudden arrival in the New Testament, where he brings no genealogy and is completely sovereign over his own discourse.⁶ Longenecker and Still went as far as to claim that understanding Paul's theological "landscape" is challenging due to the apostle's lack of tidy dispositions offered to his—now formidable—audience.⁷ R.S. Thomas wrote of Paul as a mountain that theologians have failed to climb.⁸ Many Christians, scholars, and even poets long to better understand what drove the apostle to write the words that we pour over in the New Testament. There is merit to the incessant studies surrounding the apostle; his salvation story is supernatural and incredibly famous within Christian circles. His extensive New Testament writings are compelling and confusing at times, and it is difficult to fully determine what drives a man to particular actions without the man himself standing before us to offer an explanation.

⁵ Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), accessed November 8, 2022, app.logos.com, 9.

⁶ Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), accessed September 11, 2022, app.logos.com, 1-2.

⁷ Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still, *Thinking through Paul: An Introduction to His Life, Letters, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 296.

⁸ Ronald S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 404.

N.T. Wright outlines pertinent questions and recent research regarding the person and identity of Paul and the basis for his theology in *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates*. Within this overview of the scholarship regarding the New Perspective on Paul, Wright notes some questions surrounding the debates on the topic. Among those questions he asks, what kind of religion did Paul teach and practice?⁹ Can a line of development be drawn on the apostle's thoughts and theology, leading us back to a starting point? Was Paul's theology influenced more heavily by Judaism, the Hellenistic world in which he lived, or something entirely different?¹⁰ Studying Paul is indeed a dynamic undertaking, with Wright noting that Paul lived and stretched himself across three different worlds, each of which must be understood to discern the meaning behind the apostle's writings.¹¹ Indeed, those three worlds must also be understood in order to discover the identity that Paul most heavily operated out of.

All of Wright's questions and observations are formidable and relate to the topic at hand: Paul's identity. Regardless of the utilization of Wright's insight into this topic, this research does not intend to examine the New Perspective on Paul directly. Instead, this research simply asks, what did Paul believe about himself? Thus, a solid and unavoidable relationship between the NPP and this research may exist. However, the goal of the research within these pages is to utilize biblical exegesis to examine Paul's words about himself and apply them to modern-day studies on identity. If the apostle stood before us today, would he tell us that his identity was based upon the culture of his time, his childhood background, his time spent as a faithful Jew, or

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), accessed September 1, 2022, app.logos.com, 11.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 2-3.

just Jesus? What portion of his varied background plays a part in that identity and how he used it for the kingdom work to which the Lord had called him?

In his book *Paul: A Biography*, Wright ponders the apostle's influence on the world in which he lived and even the current world.¹² That influence has created tremendous interest, research, and exploration around all aspects pertaining to the apostle. Information abounds regarding the apostle's life and background, but what needs to be added is an attempt to merge that knowledge into understanding his identity with input from current sociological and psychological studies on identity. As an individual with a varied and intriguing background, Paul's personal identity stems from a myriad of sources. If the heaviest influence upon the man's identity can be pinpointed from the exegesis of his own written works and words, it would seem logical that conclusions can be drawn regarding his theological ideas and why his Christian influence has been so successful through the centuries.

The word "identity" expresses a sameness within oneself or an inner set of values that lead to the sharing of essential character with others.¹³ It is intended that this research will draw forth that identity, those inner values, and that essential character of Paul in the manner that he viewed himself. The discovery of this identity will be arrived at and constructed from sound biblical exegesis of the apostle's own words with input and comparison to modern social sciences research on what identity truly entails. The methodology will be further detailed in the following sections. The methodology and exegesis are expected to provide the identity that Paul expresses through his values and subsequent actions, pinpointing the community that Paul most identified with. In addition, it will highlight the origins of his theological thoughts and methods

¹² N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2020), xi.

¹³ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, NY: Norton, 1994), 109.

of evangelism. Rosner writes that a critical feature of the biblical perspective on identity is that we are to consider others from God's point of view.¹⁴ This, too, will play a part as the ramifications of Paul's call to serve the Lord are considered.

The New Perspective on Paul

As mentioned in the previous section, this research does not intend to examine and add voice to the New Perspective on Paul directly. However, since portions of the discussion surrounding Paul's identity also circulate through the conversations about the New Perspective, making them bound to intertwine within these pages, a brief overview of the topic must be addressed.¹⁵ Ultimately, the NPP is a divergence from the traditional belief that Second Temple Judaism was a religion of legalism, a heavy burden that the Jewish people not only could not carry but one that they longed to be released from.¹⁶ Paul's theology on justification by faith has been used by the likes of F.C. Baur and Bultmann to emphasize the supposed legalistic side of Judaism. In Galatians 2:16, Paul writes of justification not through works but by faith. The order the apostle chooses in this verse indicates that this was a circulating theology that was a concern for Paul, pointing to a stark discontinuity between his understanding of faith in Christ and his Jewish views.¹⁷

¹⁴ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 64.

¹⁵ Hereafter, the New Perspective on Paul shall be referred to as the NPP.

¹⁶ Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul an Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 6-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

Dunn writes that the negative side effect of Luther's rediscovery of justification by faith was a decidedly unfortunate strain of anti-Judaism.¹⁸ Although there is widespread belief throughout the church body that the Old Testament abounds with stories about the Israelites who were accepted into the covenant through their ethnicity alone, this is a common misconception. Instead, the Old Testament displays stories of foreigners being accepted into the covenant through their faith in God, much like in the New Testament. Firth writes that God's people were those who committed themselves to Him in the Old Testament.¹⁹ An example is Rahab, whose story poses fundamental questions about who is allowed to belong to Israel.²⁰

Rahab is ultimately so entwined with Israel that she becomes part of the lineage of Christ (Matt 1:5). The conclusion is that when one commits themselves to the Lord, they are accepted into the fold of God's covenant people. Thus, faith in God and the promise to commit oneself to Him bring inclusion in the community. Sanders highlighted the assumptions inserted into Judaism, demonstrating that the Jewish religion has always been one of grace, with human obedience as a response to that grace.²¹ The same is seen within the folds of Christianity: one accepts Jesus, and human obedience is a response to that salvation.

In the book of James, the author writes that it is impossible to be a hearer of the word and not a "doer" of the word (Jas 1:22-23). Being seemingly incapable of finding a solid middle ground, many believers felt they had no responsibilities beyond their salvation. However, James

¹⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 336.

¹⁹ David G. Firth, *Including the Stranger: Foreigners in the Former Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, IVP Academic, 2019), accessed March 3, 2023, app.logos.com, 53.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 338.

makes it perfectly clear that those who accept Jesus obey Jesus.²² Obedience in response to God is a common theme between both Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, a problem arises that can be seen in both religions: it is easy to concentrate on that which can be seen or enacted upon. In other words, what is known as “works.” The “doing” portion of both Judaism and Christianity is often much easier to focus on rather than a God that cannot be seen. It can cause anyone to fall into a works-oriented religion rather than a faith-based religion, with works as a demonstration of belief and obedience.

Works are an essential part of both Judaism and Christianity. By no means does this indicate a legalistic faith. In both religions, there will always be those who focus more on the obedience portion of their faith rather than the Giver of faith. Such focus has far more to say about the person than it does about the religion. Dunn believes that the phrase “works of law” refers not to doing works to be saved but to the covenant practices that so solidly functioned as badges of Jewish identity in the ancient world.²³ One could hardly fail to see the similarities between that statement and the various modern practices of Christian obedience that solidify our badge of religion, such as tithing, attending worship service, celebrating Easter, or engaging in corporate prayer. Are Christians, then, practicing legalism?

In short, this author's stance is that Judaism is not a religion of legalism, standing in agreement with the NPP. There may have been some Jews who focused heavily on the Law itself rather than obedience to the Law out of appreciation for God, but that hardly defines an entire group of people. That is an examination for another study. Throughout Judaism and Christianity,

²² David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in James* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), accessed February 15, 2023, app.logos.com, 21.

²³ Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul an Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 20.

the people of God are defined based on faith in God.²⁴ Obedience to the laws and instructions of God flows freely from that faith.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study begins with the intent to combine modern social science research on identity with solid biblical exegesis to create a deeper understanding of the ways in which Paul's varied backgrounds influenced his identity and, by association, his theology and how he effectively utilized that identity to spread the gospel. This coalition of biblical exegesis, historical research, and input from the social sciences is calculated and determined to bring new insight into the person of Paul and his theology while building up the identity of the modern-day church.

One of the objectives is to make new discoveries about Paul's identity, seeking to determine what he considered essential aspects of his identity. Did Paul identify most as a Jew, or could he, perhaps, have been more entrenched in the Hellenistic culture than previously thought? Does the use of Jewish or Hellenistic language within his theology indicate agreement, or is that simply a product of picking up things that are prevalent in the culture around him? After all, one cannot expect Paul to have lived in a vacuum. Naturally, Paul's surroundings would influence him in some way. Wright notes that Second Temple Judaism was a vibrant mix of religion, faith, culture, and politics.²⁵ This alone would have heavily influenced the apostle, although it remains to be seen if it influenced him at the level of his identity.

²⁴ David G. Firth, *Including the Stranger: Foreigners in the Former Prophets*, 184.

²⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 3.

Although the heaviest focus will be upon Paul's own words in Scripture, we will first familiarize ourselves with what we now know about a person's identity and how it is formed. This knowledge, combined with the current scholarship regarding the apostle Paul's background, will allow Scripture to be examined with fresh eyes. Information about the formation of self-identity could give us clues as to what stands out about Paul's focus in the New Testament. Paul belonged to a generation that was more formative and definitive for Christianity than any other.²⁶ It would be unwise to claim that finding Paul's focus and identity during those formative years of Christianity has little bearing on modern-day faith.

It is imperative to note that although this research will include the social sciences side of self-identity, Scripture always has the final say on the matter. Modern-day studies on identity will not, at any point, have more weight than the word of God. Should the current social sciences and biblical information disagree, what the Bible says about the subject will always take precedence. Osborne writes of some of the difficulties with utilizing modern social sciences for biblical study, including analyzing historical situations in the light of modern theories without asking if the current models fit the first-century data.²⁷ These pages will consider this and other concerns with sociological and psychological studies. Of additional interest are implications for the modern-day church that can be drawn from this research in conjunction with the information social sciences can provide. It is possible that a fuller understanding of identity, especially on the part of the apostle Paul, could lead to more wisdom on how to stop the identity crisis in the current church so that the gospel message might be more effectively spread.

²⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 2.

²⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 175.

Through this study, Paul's understanding of the term "new creation" will be examined concerning his identity. Kujanpää's studies exalt Paul as an entrepreneur of identity in the apostle's dealings with the wayward Corinthian church, as he seeks to shape their social identity and teach them who they are and what their lives should look like when they abide in Christ.²⁸ To teach others about identity can only reliably come from one who has already sorted out their sense of self and purpose in life. If Kujanpää's theory is true and Paul was indeed teaching the Corinthians about their identity, then 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul tells the church that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," becomes exceedingly important to the concept of the "who" at the center of the person of Paul. Was the idea of new creation a development of his self-formation that was passed on to the Corinthians? If Paul identified as a new creation, something entirely different than he had ever been, then why would he appear to cling to any of the vestiges of his Jewish or Hellenistic backgrounds?

Once determined, it may be possible to understand how Paul utilized his identity to further the gospel message. In turn, this may bring the modern-church insight into more effective ways to spread the gospel. Did Paul use only his identity to spread the gospel, or did he also take advantage of his background? Additionally, it needs to be known if examples of Paul's use of his background can be found in Scripture. Are identity and an individual's background separate entities, or are they combined? Is it plausible for individuals to attempt to remove themselves from their background for the gospel? Is this a tactic that the apostle employed? Part of the purpose of this research is to determine what portions of the apostle's life he adopted into his identity and how those were or were not exploited for the use of the gospel.

²⁸ Katja Kujanpää, "Paul and the Author of 1 Clement as Entrepreneurs of Identity in Corinthian Crises of Leadership," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44, no. 3 (2021): 368-389, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/doi/epub/10.1177/0142064X211064782>, 371.

Rosner writes that although the exact question “Who are we?” does not appear in the Bible with those exact words, the entirety of the Bible contains an abundance of answers to it.²⁹ An additional purpose of this study is to assess the interrelated nature of these concepts. How does identity factor into being a new creation, spreading the message of Christ, or keeping a church intact and on track? The Bible itself is meticulously interrelated, woven together by the hand of God. Therefore, it is possible that Scripture’s understanding of identity, paired with how an individual’s identity allows connection with others, may show that the apostle executed something extraordinary through his deep understanding of self. What information can be gleaned from any discoveries made, and how can it be applied to the Christians of today? An awareness of self and knowledge of self is both biblical and encouraged by Paul (Rom 12:2, Gal 6:3).³⁰

Identity was vital to Paul and the early church and is vital to us today. Teaching about humanity and personal identity appears throughout Scripture, although it is not often the focus.³¹ A strong sense of identity is imperative to a Christian’s walk with the Lord, yet the idea of identity may simply be a trendy modern word that is not entirely understood. The Lord’s input on who we are will be sought from Scripture. The things that draw us into an identity could possibly be found in the body of Christ. The final portion of the purpose of this research is to determine what human identities, Paul’s and ours, circulate in the Bible. A pinpointing of the definition of self-identity will be sought, along with the factors of life contributing to the formation of self. Perhaps the things necessary to the creation of self are mentioned in the Bible.

²⁹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 37.

³⁰ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 33.

³¹ Ibid.

Overall, this research seeks to find the source of Paul's identity and that from which his theology is borne through biblical interpretation and social sciences. Traditional identity markers such as culture, gender, relationships, occupation, and personality do not give a complete understanding of Paul.³² This collaboration is intended to lead to new insight and understanding of the person of Paul, his biblical ideas, and his effectiveness in spreading the gospel message in his time. With help from the background of social sciences and careful exegesis, it may be possible to reach conclusions and recognize new methods that can be employed to encourage the church body to reach the lost for the Lord.

Method of Research

As we embark upon the journey toward Paul's self-identity, a solid method of research must emerge. The apostle lived at a time very much removed from our own, within a culture and context that modern-day readers can never fully understand without having been there. Regardless of this truth, if the desire is genuinely to understand Paul, then the desire must also be to truly understand his world and the way in which it operated. To attempt the biblical exegesis of the words of an ancient personality means that we will be confronted with cultural norms, contemporary practices, literature, communication, and theology that are not our own and are often difficult to wade through.³³

These certainties lead this study to begin from the position of context. Osbourne writes, "There is no meaning apart from context, only several possible meanings."³⁴ Context in this

³² Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 41.

³³ Richard Alan Fuhr and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 2.

³⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 37.

study will involve the investigation of the meaning behind keywords, the historical context of the letters of Paul, the literary context, and the cultural context of the societies in which Paul interacted. Each chapter has the following primary tasks:

1. To examine the historical-cultural context in which Paul was writing to gain a thorough understanding of the world as the apostle would have known it.
2. Once the historical-cultural context is grasped, examine the literary and theological contexts for the verses in which Paul alludes to his identity.
3. Discover the meanings of words and phrases through lexical and contextual analysis.

The combined information discovered through these tasks will be utilized to establish Paul's self-identity. Longenecker and Still describe Paul as more than an object to be studied.³⁵ Indeed, this study seeks the very person of Paul to better comprehend his theology and evangelistic success. Dunn writes that, in some ways, we can enter into Paul's dialogue with himself.³⁶ With this method in place and these goals in mind, we proceed.

Research Questions

Many of the questions driving this research have been stated in previous sections. However, many additional questions have been born out of the original ones, creating branches

³⁵ Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still, *Thinking through Paul: An Introduction to His Life, Letters, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 13.

³⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 25.

that will add depth to the research. Here, the main questions that will drive the research are outlined, followed by a brief background and explanation, as appropriate.

Did Paul identify as Jewish, Hellenistic, something entirely new, or a conglomeration of many different portions of his background and culture? Rosner suggests that the critical components of a person may change according to the context they find themselves in, yet that does not amount to those components being personal identity.³⁷ The answer to this question is to be examined through social sciences and studies on the formation of human identity, with the hope that the information will bring insight into Paul and his reason for writing the Scripture that he did. It may well be that we, too, could have a glimpse into why God saw fit to call Paul through the examination of the makings of the man himself.

Often, when people are asked "why" they do certain things, think in particular ways, or do things, they will point back to certain aspects of their background that they have adopted into their sense of personhood. Is it possible to trace such things in Paul when being so far removed from his life and culture? We are distant from Paul in all ways: contextually, culturally, and concerning time. Furthermore, the Paul of Christianity is vastly different from the Pharisee Saul.³⁸ Yet each individual's experiences somehow affect them and the person they become.

What can modern psychology and sociology tell us about the formation of an individual's identity? The formation of our identities is a complicated process that has become of increasing interest in modern times due to the distinct changes in our culture and abilities. Cote writes that humans in modern societies simply are not used to living in societies where such high levels of

³⁷ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 41.

³⁸ Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), accessed November 8, 2022, app.logos.com, xviii.

personal choice exist over things of fundamental personal meaning.³⁹ However, regardless of the limited life choices available to individuals in the first century, it remains true that Paul's background varied. If what Cote states is true, that was unusual and may have had a distinct impact on the apostle. That which impacts an individual often impacts their ministry, for good or bad. Paul's process of identity formation and the aspects of his life that he decided to adopt into his personality and those that he decided to depart from would have had a profound impact on his life in Christ and his theological formation.

Upon unearthing the knowledge of how one forms a self-identity, Paul's background and words will be closely examined with the new information. What does Paul say in the Bible to indicate what culture or religion he most heavily identified with or aligned himself with? To answer this question, it will be necessary to dive into the apostle's written legacy to discover clues about what seemed important to him and what he said about himself. Is the seemingly errant imperial language used in portions of the text an indicator that Paul was deeply immersed in the Roman culture? Could there be another explanation for his use of imperial language, if it exists, based on what we now know about identity and the impact that the surrounding culture has on it? Many of Paul's "I" statements will be examined, emphasizing not only what is being said but the tense in which the apostle states it. An example of this can be seen in 1 Timothy 1:13-15, where Paul describes what he was and the things that he did in the past tense, indicating that he does not partake in them or act in that manner at the time of writing.

Are there indicators in Paul's writing that tell us if he fully embraced certain portions of the backgrounds that formed his identity or if he completely abandoned some of them? This question is closely tied to the previous question, although the research seeks something slightly

³⁹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*. Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 1.

different here. If Paul were utilizing portions of his life and background to influence the kingdom, such information would demonstrate that the apostle did not wholly abandon certain aspects of his life. Instead, it might indicate a repurposing of the things that his walk with Christ no longer allowed him to encompass into his life entirely. For instance, many aspects of Greco-Roman culture were not things that would have been prudent to partake of if one was a Christian. For example, there was a gradual move in the first century to ascribe divinity to the Roman Emperor, which would have been appalling to both Saul the Pharisee and Paul the apostle.⁴⁰ However, as Paul carried both the privilege of Tarsian birth and Roman citizenship, there may well have been portions of the Roman culture that did not offend one's walk as a Christian and, therefore, could instead be weaponized for the kingdom.⁴¹

If Paul was simply utilizing the portions of his background and culture that did not interrupt the movement he found himself to be a part of, then there is a distinct chance that he cannot be placed firmly within one school of thought. Indeed, should this be the case, we would find it more prudent to look at the various portions of Jewish and Hellenistic language within his theology and ask questions about why he chose that particular language or thought rather than wondering what camp that language places him in. In addition, did Paul's use of imperial and political language indicate more about the apostle himself and the audience he was attempting to reach, or were there lessons to be learned about both from the way he spoke?

Of high interest to the study of Paul's identity is his specific theology around being a new creation, especially considering the lessons that can be learned from studying identity. In

⁴⁰ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2003), 49.

⁴¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 2000), 37.

Scripture, Paul speaks of being a new creation in 2 Corinthians 5:17. Similarly, he speaks of the “new self” in Colossians (Col 3:9-10). Is the apostle speaking of an entirely new identity with no remnants of the old person remaining? Is he speaking of identity at all or something different? If the new creation identity incorporates things from the former person, what is brought forward into the new person, and what is left behind? In a further twist on the subject of new creation, Moo writes that the phrase is usually used to describe the re-created world that will follow the current creation and attributes Paul’s use of it as such.⁴²

N.T. Wright notes that it is appropriate to ask how Paul came by his various ideas, whether they resulted from sudden enlightenment or developed over time.⁴³ It may be a combination of both. Often, ideas are refined and clarified through self-reflection and, in the case of theological messages, input from the Holy Spirit. Wright further states that separating Paul as a religious figure and thinking of him as such in our approach to him is not necessarily the correct way to go about things.⁴⁴ In these studies, an attempt is made to approach Paul from a different direction. Rather than understanding him only from the standpoint of religion, this study endeavors to approach Paul and his thoughts through his self-identity. There is value in seeing Paul as a great apostle and theologian, but there is also an element of distance when someone is placed on such a high pedestal. Through these questions, we seek to know Paul from his heart and mind, attempting to discover the inner motivations and person within.

⁴² Douglas J Moo, “Creation and New Creation,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 1 (2010): 39-60, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001779366&site=ehost-live&scope=site>, 41.

⁴³ N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates*, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Definition of Terms

Terms that will be clarified and outlined in this section include “self-identity,” and “Imperial language.” These terms have been selected due to the consistency of use that will occur throughout this research and to obtain a complete understanding in order to process the information contained herein and to form logical conclusions. Words and phrases can often have varied meanings, leading to misunderstandings when the reader is left to their own interpretation. Each of these terms will be given full clarification.

This research is based heavily on “self-identity.” What is meant by this term? Psychology Today author Shahram Heshmat writes that identity is primarily concerned with the question, “Who am I?”⁴⁵ In turn, this question often gives its answer in our values, which are reflected in the choices we make.⁴⁶ A quick dictionary search defines self-identity as “the recognition of one's potential and qualities as an individual, especially in relation to social context.”⁴⁷ Drummond writes that self-identity is based upon an individual’s beliefs, character traits, and convictions about what is true, good, and right, including the pursuit of things that support that which the individual believes is true, good, and right.⁴⁸

Immediately, the variations in the determination of a solid description of self-identity can be seen. However, several things can be noted from the definitions given. To begin, self-identity

⁴⁵ Shahram Heshmet, “Basics of Identity,” *Psychology Today* (Sussex Publishers, December 8, 2014), last modified December 8, 2014, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201412/basics-identity>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Oxford Languages,” *Our Dictionaries* | *Oxford Languages*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://languages.oup.com/dictionaries/self-identity>.

⁴⁸ John J. Drummond, “Self-Identity and Personal Identity,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 2 (August 7, 2020): 235-247, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://rdu.be/cXpNt>, 235.

clearly seeks to answer the question of who an individual is according to what they value, and it is from those values that a person's character emerges. Part of the problem with giving the term "self-identity" an explicit definition is the failure on the part of the sciences that champion it to define it appropriately. Cote writes that it is nearly impossible to find anything other than very general definitions for self-identity within psychological and sociological science literature.⁴⁹ To complicate things further, the term "self" is often associated with other ideas within sociology, including ego and self-awareness, and there are scientists who argue that identity is not something that even exists.⁵⁰

This problem casts a confusing shadow over the research at hand. After all, how can Paul be studied in the light and knowledge of self-identity if we cannot define what self-identity is? The theory that any sense of self or identity does not exist can be dismissed. Rosner writes of his own loss of identity and the subsequent conversations that he had with many different people, at different ages, in different circumstances, who all asked the question, "Who am I?"⁵¹ He further writes that personal identity is often settled for people in their teenage years when they either adopt or reject the identity given to them by their parents.⁵²

The difficulties surrounding identity will be further discussed in the following chapter, where there is a plethora of material to sort through, both in the social sciences and the Bible. Here, we seek only to define the term, although it was necessary to demonstrate the difficulties surrounding the endeavor. It is relatively undisputed that when one is questioning identity, one

⁴⁹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*, 69.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵¹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

seeks to answer the question of who they are. The items that determine the "who" of someone are those things that they determine to be of value. If loyalty, truth, or faithfulness are valuable to an individual, those things of value form their "self," and it is from these things that their actions will stem. Those actions include job interests, how they handle marriage, family, friends, politics, and many other life elements. Thus, self-identity can be defined as the knowledge of one's personal values and character traits that cause them to behave in particular ways in the world around them.

The second term that should be discussed here is "Imperial Language." This term refers to Paul's use of Greco-Roman language within Scripture. Arguments abound around Paul's selected word choice, with scholars arguing over the apostle's use of terms standard to the Greco-Roman culture and whether Paul intended to either agree with or show distaste for the culture. In short, there is disagreement on Paul's display of Roman ideology. Regardless of the conclusions reached when determining what Paul's use of language indicates about himself, the term's meaning remains. In this research, reference to "imperial language" indicates words or phrases that Paul uses in Scripture that point towards Greco-Roman culture, whether with positive or negative intentions.

Limitations of the Study

Various limitations present themselves in this research. One of the more apparent issues is that of cultural bias. Modern society and even modern Christianity are far removed from the lifestyle and concerns of the first century in Greco-Roman culture and rule. For American Christians who are far removed from the region in which Jesus and the early Christians walked the earth, the gap in understanding that exists can be even more widespread. Immersion in our

own culture, time period, politics, and even region presents the necessity to fully understand the people, culture, time period, politics, and region in which life was experienced in order to study it properly.

Carson and Moo point out that the study of the New Testament has been taking place for as long as the documents have existed, with changes in such things as culture, history, and language making the task more and more difficult as time advances.⁵³ In addition, the authors note the tendency to overlook thousands of years of study and debate on the New Testament, which is more likely to be seen in Western cultures that value that which is modern, including modern studies.⁵⁴ As previously noted, this study will be based on modern studies on self-identity. This is because identity studies are relatively new rather than exhibiting a desire to look at only the modern.

Lea and Black note, on the issue of politics, that knowing the period's politics provides a more lifelike description of the events we read about in Scripture.⁵⁵ However, this is not simply for politics. It is for every aspect of the lives that were led in the first century. To combat the cultural bias, every attempt will be made to understand the workings of the first-century world to examine life through the eyes of Paul, with a full attempt to understand Scripture from his point of view and through the things he was experiencing. It is noted that there is missing information regarding the life of Paul, first-century citizens, and Christians, making it impossible to be perfect. It is intended that this study be as culturally aware as possible. This cultural awareness

⁵³ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁵ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 8.

will be critical when examining modern social science, as general theories can never deal adequately with the contingencies of history.⁵⁶

Another limitation of this research is the lack of studies surrounding Paul and his identity. Although the New Perspective on Paul skims this idea, seeking to assign an identity to him, it does not attempt to argue from the angle of social sciences and identity studies. While there is plenty of research about the apostle Paul and plenty of research about self-identity, there are few studies that merge the two ideas. Although this is, indeed, a limiting factor, the combination of the studies just mentioned, along with Scripture, should provide adequate resources to form logical conclusions around the subject matter.

A more apparent limiting factor is the attempt to understand a person's self-identity who cannot be spoken with directly. A complete understanding of Paul's person could undoubtedly be obtained for this research if any theologian were able to sit and speak with him at any length. Short of that, research will have to be based on Paul's written words about himself, his recorded actions, and the things that can be seen that he valued from the historical record. If the definition of self-identity presented earlier holds true, these things should be enough to form conclusions, even if not the ideal situation.

While there is too little information on Paul and his identity, another limiting factor falls on the opposite end of the spectrum. When it comes to both the New Perspective on Paul and the topic of identity, an abundance of information exists to sort through. Such information has accumulated regarding both subjects that it will be impossible to sort through it all for this research. This will, indeed, limit the study, but it will also allow it to be built upon in the future

⁵⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 178.

as the pertinent research that might be missed can be carefully waded through, assessed, and applied later.

A final limitation that has been alluded to within the section but has yet to be fully discussed is the lack of background history available for studies on Paul. Ultimately, knowing more about his childhood would give us more firm answers regarding his identity, but the research will have to be conducted without that knowledge to work with. There are simply things that we do not know about Paul, such as how his family acquired Roman citizenship or what they were doing in Tarsus.⁵⁷ It will be discussed further in the chapter on identity, but much research regarding identity centers around the adolescent experience. Erikson writes that the life cycle is interwoven throughout a community's history, which only the social sciences and psychoanalysis can appropriately chart.⁵⁸ There would be much helpful guidance if we had more resources on Paul's childhood and adolescence.

However, when considering this limiting factor, it must also be remembered that Paul experienced a significant shift in his identity when he encountered the risen Christ, therefore any personal identity he held before that life-altering and transformative event might have been eradicated or at least partially erased. Bruce writes that Saul, the persecutor of the church, met Jesus with "astonishing suddenness."⁵⁹ The change can be seen immediately in the pages of Scripture, even without an in-depth study. The positive side is that the insight we possess into Paul's background is given to us by Paul himself, meaning we do not have to question the

⁵⁷ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 36-37.

⁵⁸ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, NY: Norton, 1994), 17.

⁵⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 74.

accuracy of the statements and are given the benefit of a primary source. With these limitations out in the open, the research will proceed.

Structure of the Study

This study is structured in a way that is intended to present the material in a logical format that investigates the evidence thoroughly, one subject at a time. As the study goes forward, each conclusion will build upon the next, first presenting an understanding of what modern social sciences believe to be true about the formation of one's self-identity and proceeding with that knowledge into studies on Paul's various backgrounds. Each aspect of Paul's identity will be examined in turn: Jewish, Roman, and Christian influences. The political undercurrents of Paul's time greatly affected every aspect of life and how the apostle's writings are interpreted and applied wisely.⁶⁰

Once these have been given proper scrutiny, attention will turn to exactly how Paul utilized these portions of his life in his ministry. Combining each of these puzzle pieces of information will give an accurate view of Paul's identity and his utilization of it, allowing the implications for the church to present themselves with very little unearthing. Exegesis of Scripture will run throughout, giving the research the backbone that will allow it to stand.

Chapter one is intended to introduce and define the study, preparing the reader for what should be expected and encountered. The particulars may vary as the research proceeds and as new information and findings are assimilated into the study. However, the basics laid forth in this chapter will remain the same throughout. This chapter lays the groundwork for the exploration that will be undertaken in the remaining chapters. As we proceed with that exploration, it is

⁶⁰ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 27.

important to remember that meaning and significance are a vital part of the Biblical text, with every word bringing more profound insight into the author's intent.⁶¹

From here, the chapters will each tackle a differing subject, beginning with the discussion on self-identity in chapter two. In this chapter, an analysis will take place on what modern psychology says regarding the formation of one's self-identity. Only that information that aligns with biblical ideology will be contained in this study. Many factors weigh against the population's stable sense of self, and the Biblical explanation combined with science on the subject matter will shed light and allow us to grasp it.⁶² The extent to which our background experiences influence our sense of identity is essential to examining Paul and how much of his background he incorporated into his Christian life. A conversation about God's idea of identity will also occur in this chapter. Exegesis of the creation verses in Genesis (Gen 1:26-27, 2:7, 5:1-2) along with Psalm 139:1-6, 139:13-18, and Acts 17:26-28. This exegesis may well lead to a necessary examination of further verses.

Although psychology and social sciences are not the determining reasons for this paper, a base knowledge of self-identity and what individuals tend to incorporate into their identity can give us a deeper understanding of Paul, his choices, and his thoughts. Young writes, "We should listen to what Paul tells us about himself."⁶³ Information gleaned from Christian psychologists can help us understand some of the "why" behind Paul, but they will only lend to a portion of the fullness of understanding. However, it remains true that God created the human mind and its

⁶¹ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 33.

⁶² Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 25.

⁶³ Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles*, 1.

intricate workings, and recognizing how the mind functions can help us better understand the apostle who cannot stand before us today. Our current culture encourages us to think of ourselves in a certain way, just as Paul's likely did, but it is the Bible that teaches us how to think of ourselves.⁶⁴

Chapter three aims to give an overview of the scholarship available on Pauline identity studies. Scholarship on anything related to the apostle Paul is varied and in-depth, covering a wide array of subject matter. Due to this, the examination offered within chapter three will be necessarily brief and narrow, adhering only to those Pauline subjects that relate to the direction of the study. This chapter proceeds from the attempt to tie the social sciences and identity formation into the equation of the "who" behind Paul. Without a thorough understanding of how identity is formed in order to understand Paul's self-identity, mapping Paul's words and tracing them back to what seems to be one particular cultural identity will never yield complete results.

Some of the scholarship that will be examined includes a focus on history, Paul's writings on justification, and if early Christianity leaned more towards being Jewish or if it broke roots with Judaism entirely and failed to retain any aspects of it at all. Paul has been called a Hellenistic Jew who departed from Judaism, influenced by Tarsus and perhaps paganism, and even Gnostic systems.⁶⁵ While all of these are important considerations that help us understand Paul's way of thinking, they all fail to consider Paul's thoughts about himself. To fully embark on the task of understanding Paul's self-identity, this chapter will give a brief overview of current scholarship as it pertains to the topic at hand.

⁶⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *Who Am I?: The Christian Hunger for Self-Identity* (Fearn: Mentor, 2002), accessed September 15, 2022, app.logos.com, 9.

⁶⁵ Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles*, 1.

Chapter four will spend its entirety examining Paul's life as a Jewish believer and persecutor of the followers of Christ. Exegesis of verses includes Philippians 3:5-6 and verses where Paul describes his adherence to the Jewish faith, including Acts 23:6-8 and Galatians 1:13-14. Additional verses include Matthew chapter 23, in which Jesus criticizes the Pharisees, Acts 15:5, Matthew 5:20 and 9:11, Matthew 15:1-14, Luke 16:14-15, Luke 12:1 and 7:30. This chapter will be used to summarize the conclusions that can be drawn from the information given regarding the Jewish religion in the first century, combined with the exegesis of the biblical passages mentioned. Through these findings, a clear vision should emerge of what Paul looked like as a Jew and how deeply he identified with the cult of which he was a part.

Chapter five will tackle Paul's background as a Roman citizen. Bruce makes the claim that "Rome's swift rise to power made an impression on men's minds in antiquity."⁶⁶ As part of the exploration of this topic, the customs of Rome and how that society functioned will need to be given a brief overview. The world of the first century did not operate in the same manner as modern society, and a deep understanding of this will allow the research to move forward appropriately. One of the most obvious differences between Paul and the society he lived in is the religious practices of Judaism and Christianity, which differed immensely from that of the Greco-Roman society. In general, no code or system of morality was followed, a knowledge of which will impact understanding of how Paul operated and his values.⁶⁷

Verses to be exegetically examined in this chapter include Acts 22:22-29 in which Paul reveals that he is a Roman citizen when he is about to be flogged. In addition, in Acts 16:36-40,

⁶⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 22.

⁶⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), accessed July 14, 2022, app.logos.com, 149.

Paul mentions his Roman citizenship while in jail. In Acts 25, Paul again mentions his Roman status when he appeals to Caesar in verses 10-11. Concerning Paul's understanding of the Roman Empire vs. God's empire, Romans 14:17 and Philippians 3:20 will be utilized. Finally, many scholars claim that Paul uses distinctly imperial language in his writings, perhaps indicating that he was either more deeply ingrained in Roman society than initially believed or that imperial thoughts made their way into his theology. As such, verses that support these theories will be examined.

Chapter six will explore Paul as a Christian, emphasizing the exegesis of Paul's Christian conversion that occurs in Acts chapter 9 and is repeated in Acts 22 and 26. Wright calls the Damascus event "a honey trap for psychological speculation."⁶⁸ Although psychology will play a role in this research, there will be no psychological speculation on the acts of God. Additional exegesis will hover around Paul's thoughts on being a new creation (2 Cor 5:16-17). Chapter six will closely follow the trajectory of the previous two chapters, examining how Christianity influenced Paul and to what degree. Philippians 3:4-14 may also be instrumental to this section, along with 1st Timothy 1:12-16. There is an assortment of material that can be examined in relation to Paul's understanding of his Christian faith.

Chapter six will also examine Paul's possible movements away from the Jewish and Roman cultures and towards the newfound culture of Christianity. Tradition was an imperative part of the first-century church, described by Bruce as living and growing.⁶⁹ After his conversion, Paul's actions begin his immersion into this tradition, in which he states that he "received" and

⁶⁸ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 41.

⁶⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 86.

then was able to pass on to others (1 Cor 15:3).⁷⁰ This will include biblical exegesis from Paul's letters and the apostle's thoughts and writings. This chapter will bring the information together to reach a cohesive conclusion on Paul's identity as a Christian.

Having explored the possible identities of the apostle, chapter seven will examine the conclusions and apply them further, looking at how Paul utilized identity in the first century on behalf of the Lord. The chapter will focus on biblical passages where Paul uses his background and the totality of his identity to navigate situations. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 will face the brunt of the exegesis before it can be properly applied to the apostle's various situations in which he works to spread the gospel. This section will bring together much of the research from previous chapters, emphasizing what the research and exegesis have previously discovered. By this point, a clear picture of Paul and his identity should have emerged, which will be summarized further in the concluding chapter.

Upon the successful exegesis of the biblical material combined with the knowledge gained from Christian social sciences and the Bible on identity, the conclusions reached should provide implications that could aid the modern church in its goal to fulfill the Great Commission. If the expected conclusions of this study are reached, then the wider church community could have additional tools in their arsenal for reaching the lost for Christ. It is expected that this study on Paul can show the church exactly how he discovered and utilized his identity, background, and experiences to foster connections to those he was attempting to reach, making it possible to build the kingdom through relationships.

This portion of the discussion is appropriate for proper exegesis on God's concern for relationships in the biblical narrative. Relationships embed a sense of community and the

⁷⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 86.

exhibition of love towards others. Care will be taken to exhibit the connection between the implications presented here and the main topic of research.

Chapter eight will conclude the paper. The significant points will be revisited, reviewed, and summarized. Any final concerns will be noted and settled, if possible. The research questions will be explicitly addressed, and contributions to existing literature will be recorded. This conclusion will also include limitations of the study that came to light during the analysis. Finally, recommendations for future research stemming from the contents of this inquiry will complete the paper.

Conclusion

As Wright refers to it, this is another road in the quest for the core of Paul.⁷¹ The apostle Paul's identity is not inherently tied to any particular aspect of the apostle's background; instead, as modern social science research teaches and the Bible informs us, it is a conglomeration of Paul's sociological and religious experiences, leading to an entirely new person who utilizes his background to advance the kingdom of God. Armed with the knowledge of how identity is formed and demonstrated in our everyday lives, the modern church should be capable of taking both identity and Paul's example and employing it as a new tactic for the spread of the gospel in a time of less community, effective communication, rampant mental health struggles, and an overall loss of connection.

The biblical exegesis in this paper, emphasizing the person and thoughts of the apostle Paul, is intended to foster new thoughts on the identity of the church and those who claim to be part of the body. It is hoped that this study will focus on how meaningful connections can be

⁷¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), accessed September 1, 2022, app.logos.com, 7.

created both within the church and from the church to the lost. Furthermore, another desired outcome is that through Paul's strong example, the church body can be taught how to have a solid identity that spends less time attempting to discover itself and more time helping others discover Christ.

As history concludes, the church must refrain from becoming immersed in problems that look like the world's. While expected, the world's identity crisis cannot be a part of the church. However, little has been attempted to address the lack of identity within the church walls. Within this study, we look to the model of Paul and the patterns that can be seen in his life, echoed through thousands of years of separation as we examine his own identity and his attempts to struggle with identity or utilize it. The well-studied apostle, writer, and minister of the gospel may have new things to teach the modern church.

CHAPTER TWO: MODERN STUDIES ON IDENTITY

Defining the Composition of Identity

Who am I? This is the question that identity seeks to answer. Although the question is simple, comprising just three small words, its far-reaching consequences, context, and implications have left many people scrambling for answers about themselves. Thomas writes that the cultural emphasis in the Western world encourages people to think about their identity in certain ways.⁷² Even with this encouragement to adopt a particular identity within a culture, people often end up confused and lost. In his book *Known by God*, Brian Rosner writes that dramatic life change caused him to lose his sense of self, forcing him to reevaluate who he was in the light of traumatic events.⁷³ There is much to know about identity. This chapter examines modern identity studies to gain an understanding of identity formation and what comprises identity. This knowledge will be implemented as the research into Paul's identity progresses.

As discussed and defined in Chapter One, self-identity can be defined as the knowledge of one's personal values and character traits that cause them to behave in particular ways in the world around them. For example, one might value loyalty, thus leading to the character trait of being a loyal individual. Another person might appreciate the attribute of truthfulness, thus causing them to be truthful themselves. What needs to be clarified is how individuals conclude that they value one thing over another. Why might one decide that they value truth over lies?

⁷² Robert L. Thomas, *Who Am I?: The Christian Hunger for Self-Identity* (Fearn: Mentor, 2002), accessed September 15, 2022, app.logos.com, 9.

⁷³ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 23.

There must be processes or life experiences that allow an individual to adopt certain values over others that become their character traits and identity.

A problem that arises within those seeking their identity, especially when a crisis of identity is seen, is that the human desire is to define self-identity by what can be seen on the outside rather than character traits. We might allow our job to tell us who we are—a factory worker, a teacher, a truck driver, or even a cashier. Those who are happy with their jobs could be pleased to have their identity defined by their career. However, those who don't like their job or don't have a steady career might be less pleased to be defined by the position that brings home their income. Sometimes, we attempt to compose our identity around other roles we hold, such as mother, father, daughter, brother, aunt, or uncle. The problem with this theory is that many parents have expressed frustration with losing themselves in their children, unknown as anything other than "mom" or "dad" and the care that they provide concerning those roles. In addition, some people don't hold many familial roles or do not hold strong relationships with their families.

It would seem unwise to base one's sense of self on relational roles. Indeed, to base one's identity off any outward societal role that can change due to unforeseen circumstances seems tenuous at best. At worst, it is positively reckless and nearly guarantees an identity crisis when those roles shift, sometimes without warning. Marriages can end, job losses happen, physical health can decline, and circumstances tend to shift constantly. However, with a lack of guidance on the subject, many people in our Western society tend to base their sense of self on outward factors.

Charles Taylor acknowledges that the quest for identity and what it entails has been largely unarticulated.⁷⁴ In addition, he writes that the human identity is rich and complex, something that anyone can grasp a sense of when one considers the number of factors that can be involved in creating an identity.⁷⁵ Although Taylor does not write from a Christian worldview, he makes an interesting connection at the beginning of his examinations on identity, noting that "selfhood and morality turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes."⁷⁶ Later in his book *Sources of the Self*, Taylor includes a chapter on "Rationalized Christianity" and its impact on the formation of the self. His findings will be covered later in this chapter. Pertinent to the conversation at hand, the inclusion of morality begs the inclusion of God into the formation of identity. Morality is a central theme throughout the Bible, with it being clear from Genesis that the Lord determines moral and immoral behavior.

Interestingly, some researchers believe the current focus on identity is strictly a modern problem. Cote and Levine write that there were formerly few choices available to individuals when speaking of identity, with the majority of people moving into the cultural roles that had been ascribed to them by their parents and grandparents.⁷⁷ If anyone did wish to move out of those pre-prescribed roles, there was a narrow range of choices for an individual to select from.⁷⁸ When speaking of his identity crisis, Rosner also acknowledges that the developed sense of self

⁷⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), x.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁷ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

is thought to be solidified in adolescence.⁷⁹ However, when speaking of identity as something that is fashioned around a role in society, both the non-Christian and Christian once again miss the mark, no matter if the role is chosen or forced. An outward role that can easily be changed is not an identity marker.

This theory raises questions about life experiences such as the infamous "mid-life crisis" and events such as Rosner's experience when outward circumstances temporarily wreck self-identity. Such problems imply that identity is not solidified in the teenage years in a lifelong way. The author also follows the same lines of thought as Cote and Levine when he writes that it is harder to know who you are at this point in history than ever before.⁸⁰ Although this information may be generally accurate, Scripture tells a different story regarding first-century Christianity. Early Christian converts fought against societal norms and solid, prescribed identities to follow Christ. So, although the difficulties people experienced surrounding identity in the first century were undoubtedly different than those faced in the modern era, there remain complications in determining one's most intimate person.

Identity and the Social Sciences

Having noted that various societies have faced distinct issues regarding identity formation, we can turn to the discrepancy between psychologists and sociologists in identity research. Each has studied identity with obviously differing beginning interests and differing end goals. Rather than overlap the research that has come from each discipline, Cote and Levine

⁷⁹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 23.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

write that any common roots between the two have been isolated from one another, failing to produce cross-referencing and resulting in separate literature.⁸¹ The consequence is a fragmented understanding of self-identity, with the very language and definitions surrounding the topic being muddled and inconsistent.⁸² Cote and Levine argue that explaining something as complicated as identity from a singular vantage point is impossible.⁸³ Before it is possible to understand the process of developing self-identity, the claims from both disciplines must be examined. It is important to note that another problematic factor that arises between the two is that there is no solidification of the use of language between them. The terms "self" and "identity" are used interchangeably throughout the literature on both sides, with little attempt to provide anything except general definitions of the concepts.⁸⁴ However, this paper has already given a definition of identity from which it will operate due to the failure of the social sciences to provide a consensus.

Psychology

Psychologists believe that self-identity is solidified in adolescence. They claim that nearly the entirety of those years is spent determining one's values and formulating one's person and actions around those values. The psychological approach to identity acknowledges that there are several components to creating an identity, all of which must be dealt with before identity formation is achieved. According to psychology, these components of identity formation include

⁸¹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 11.

⁸² Ibid., 10-11.

⁸³ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁴ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 69.

psychological, social, and personal dimensions of identity.⁸⁵ For psychologists, a person requires a viable social identity in which they have recognized roles within the community, causing integration into a culture.⁸⁶

Erikson

Erikson's influence on the study of identity formation in adolescence is widely recognized, with importance placed upon the need for adolescents to create viable adult identities.⁸⁷ His writings are based upon the systems detailed by Freud, but most of his focus is on the psychosocial system and how it interconnects with individual development.⁸⁸ We begin with the research of Erik Erikson, as he is the one who originally attributed the task of identity formation to the period in which one becomes an adult.⁸⁹ The psychological, social, and personal portions of identity are the basis of what must be examined, although Erikson noted in his research that additional dimensions would be included as necessary for normal adult functioning to occur.⁹⁰ Modern research still heavily depends on Erickson's work, and many psychologists use his research as a springboard for their own.

For Erikson, the three dimensions of psychosocial functioning included the subjective/psychological, personal, and social dimensions.⁹¹ His research pointed towards the

⁸⁵ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 69.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁸ Gerald R. Adams and Sheila K. Marshall, "A Developmental Social Psychology of Identity: Understanding the Person-in-Context," *Journal of Adolescence* 19, no. 5 (1996): 429-442, 429.

⁸⁹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 50.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁹¹ Ibid.

idea that it was imperative that those three dimensions intertwine in a meaningful way or that an identity crisis was imminent. An example of this intertwining would be the social and personal dimensions, with Erikson believing that a workable social identity is required to safeguard individual and social identities.⁹²

Erikson's research is also highly dependent upon the idea of "crisis." He writes that the term "identity" often does not resemble the meaning ascribed to it, requiring the additional term of "crisis" to appear in conjunction for the meaning to be complete.⁹³ Furthermore, Erikson created the eight-stage theory of psychological development, which various disciplines still utilize today involving children's mental or physical development.⁹⁴ Erikson insisted that the formation of identity was consolidated in adolescence, with identity crisis being his most significant contribution to psychology.⁹⁵

James Marcia

Marcia believed that the consolidation of identity was a marker of the ending of the formative childhood years and the beginning of adulthood.⁹⁶ Believing the process of identity formation to be both content and process-based, Marcia identified four different styles, or forms, of identity formation.⁹⁷ These four areas in which identity-defining decisions occur are outlined

⁹² James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 15.

⁹³ Erik Homburger Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, NY: Norton, 1968), 295.

⁹⁴ Richard B. Gunderman, "Psychology and Ethics: Erik Erikson," *Pediatric Radiology* 52, no. 8 (November 2022): 1420-1422, 1421.

⁹⁵ Jacobus G. Maree, "The Psychosocial Development Theory of Erik Erikson: Critical Overview," *Early Child Development and Care* 191, no. 7-8 (2021): 1107-1121, 1107-1108.

⁹⁶ James E. Marcia, *Ego Identity a Handbook for Psychosocial Research* (New York, NY: Springer, 1993), 2.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

as identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion.⁹⁸ This model is heavily based on the person's choices, which correctly considers the wide range of options in life decisions that modern-day societies have.

Cote and Levine write that Marcia's identity status paradigm has produced the most coherent body of research on identity formation in either the field of psychology or sociology.⁹⁹ The identity status paradigm is interesting because it focuses on commitments, which directly influence a person's values. Studies have employed this paradigm to examine family background and personality variables and found some developmental patterns.¹⁰⁰ These variables explain why many favor the identity status paradigm over Erikson's work; there is a greater variety of styles when attempting to understand identity issues.¹⁰¹

Although considered wildly valuable and based on Erikson's foundations, Marcia's paradigm has its troubles. The four-category typology, heavily based on an individual's choices, does not establish a model of identity formation that applies to all cultures.¹⁰² Many cultures do not have the luxury of options in adolescence when the prescribed explorations are presumed to be taking place. In addition, the attempts to identify sub-categories of several of the statuses can become confusing when upwards of six to seven sub-categories are identified.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Jane Kroger, Monica Martinussen, and James E. Marcia, "Identity Status Change during Adolescence and Young Adulthood: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Adolescence* 33, no. 5 (November 2009): 683-698, accessed March 18, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1016/j.adolescence.2009.11.002>, 683-684.

⁹⁹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰² Ibid., 20.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Jeffrey Arnett

Jeffrey Arnett is a third voice in the discussion of identity formation. He also focuses on identity formation in the adolescent years and emerging adulthood. Arnett set out to interview young adults ages 18 to 29 and found that a large number of them were still pondering their identity, despite stark differences in their social backgrounds and Arnett's assumption that this particular group should have their identity solidified.¹⁰⁴ This information caused Arnett to create a new period of lifespan development that he coined "emerging adulthood."¹⁰⁵

According to Arnett, the components of emerging adulthood include identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities.¹⁰⁶ Arnett's work is intriguing because it indicates that even when an individual is thought to have solidified his or her identity, young people are still attempting to decide who they are. Arnett writes that emerging adulthood is distinct from adolescence and young adulthood, comprising a period of exploration of possible directions in various avenues of life, such as work, love, and worldviews.¹⁰⁷ This period of life has changed drastically since Erikson and Marcia's initial writings. Parenthood and marriage take place later in life today than in previous generations. Taking time to pursue a college degree and making long-term life plans is a more normal life pathway when leaving one's teens and entering one's early 20s.

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Munsey, "Emerging Adults: the in-between Age," *American Psychological Association*, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jun06/emerging>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties.," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (May 2000): 469-480, accessed March 14, 2023, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>.

The modern trend towards postponing major life transitions leaves time for exploring possible life directions.¹⁰⁸ Naturally, this includes the exploration of one's identity. Arnett writes that one of the most surprising findings of emerging adults' subjective sense of when they have reached full adulthood has little to do with accomplishing the procurement of a career, marriage, or finishing school.¹⁰⁹ Rather, it is the individual's qualities of character that lead to personal responsibility, decisions, and financial independence that cause emerging adults to feel that they have reached adulthood at long last.¹¹⁰

Due to the level of freedom and opportunity available to the emerging adult, Arnett considers this to be the age in which the most identity exploration is taking place, roundly discrediting the idea that identity achievement has been reached by the end of high school.¹¹¹ However, the model of emerging adulthood still receives pushback from researchers who prefer to refer to the early twenties as late adolescence.¹¹² Through his research, Arnett identified a group of people who had not solidified their identities in the way previously promoted by other psychologists, thus changing the conversation around identity formation.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties.," 470-471.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 472.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 473.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

Conclusion on Psychology and Identity Formation

Personal growth initiatives and identity theorizing show that humans are proactive and prone to acting on their inner and outer environments to develop a unified sense of self.¹¹³ The research again points to a complicated process and timeline for developing one's identity. In addition, as noted previously, outer environments are prone to frequent change, indicating that a restructuring of the identity might be required to adapt to those changes in environments. External environments might also provoke change to the inner through experiences that are enjoyed or valued, or perhaps quite the opposite.

When those identities lack stability, the process is often an identity crisis, resulting in rebuilding and revision.¹¹⁴ Instability can also arrive in the form of outside forces, leading to an identity crisis. Although there is clearly a heavy community component in the formation, understanding, and maintenance of one's identity from a psychological standpoint, psychology rarely investigates that link further. It has been left up to sociologists to dive into that avenue of research, and their viewpoints will be discussed shortly.

Although psychology has found Erikson's research to be incredibly important and has thus built the basic understanding of identity off the backbone of that research, problems remain. For instance, Cote and Levine find the idea that identity must be "achieved" problematic in Western cultures and nearly non-existent in other cultural contexts.¹¹⁵ This would indicate that our modern, Western ideas of coming to a place of "self-identity" in which one knows oneself

¹¹³ Koen Luyckx and Christine Robitschek, "Personal Growth Initiative and Identity Formation in Adolescence through Young Adulthood: Mediating Processes on the Pathway to Well-Being," *Journal of Adolescence* 37, no. 7 (August 6, 2014): 973-981, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1016/j.adolescence.2014.07.009>, 973.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 20.

completely are inaccurate viewpoints. Instead, it might be more wisely stated that in most cultures, identity is not something that is ever fully solidified, instead comprising a "revolving" of sorts, where the identity is continually evaluated and revised according to both internal and external factors. It seems odd, therefore, that Western societies have come to understand identity as something that reaches a certain point and stops when Erikson himself wrote:

I shall present human growth from the point of view of conflicts, inner and outer, which the healthy personality weathers, emerging and re-emerging with an increased sense of inner unity, a heightened sense of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity to do well, according to the standards of those who are significant to him. (Erikson 1994, 52)

Taylor writes that perpetual change is not only inside of us but all around us, as well.¹¹⁶ That knowledge would seem to firmly establish the idea that coming to a concrete and finalized version of our identity is improbable. Our values and understanding of the world around us change as information is taken in and life is experienced. If identity encompasses and emerges from our values, and values revolve and change, it would be clear that identity would also transition to incorporate the growth we experience. Could this growth and change possibly exhibit itself in Paul's theology? It would certainly be plausible and might be able to be tracked along a theological theme within the apostle's writings. Additionally, it would allow theologians to assess the growth in ideas as he explored and encountered life in Christ and grew in that regard.

Sociology

Ultimately, while psychologists recognize that aspects of the community are valuable to personal identity, they remain focused on exploring how self and identity can be understood as

¹¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), 179.

processes, with people ultimately utilizing those processes to maintain their identities in social contexts.¹¹⁷ Turning to sociologists, they, too, find value in Erikson's work. As shown through the brief examination of the current identity model that psychology rests on, much about identity occurs within the community context. Although psychology may gloss over the connection between community and identity and instead focus on the internal aspects, this is where sociology shines.

If social relations and community involvement determine much about one's self-identity, then such knowledge can easily be applied to Paul's person. Much can be known about what communities he was involved in, how he operated in those communities, and the values that those communities espoused to form the outward workings that comprised life in the first century. Some psychology research regarding identity is based on the phenomenon of individualism and the vast array of choices that permeate modern American society, in particular. However, understanding the communities of the era in question can prevent the application of modern identity issues to past societies and cultures.

Sociologists spend a great deal of time evaluating social causes to determine how identity is formed. They are naturally less interested in developing identity than in how one's interaction in society affects that process. Cote and Levine write that one school of thought in sociology believes that identities are only created through social realities and the symbols they attach to things when communicating with one another.¹¹⁸ A prevailing view throughout sociology that defies psychologists' conclusions is that identity is fluid, precarious, constantly needs

¹¹⁷ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 30.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

management, and never fully determined.¹¹⁹ In 1988, behavioral scientist Louis Zurcher argued for the "mutable self," which Cote and Levine summarize:

the mutable self is characterized by a highly flexible and autonomous capacity to modify and control self-concepts and to experience various components of self in varying social contexts. Zurcher believed this versatile identity strategy is adaptive in the face of rapid social change and uncertainty. He also speculated that there is a loose developmental pattern associated with it, from the adoption of single identity modes transforming to an ability to switch identity modes as the situation demands. (Cote and Levine 2014, 34)

Thus, rather than the rigid, fixed identity that psychology believes individuals land on, sociologists seem to understand identity as something flexible according to the context in which the person finds themselves. Many sociologists see the self, or identity, as arising out of the mind, as influenced by social interaction and social structure.¹²⁰ In other words, identity is understood as being influenced by the society that one finds oneself immersed in and how one understands life experiences and interactions within that society. These understandings of identity flow well with sociologists such as McCall and Simmons, who place the origins and functions of identity in the context of how a person enacts their social roles.¹²¹ Because of this understanding of identity origins and society's rapidly changing nature, they insisted that there is room within identity for adaptation, creativity, novelty, and even full reconstruction of roles and identities.¹²²

¹¹⁹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 33-35.

¹²⁰ Jan Stets and Peter J. Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity," *ResearchGate*, last modified January 2003, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/252385317_A_Sociological_Approach_to_Self_and_Identity, 4.

¹²¹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 33.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism emerged from the American pragmatist work of William James and Charles Pierce, although the processes it entails are described in the work of George Herbert Mead.¹²³ The SI model demonstrates that identities are not only created but are continually modified through ongoing processes through the social reality that humans create through names and meanings that are attached to things for the purpose of communication with one another.¹²⁴ Rather than stating that identity is, at some point in life, fully formed and no longer required to be attended to, the SI model indicates that the process is lifelong. By examining the subject, Strauss emphasizes the impossibility of studying individual identities without understanding activity in a collective format.¹²⁵

Stryker writes that identity theory derives from a structural symbolic interactionist frame.¹²⁶ It allows for an explanation of the choices that people make when they have the option of enforcing role-related actions upon themselves.¹²⁷ Stryker summarizes symbolic interactionism by stating that it assumes that humans are the actors and not the reactors in any given situation.¹²⁸ This ties into identity theory through the shared assumption that human action and interaction are shaped by interpretation and definition and have a basis for shared meaning

¹²³ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 32-33.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹²⁵ Anselm L. Strauss, *Mirror and Masks: The Search for Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1969), 7.

¹²⁶ Sheldon Stryker, "Identity Theory and Personality Theory: Mutual Relevance," *Journal of Personality* 75, no. 6 (September 17, 2007): 1083-1102, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00468.x>, 1084.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Sheldon Stryker, "Identity Theory and Personality Theory: Mutual Relevance," 1088.

through interactions with others.¹²⁹ From the basis of symbolic interactionism rose identity theory, which demonstrates in part that identities, or "selves," are built upon the response given to them by interacting with others.¹³⁰ Peter Callero, sorting through sociological identity research in the early 2000s, notes that sociology researches the idea of identity within the “relatively localized disciplinary concern of symbolic interactionism.”¹³¹

Symbolic interactionism gives privilege to the rational, favors reason, and is the sociologically dominant approach to self.¹³² Another vital part of SI is that it gives the potential for a theory of agency.¹³³ What unfolds here throughout sociological scholarship is a belief that identity cannot be formed without the input and interactions of those within the community system. Callero, however, was concerned that if people are genuinely mere puppets to their society and the influences around them, it becomes difficult to explain those who break away from society to go against the grain and chart new courses, causing such things as political uprisings.¹³⁴ Indeed, any change becomes impossible if personal agency and choice do not exist. Sociologists headed toward this line of reasoning were left to defend themselves against the rest of the community when their conclusions were challenged.

¹²⁹ Sheldon Stryker, “Identity Theory and Personality Theory: Mutual Relevance,” 1088.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1089.

¹³¹ Peter L Callero, “The Sociology of the Self,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 115-133, accessed October 2, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30036963>, 116.

¹³² Sheldon Stryker, “Identity Theory and Personality Theory: Mutual Relevance,” 116.

¹³³ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 36.

¹³⁴ Peter L Callero, “The Sociology of the Self,” 118.

The Postmodern Self

Unlike psychology, sociologists were thrown into the realm of identity studies due to the impact identity began to have upon society, including the increasing individualization of social life.¹³⁵ Callero's examination of the research surrounding self demonstrates a move towards understanding identity within the relations of power and control embedded in systems of knowledge and discourse.¹³⁶ Many current sociologists believe the postmodern self is made through the influences of power surrounding humans in society. The powers that postmodern sociologists refer to include institutional settings and those who work in them, which are vehicles of the institution's power.¹³⁷

The postmodernist proposes that modern institutions create tension between self and society, leading to the identity confusion seen throughout society today.¹³⁸ Not only did this tension incur identity confusion, but it also resulted in the population feeling alienation, fragmentation of self, and a loss of sense of authenticity among those who struggle.¹³⁹ Due to these institutions, such as schools, prisons, hospitals, and governmental agencies, people lose sight of finding an authentic core, perhaps even to the point of failing to realize that an authentic core can exist.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Peter L. Callero, "The Sociology of the Self," 115.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹³⁸ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 40.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 41.

Michael Foucault is one of the leading theorists of the postmodernist self. He believed that the self is the direct consequence of power, brought into existence through very specific systems of discourse.¹⁴¹ The primary takeaway from the postmodern theory of self is that it connects the study of identity to the historical deployment of power.¹⁴² Cote and Levine write, "the distinction between the false self and real self loses its meaning in the postmodernism paradigm because postmodern society provides a 'cafeteria' from which identities can be selected and combined with each meal, and then discarded."¹⁴³ A growing number of sociologists find fault with the postmodern framework, even if they agree that there were significant social changes in the latter part of the 20th century.¹⁴⁴

Sociology understands identity as being much more fluid than the discipline of psychology. Across various sociological traditions and schools of thought, each return to the belief that identity adapts and changes the society around it. Psychologists focus on the cementation of identity in adolescence, with sociologists being more fixated on identity as a life-course phenomenon.¹⁴⁵ However, sociologists do not seem to consider how much of that life change is forced and how much is due to individual choice, although many sociologists note that free agency is indicated in some form. For sociologists, identity has both internal and external

¹⁴¹ Peter L Callero, "The Sociology of the Self," 117.

¹⁴² Ibid., 118.

¹⁴³ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 41-42.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 50.

components.¹⁴⁶ An individual internally constructs it, yet external social circumstances, interactions, and events influence this internal process.¹⁴⁷

Summarizing the Disciplines

What is clear from the current research that has come from the two disciplines is the knowledge that there has been an increasing focus on identity within Western cultures. Each discipline gives a different emphasis to the direction from which identity flows. Psychology believes that identity is formed internally and solidified through natural processes as we advance toward adulthood, and sociology believes that identity is formed externally and, therefore, changes over time as society changes. There is little doubt that internal and external processes and interactions play a part in creating a personal identity, although it is unknown to what degree. The structure-agency debate is still a cause for concern among sociologists, who have a framework to represent social structure well, yet not the individual.¹⁴⁸

In a rare convergence, both disciplines see identity as a new problem. However, this is unlikely. Instead, the freedom and comfort enjoyed in modern times make it much more likely that grappling with one's identity is not a new problem; it is simply a problem that current lifestyles allow people more time to focus on. Indeed, the burgeoning interest in identity seems to stem from the cultural changes that make it difficult to maintain and sustain a sense of identity rather than the idea that there has never historically been an issue with identity formation.¹⁴⁹ Rather than subscribing to the idea that identity formation, crisis, and maintenance have never

¹⁴⁶ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 49.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., xi.

been a problem throughout human history, it is more correctly stated that current culture has made difficulties with those things more widespread.

Both psychologists and sociologists have discovered essential aspects of "self" (in sociology) and "identity" (in psychology); they have simply failed to combine their research into a cohesive whole. Cote and Levine write that the two have identified the same processes, only at a different level of analysis.¹⁵⁰ The process of individualization has come to light as an ordinary course of human development.¹⁵¹ This is the process by which people develop themselves as individuals rather than simply learning to be a functioning and contributing part of a community.¹⁵² It is unlikely that this process is new to human development. Instead, it has only been brought to light due to the cultural shift. If individualization were a new portion of human development that had never existed, history would have shown drone-like creatures that never broke societal norms. Instead, history has repeatedly shown that humans are not eternally embedded within the systems that surround them, as individuals have broken free from societal constraints and sparked social revolution and cultural change. Herein comes to mind those individuals such as Martin Luther, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, George Washington, Sir Isaac Newton, and even Steve Jobs.

Ultimately, the individual, the self, and the created identity have sparked change throughout history. However, Cote and Levine make a distinction between the process in the past and the present, noting that individualization in modern society is compulsory.¹⁵³ Operating from a Christian worldview makes this idea untenable. However, it can't be denied that current

¹⁵⁰ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 57.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

cultural parameters in Western societies do encourage widespread individualization.¹⁵⁴ This does not mean that the process of individualization didn't exist in premodern societies; it simply wasn't a process that was encouraged or that anyone held knowledge of. Cote and Levine write:

To pilot a passage through the late modern life course in a way that produces long-term positive developmental outcomes requires considerable personal resources that many people do not possess (Cote, 1996a, 1996b). To continue the brick-house metaphor, many people in late modern society must now construct a whole "house" for themselves rather than simply fit into an already-built house. This enormous task has placed considerable pressure on the "self" regarding self-development, self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and the like. (Cote and Levine 2014, 65)

In earlier societies, little individualization was required, although it is almost certain that some form of it occurred as a normal part of human development. As previously discussed, it was not required because one's role within society was typically predetermined. However, the process of individualization would be heightened for those stepping out of societal norms and into new roles or societal movements that went against the culture. First-century Christianity could certainly meet this definition, requiring a definite jaunt through the more in-depth portions of identity formation and individualization for one to go against the Greco-Roman culture of the time to join a movement or religion that was often persecuted and detested.

Erikson's research, held so widely in acclaim by academics in the areas of both psychology and sociology, considers the differences in societies and their influence on human development while still acknowledging that, regardless of the society, there are still core processes that every human must go through on their march towards adulthood and identity. He applies his parameters and processes to all humans and their development. If Erikson's research is to be trusted, the developmental markers he has indicated as typical and required for human development have existed even in ancient times. There may be differences in how detailed the process is or the level of complication that is required to create, solidify, and maintain a self-

¹⁵⁴ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 65.

identity, but the process should be there at its core, nonetheless. In fact, Erikson himself writes that students of history lean towards ignoring simple facts such as everyone is born by mothers, all humans must endure childhood, that people begin in nurseries, and that the entirety of society consists of individuals in the process of development out of childhood and into adulthood.¹⁵⁵

Some sociologists' conclusions that individualism is a myth may very well stem from the fact that all humans face the same stages of development. Callero writes of Western culture's focus on individualism, noting that people do have control of choices and direction in their own lives.¹⁵⁶ However, the author also intertwines this idea with the knowledge that we are inherently social beings who require interdependence on others.¹⁵⁷ Naturally more focused on the social interactions between people, Callero nonetheless approaches the subject of individuality from a more balanced point of view than some sociologists. In fact, he writes that “sociologists offer compelling evidence that the individual and society are one and the same, mutually supportive, and necessarily intertwined.”¹⁵⁸ Rather than dismiss individualism altogether, as some sociologists do, Callero instead points out that it is not possible for the person to merely be an individual—they are naturally part of their community and are shaped by it, as well.¹⁵⁹ This viewpoint represents the more balanced approach on the side of sociology.

¹⁵⁵ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, NY: Norton, 1994), 17.

¹⁵⁶ Peter L. Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives* (Lanham, PA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), x.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵⁹ Peter L. Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives*, 3.

Callero notes this tendency to sway towards either/or, writing that an understanding of the individual-society relationship often boils down to either our personal actions and choices shaping our life or society is truly the master of our destiny.¹⁶⁰ However, to lean in either direction is false and ignores both the human capacity for individual choice and our necessary reliance on others. At the intersection of psychology and sociology is an understanding that people are both social creatures and require interaction with others, yet they also possess the capacity to make their own decisions and separate from the crowd if there is an adequate driving force behind it. These conclusions will be important as this research moves toward Paul and the possibility of a radical change in identity for the apostle. The following section explores some of the processes and forces behind identity creation.

Identity Formation

A taxonomy of positions regarding identity development brings forth a view that identity formation is the process that constitutes an individual striving to find an inner core.¹⁶¹ Identity formation takes place on both large and small scales. An individual is responsible for creating an all-encompassing self-identity that further incorporates other integrated yet separate portions of an identity. For example, Patrick Longan writes of the development of the sense of identity that one must step into when going from law student to lawyer. In his book, he repeatedly speaks of a "professional identity" that he wishes those emerging from law school to enter.¹⁶² This professional identity would be encompassed within the entirety of the identity of the person in

¹⁶⁰ Peter L. Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives*, 9.

¹⁶¹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, 56.

¹⁶² Patrick Emery Longan, Daisy Hurst Floyd, and Timothy W. Floyd, *The Formation of Professional Identity: The Path from Student to Lawyer* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 8.

question. In his book, Longan indicates that he believes adopting a strong professional identity as a lawyer, provided within the context of one's personal identity, leads toward a fulfilling career and life.¹⁶³

While not a sociologist, psychologist, or theologian, Longan provides a prime example of an identity within an identity. Longan writes in encouragement of creating a professional identity based on the personal identity that has already been formed, thus showing how each person has various forms of identity that they must create, maintain, and cope with. This is a testament to the complicated nature of human identity and breathes understanding into the intricate process that allows a person to define themselves. With these complications and intricacies in mind, we turn to the subject of identity formation.

Erikson

Erikson felt that one of the natural aspects of a healthy personality is the weathering of inner and outer conflicts.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, at the conclusion of these conflicts, the individual is expected to emerge with a better sense of inner unity, an increase in good judgment, and an increase in the capacity to do well.¹⁶⁵ Part of human development is not only the predetermined stages of the life cycle that everyone must go through; it is also a process of encountering conflict, dealing with it, and emerging on the other side with lessons learned. This ongoing life conflict allows identity to be shaped and molded, with Erikson indicating that every conflict

¹⁶³ Patrick Emery Longan, Daisy Hurst Floyd, and Timothy W. Floyd, *The Formation of Professional Identity: The Path from Student to Lawyer* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 10.

¹⁶⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 52.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

tweaks and fine-tunes the self-identity. This marries well with sociologists' claims that identity is fluid and changes based on interactions within society to a certain extent.

Erikson's theory was that humans are predisposed to attempt to gain competence when interacting with their social environments.¹⁶⁶ These interactions provide the necessary means for identity development, structured around the challenges associated with stage-specific competence tasks.¹⁶⁷ When these conflicts are encountered and mastered, individuals can recognize and make connections between their strengths, things they enjoy doing, and values that are important to them. As this process plods forward through various stages of life and new challenges arise, the process is repeated again and again.

The result of this repetitive process is the unification of the personality.¹⁶⁸ This unification allows the person to operate successfully in the social world and be socially integrated, further resulting in consistency of behavior.¹⁶⁹ This would seem to point to behavior indicative of a strong identity. Those who lack a strong sense of identity can easily be spotted in their inconsistent behaviors, often molding their preferences and personality traits to match those they are with. When the personalities and preferences around them change, they change as well. This behavior easily leaves a trail of confusing social interactions, as those in the space of inconsistency will be left wondering who the person really is.

¹⁶⁶ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*, 92.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 94.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Erikson was quite clear in his research that the formulation of identity was not something noisy nor a desperate "quest" or "search."¹⁷⁰ Such demonstrations would lead more towards a crisis of identity, which will be discussed. Additionally, identity formation includes simultaneous reflection and observation, through which a person judges himself against the personalities he has found relevant to him.¹⁷¹ Therefore, if a person establishes their identity as a lawyer, Christian, or teacher, they will judge their own identity based on the identities they prefer and see modeled in the lawyers, Christians, or teachers around them. This is a powerful indication of the effect that the people have on us.

Erikson notes that the process of identity formation is constantly changing and developing, becoming increasingly inclusive as the individual creates a widening circle of those who are significant to him.¹⁷² In addition, varying social contexts contribute to identity development and how that identity is exhibited in social situations. Individuality and specific identity traits are less likely to appear in situations of low social demands and expectations than in high social demands and expectations.¹⁷³ While this information is more relevant to the study of the outcome of the development of identity, it highlights the importance of paying careful attention to how an individual behaves in daunting social contexts and what their identity produces in those instances. The expectation that arises for an individual with a highly developed and strong sense of identity would be uniformity in behavior across a spectrum of differing social situations and the personality they present to the world.

¹⁷⁰ Erik Homburger Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, NY: Norton, 1968), 19.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷² Ibid., 24.

¹⁷³ Jule Specht, *Personality Development across the Lifespan* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press Elsevier, 2017), 4.

Specht

Specht discusses personality development, with personality being directly related to, yet slightly different than, identity. In essence, personality is the identity that one puts forth to the world. Individuals can either choose to hide or exhibit differing portions of their identity through their personality. Personality can also be completely fabricated for social acceptance. Thus, an individual who is grappling with a torn sense of identity can be seen to be inconsistent in their reactions, often changing their personality to fit in with their surroundings.

Marcia

Building off of Erikson's research, Marcia writes that identity formation combines childhood skills, beliefs, and identifications into a whole that provides the blossoming adult with a sense of continuity of the past and direction for the future.¹⁷⁴ The experience of having an identity is that a person has a core, a center, to which experience and action can be referred back to.¹⁷⁵ An essential element of identity formation that Marcia adds to the equation is the idea that identity can be either conferred by childhood caretakers, constructed, or a combination of both.¹⁷⁶ This allows the individual to partake in the process of identity formation rather than simply being a product of the childhood environment and explains why it is possible for people to escape prescribed social restraints and step out of roles that were expected of them to change history.

¹⁷⁴ James E. Marcia, *Ego Identity a Handbook for Psychosocial Research* (New York, NY: Springer, 1993), 3.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

Marcia's expansion of Erikson's theory states that identity formation during the teenage years involves exploration and commitment, beginning with discovering role models who allow them to explore who they might become.¹⁷⁷ Identity formation then involves progressive strengthening through a commitment to the things the adolescent finds worthwhile.¹⁷⁸ Taking the idea of encountering various identity crises a step further, the goal of each crisis that the young adult experiences should produce commitments to goals and values.¹⁷⁹ If the crisis fails to produce such results or the resolution is unsatisfactory in some way, the individual may well reenter the crisis.¹⁸⁰

The process of identity formation ultimately involves a series of "crises" encountered throughout adolescence. How the person handles the crisis allows them to decide what they value and wish to stand on. The idea is that lessons are learned and then incorporated into an individual. This process, repeated over years in the adolescent's life on a small scale, contributes to the creation of a person's inner core, upon which values are built and maintained. This inner core is what young adults are expected to enter adulthood with, although it is clear that interaction with one's surroundings and life experiences continue to allow that core to be examined and slight changes to be applied throughout one's life. When a complete crisis of identity occurs in adulthood, reconstruction of the core may be necessary, and this crisis is typically outwardly noticeable. Our attention now turns to the identity crisis.

¹⁷⁷ James E. Marcia, *Ego Identity a Handbook for Psychosocial Research*, 46.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Identity Crisis

Erikson wrote that decisive encounters with one's environment, combined with a resulting crisis, bring about growth and awareness in childhood.¹⁸¹ His and Marcia's research on identity formation shows that a small-scale identity crisis is repeatedly required for an identity to emerge and solidify throughout childhood and the teenage years. Each successive crisis is formative in these developmental years because growth and awareness occur.¹⁸² These small steps result in radical changes in perspective, which children and youth frequently experience as they interact with their world.¹⁸³ However, an identity crisis in adulthood, when the identity is supposedly established, can bring serious problems to an individual.

An identity crisis occurs after identity is already established and is a period when a person's previous identity is no longer experienced as suitable, but a new identity has not yet been established.¹⁸⁴ Dissociative disorder, although it includes a wide array of differing issues, also encompasses the loss of one's sense of identity. It is an adaptive defense in response to high stress or trauma that includes a sense of disconnection from oneself.¹⁸⁵ This disconnection can be visible to those surrounding the individual. While an identity crisis is not a dissociative disorder in and of itself, it can include symptoms of dissociation due to its nature of running along a continuum.¹⁸⁶ In his own identity crisis, Rosner writes that he felt like the memories of his

¹⁸¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 56.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, 95.

¹⁸⁵ Marlene Steinberg and Maxine Schnall, *The Stranger in the Mirror: Dissociation - the Hidden Epidemic* (New York, NY: Quill, 2003), 3.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 6.

marriage that he so deeply valued “belonged to someone else.”¹⁸⁷ This is one of many symptoms of dissociation that are also present in an identity crisis, absent a dissociative illness.

Erikson first noted incidences of identity crisis in the severely traumatized war victims he treated during the Second World War.¹⁸⁸ He later saw the same symptoms of identity confusion within severely conflicted young people who were in an entirely different situation than that of the war victims he had previously dealt with.¹⁸⁹ Symptoms of an identity crisis can mimic or even include symptoms of other disorders, such as depression. One’s personal and professional life can be disrupted during this period in which they seek to regain their sense of self. A lack of direction in life and feelings of worthlessness can often lead to the experience of a psychological void.¹⁹⁰

The mid-life crisis is most well-known for creating an identity crisis in adulthood. Jaques wrote that it was a critical stage in development as he traced this phenomenon throughout the work of famous artists.¹⁹¹ Identity crisis in adulthood does not have to occur mid-life, although it is more likely to occur “mid-life” due to Jaques’ wide time frame of 35-65 for the mid-life crisis age.¹⁹² However, any occurrence that severely alters the sense of self, no matter what portion of

¹⁸⁷ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 23.

¹⁸⁸ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, 95.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Jaques, Elliott. "Death and the Mid-Life Crisis." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 46 (1965): 502, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/death-mid-life-crisis/docview/1298193894/se-2>.

¹⁹² Ibid.

adulthood it occurs in, can throw one into a crisis of identity. Any alteration to things that a person has incorporated into their identity could possibly spawn a crisis of that identity.

Common symptoms of an identity crisis include confusion, an inability to concentrate, or a self-destructive preoccupation with an activity that is one-sided.¹⁹³ Another symptom of an identity crisis is hostility towards the roles that one lost or felt were desirable.¹⁹⁴ For example, if a woman unexpectedly lost her marriage due to the death of her spouse or if her spouse left, in her crisis of identity, she might be scornful towards marriage in various ways. Symptoms such as this may remain until the identity crisis is dealt with and a new, satisfactory identity has been established to replace what was lost. Overall, what should be taken from this information is that an identity crisis is often visible and noticeable to those around the individual experiencing it. In addition, the individual will typically share with those close to him/her to gain direction and insight to solve the crisis.

Once an identity crisis has begun, it may be ended by forming new, meaningful commitments.¹⁹⁵ New values are often established, and new communities may be joined in an effort to make concrete connections and find support for fresh values. Marcia writes that there is a level of anxiety that comes with a lack of closure.¹⁹⁶ This stress encourages the individual to correct the identity deficit. The person in an identity crisis will actively explore alternatives and seek information to aid them in that task.¹⁹⁷ Marcia notes that in some instances, resolving an

¹⁹³ Erik Homburger Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, NY: Norton, 1968), 170.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁹⁵ James E. Marcia, *Ego Identity a Handbook for Psychosocial Research*, 49.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

identity crisis may take place on a purely intellectual level without notable emotional involvement.¹⁹⁸

Identity crisis in adulthood is a well-known phenomenon, often presenting as a mid-life crisis. Individuals can find themselves in this situation through various avenues, but it is always a loss of personal values that spawns the crisis because it disrupts the inner core established in adolescence. In essence, trauma of some kind has impacted the individual, causing them to feel disconnected from their sense of self. Notably, the crisis can almost always be seen in the individual's life because the symptoms are not that of the average person, and the person will often seek the guidance of those around them to remedy the discomfort that comes from the crisis. Ultimately, when an adult encounters an identity crisis, it is recognizable to those familiar with the person's life.

Biblical Identity

Having examined identity from the angle of the psychology and sociology disciplines, the focus now turns to the biblical evidence. If self-identity answers the question “Who am I?” and the “who” incorporates the values and traits that cause our behavior, then what does Christianity say about “who” humans are? Rosner writes that identity is a do-it-yourself project in our time period, with a myriad of possibilities for what each person decides to build.¹⁹⁹ However, crisis is the eventual result when we rest our identities on things or people around us that aren't always dependable. As discussed previously, jobs, people, and accomplishments can be removed, thus

¹⁹⁸ James E. Marcia, *Ego Identity a Handbook for Psychosocial Research*, 163.

¹⁹⁹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 245.

throwing into crisis what was formerly a stable sense of self. To worsen things considerably, Rosner writes that when compared to what the Bible says of identity, things like race, gender, nationality, occupation, familial role, and so on are considered by God to be inadequate markers in our lives.²⁰⁰

Yet, these are the markers often run to when fashioning an identity. When individuals are asked about themselves, do they politely begin to list their values and attributes? Those would be things such as kindness, generosity, love, helpfulness, etc. These are not typically things that one would hear listed from the mouth of the one being questioned. Instead of attributes, outside things that can be taken away or severely damaged are listed. Perhaps one of the strongest benefits of being unable to see God the Father is that when speaking of Him, His attributes must be listed rather than anything about a tangible body. One cannot say that God is handsome. Instead, they must note God's goodness or kindness.

Biblically, there are differing ways that God asks a person to understand themselves. Every human must understand that they are sinners who need a Savior; the Savior that was provided is Christ. Often, inquiries that surround salvation include questioning why the Lord would send His son to die for a mere person. Who am I that the death of His only Son seemed a favorable solution to God? Another reason Christians seek to understand the "Who am I?" question is because they often link it to reaching for a purpose in life. In other words, identity allows an understanding of a greater purpose. A person's life purpose and goals align with one's values, and values are at the core of our identity. As we can see, there is much that psychologists and sociologists have been right about.

²⁰⁰ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 245.

As sociologists have discovered, relationships are essential to the development of an identity. This belief is the knowledge that the Bible also contains. Rosner writes that we are social creatures defined by our relationships.²⁰¹ The Bible speaks of “knowing” God, which indicates a relationship with Him. In John 17:3, Jesus states, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." There is an indication of a relationship here in this verse. Jesus is not simply noting that there must be knowledge about God. It goes far beyond the matter of simple information. Under the new covenant, God’s children are to know Him personally.²⁰² Whitacre writes that for John, the word knowledge includes correct intellectual understanding, moral alignment, and intimacy of union.²⁰³

The biblical view on intimacy of union can be found in Scripture, where God uses marriage to describe the relationship between Himself and the body of Christ. Earthly marriage between husband and wife illuminates and illustrates the relationship between God and His people. No other temporal relationship provides the intimacy that comes through that of marriage. This theme of an intimate look at the relationship of God and his people through the example of marriage can be seen in both the Old and New Testaments. Most notably, Isaiah 62:5 in the OT and Ephesians 5:22-33 in the NT. This is not a theme that merely surfaces occasionally; it is woven throughout Scripture.

Here, there is an indication that humans were made for relationships so they could be in relationships not only with other people but also with God. The importance of relationships around us becomes clear when we examine change. Change is a necessary element for accepting

²⁰¹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 114.

²⁰² Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, USA, 2017), accessed October 28, 2022, app.logos.com, 344.

²⁰³ Rodney Whitacre, *John* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1999), accessed October 28, 2022, app.logos.com, 405.

Christ. The sinful practices of the nonbeliever cannot be carried forward into the "new creation" that is a believer (2 Cor. 5:17). In addition, thoughts and practices that do not align with the desires of God must also be abandoned as the new nature is adopted and one works to emulate Christ (Col. 3:10). This change does not happen all at once but moves forward as we learn more about God.

Personal Change

This all seems well, good, and even simple until one begins to add the component of personal change and then finds through the research how very adverse humans are to change. In his book *Changed into His Likeness*, Millar makes the case that although many people may desire change, significant personal change is much more challenging to bring about. In fact, Millar writes that studies display that humans “are afflicted with a high degree of inertia when it comes to personal change.”²⁰⁴ People are prone to believe they do not need to change or have changed as much as necessary and live in an exalted state.²⁰⁵ In case studies on Biblical characters, the propensity to return to past mistakes and repeat them is so shocking that true personal change seems almost miraculous. When one is inspired to change, that decision is usually forced rather than chosen at will by the individual.²⁰⁶

Personal change is so challenging to invoke and maintain that Millar writes of the substantial relational support required from various sources around an individual to make the

²⁰⁴ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2021), 4.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

change permanent.²⁰⁷ In fact, the deep-rooted individualism prevalent in Western society impedes our growth and change, as deep relational connections are needed for this to occur.²⁰⁸ In short, relationships are absolutely required for an individual to create and maintain personal change. These relationships must be more than superficial acknowledgments of another person, or they will not suffice to support the change. Scripture makes it clear that accepting Christ and taking on the identity of a Christian should evoke significant life changes. After all, the thought of being something entirely new is undoubtedly a daunting thought for anyone. Support is not only needed but also required for the individual to truly transition into the likeness of Christ.

Another hindrance to change, aside from human adversity to it, also presents itself, especially considering biblical change. Christians are called to continual spiritual growth (2 Pet 1:3-8; 2 Tim 3:16-17), yet many struggle with what “spiritual growth” looks like. Ortberg describes one problem many Christians encounter when attempting to change and grow when he writes:

A recent study by the Barna Group found that the number one challenge to helping people grow spiritually is that most people equate spiritual maturity with trying hard to follow the rules in the Bible. No wonder people also said they find themselves unmotivated to pursue spiritual growth. If I think God aims to produce rule-followers, spiritual growth will always be an obligation rather than a desire of the heart. (Ortberg 2010, 27)

We must seek change out of a desire to do so because of our love for Christ rather than a mentality that it is something we *must* do—or else. True and lasting change requires that we want change rather than feeling like we are being forced or undertaking something that we don't care to do.²⁰⁹ Change is necessary in a Christian's life but remains difficult to undertake and maintain without the proper mentality and support.

²⁰⁷ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 7.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁰⁹ John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 80.

Relationship and Identity

God is a relational being and has thus created people as relational beings. It is not only preferable to have relationships around us, but it is also absolutely required if humans are to persevere in advancing and emulating Christ throughout their lives. Millar advances this idea of relationship by noting that one of the differences between humans and other creatures in the biblical narrative is that the Lord speaks to them.²¹⁰ He furthers this thought by writing, "This could be what makes us essentially human."²¹¹ The fact that the Lord is willing to speak to man demonstrates a relationship with him and a knowledge of man.

The fact that part of human identity is that we are in a relationship with God allows a better understanding of Rosner's point that the traditional identity markers within our society are inappropriate foundations on which to build a self-identity.²¹² Instead, being intended for a relationship with God is where self-identity should stem from. The fact that the Creator knows us is where our identity takes shape. In Psalm 139:1, the psalmist writes, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me!" The Psalm continues with the psalmist writing of all the things he does that the Lord is aware of. The Lord is mindful of when the psalmist sits, rises, and what his thoughts contain (v. 2), the path he will take (v. 3), what he will say (v. 4), and even where he is at (v. 7). Indeed, the psalmist is writing that there is nothing that he can do, say, or think that the Lord is not aware of.

The word "know" in verse one carries the same meaning as the Greek word for "known" in John 17:3, which was previously discussed. Interestingly, Strong notes that the word is used in

²¹⁰ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 34.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 63.

a great variety of senses, including figuratively, literally, euphemistically, and inferentially, including observation, care, recognition, instruction, designation, and punishment.²¹³ Indeed, when God states that He knows a person, He knows them completely. Rosner, much like Cote and Levine, and Erikson, notes that in today's Western societal norms, identity is a “do-it-yourself” project that threatens to overwhelm some.²¹⁴ This will continue to be true for those who refuse to accept Christ. However, the fact that a Christian is in a relationship with God and is both known by Him and created by Him eliminates the need to create an identity from scratch.

When someone comes to accept Christ and enters into the relational aspect of Christianity, identity is born from this. Returning to the definition of identity that guides this study, self-identity is the knowledge of one's personal values and character traits that cause them to behave in particular ways in the world around them. Once a relationship with the Lord is entered into through the acceptance of Jesus, the goal is to be working towards becoming more and more like Christ (1 Jhn 2:6). Through that relationship with Him, we discover the character traits of God and the things that God values, and the believer adopts those traits and values. The things that do not match up with God's values and character are left behind. Biblical identity is born.

At this point, it can be taken further into each individual's likes and dislikes. Not only are we known by God, but we are also fashioned by God. For proof, a return to Psalm 139 is necessary. Psalm 139:13-16 outlines the formation of the psalmist in the womb, giving God credit for it and acknowledging that God sees and is responsible for the creation of life. In verse

²¹³ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1413-1414.

²¹⁴ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 90.

thirteen, David credits the Lord for forming his "inward parts." Likewise, Jeremiah 1:5 gives a glimpse into God's knowledge of us, telling the prophet that the Lord knew him before he was even created. In the famed Genesis 1:27, God's initial creation of man occurs, and it is written that we are made in God's "own image." These verses make it unwaveringly clear that God is intimately involved in the creation and birth of each human.²¹⁵

If God didn't directly influence our likes and dislikes, then the verses mentioned certainly tell the reader that He knew all about our preferences before we were even born. If an individual's core values and self-identity are based on the relationship that is entered into with God, then our likes, dislikes, roles, and preferences cease to be things that we need to base our inner core on and instead become things God has given us to enjoy. Furthermore, those things become tools that the Lord can use to further the kingdom rather than things that we cling to in an effort to find a sense of importance in life. When one is in a relationship with God, valuing what He does and basing identity around those things, the frail things that people often base their identities around can change around us, and we remain secure and safe in identity and relationship with God.

Millar writes that a relationship with Christ leads to an inner transformation into his likeness, particularly for Paul.²¹⁶ If one's identity is based on attempting to emulate the identity of Christ, there should be outward evidence in a person's life to reflect this. According to the information that has been gathered about identity, the values that an individual internalizes will be evident in their life through their actions. The Bible demonstrates that the human tendency to base identity on external items is incorrect, and identity should be based upon a desire to become

²¹⁵ Tremper Longman, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic/InterVarsity Press, 2014), accessed October 28, 2022, app.logos.com, 453.

²¹⁶ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 36.

like Christ. This must occur internally, at our inner core, rather than simply mimicking His actions. In addition, it takes place through inward forces and the outward influences of the community around us, just as psychology and sociology point to.

Conclusion

In the overview of what sociology and psychology say about identity, the disciplines are surprisingly accurate and provide valuable insight when appropriately united with biblical evidence. As humans grow, they seek out role models who demonstrate the values that they have found to be of worth through a process of repeated conflict and resolution. Although a natural process, the problem is that people tend to misdirect their attention to frail, human role models rather than finding the Lord to be their role model and seeking to follow Him. In a further instance of misdirected worship, our Western culture is inclined to focus identity on the superficial rather than seeing them as things that God has given us to enjoy or tools for expanding the kingdom. This leads to the identity crisis often seen in adults when the fragile things they have based their identity upon are suddenly dislodged.

Although researchers tend to believe that difficulties with identity are a modern problem, the root is misdirected worship, which has been a problem throughout history. Therefore, even if individuals in ancient times were inclined to assume their family's values naturally, if those values were misplaced, then the identity was misplaced. The issue then became generational. The problem with identity is not that a myriad of choices can be made; it is that the incorrect role models are being sought. To state that identity problems or crises happen because an individual lives in a society of choices is to continue basing identity on external things rather than core values. There is not a plethora of values for one to choose from in any society.

Further discoveries showed that individuals are not naturally directed towards change, typically being prone to believe there is no need to make changes in their lives. The research surrounding change indicates that people are so averse to change that accepting salvation and becoming a whole new person through Christ can be classified as a miracle. In addition, without strong relationships and community support, the social sciences and the Bible indicate that lasting change becomes even more difficult.

Every human has been imbedded with a desire for relationship and identity. Those things can only find perfect fulfillment within God. To be known by God and in relationship with Him allows us to choose Him as the role model that psychologists and sociologists say we need in order to find values that are important to us and that we wish to adopt as our own. Those values are internal, but they can be seen externally. For example, if one has adopted honesty as part of their inner core, they will exhibit that to those around them.

When examining Paul, we will seek to discover his values through his words and actions, leading to an understanding of his identity. Proper assessment and exposition of the biblical text and the knowledge of psychological and sociological processes presented in this chapter should lead to the discovery of the apostle's values, allowing the unearthing of who Paul self-identifies as. What is left will be gauged concerning how Paul utilizes it, for what circumstances, and what portions and pieces he utilizes. Paul's identity is firmly rooted, allowing him to be a powerful force in spreading the Gospel, so what he indicates about his identity through his expressed values will ultimately bring forth implications for the modern-day church.

At the outset, this study intended to have implications for the purpose of enlarging the kingdom. However, the culture's focus on identity and the widespread inability to focus and build that identity upon the correct things has made its way into the church, causing division,

competition, and overall strife. Further, unexpected implications in this study may point towards setting the church body back on the right path to understanding their identity through a firm relationship with the Lord and understanding His values and attributes.

CHAPTER THREE: PAUL AND THE 1ST CENTURY

Knowledge of Paul

Paul is undoubtedly known as an enigmatic character in the Bible. Called to apostleship, not one of the original twelve, but still well-known and the favorite of many Christians today. A prolific writer and theologian, many a scholar and reader of the Bible has longed to pull up a chair beside this famed biblical figure and inquire of him. Having written a large portion of the New Testament, the man known as both Saul and Paul has been instructing Christians for generations. Little is known of his childhood, and what is known of his background leaves those who study him longing for more. No matter how full or lacking our Pauline information might be, his background must be understood so that it can be applied to the study at hand. If psychologists and sociologists are to be trusted, much of a person's identity influence comes from their childhood and cultural experiences. Thus, a study of Paul must be traversed through a knowledge of his background to fully recognize any identity changes that occurred in his life and apply them to how he accomplished ministry.

One of the reasons that Paul is such a fascinating person to study is his mere proximity to the Christian movement. The apostle's writings are early, close to Christianity in terms of its significant early events.²¹⁷ This makes his writings significant as he witnessed and aided the growth of the early church. He provided theology and support for the church and those who populated them, and a model for spreading the gospel can be built off of his words and actions. This chapter seeks to examine the whole person of Paul and his first-century world to begin

²¹⁷ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thoughts, and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), accessed November 8, 2022, app.logos.com, 4.

uncovering the “who” of who Paul is in his inner core, attempting to discover his values through a greater knowledge of him as a person. In addition, various emerging thoughts in scholarship regarding Paul will be addressed. Bruce writes that the apostle Paul has stamped his personality on his writings.²¹⁸ His identity can be discerned precisely because of this revealing of his personality through his abundant writing.

Childhood

For all that can be known about Paul, little is known of his childhood. The information available regarding Paul comes from his writings and the book of Acts. Porter makes the point that unless there was a compelling reason for Paul to tell everything about himself, there isn't anything to be gained for Paul to write about his childhood background.²¹⁹ Indeed, the Bible shows that Paul has a habit of only providing the information required for the situation he is addressing. However, even from the few statements that he makes regarding himself, much can be determined.

Some of the most important statements that can aid in understanding Paul's childhood come from the apostle in Acts 23. As Paul attempts to endear himself to the crowd, he states that he was born in Tarsus of Cilicia and brought up in Jerusalem (Acts 23:3). At the beginning of the Christian era many of the fundamental convictions were practiced loosely among the Jewish people, with Ferguson writing, "to list the elements of Jewish 'orthodoxy'" in the time of Paul "is an all but impossible task."²²⁰ Lea and Black write of the “relaxed” manner in which many Jews

²¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 2000), 15.

²¹⁹ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thoughts, and Letters*, 6.

²²⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), accessed March 25, 2023, app.logos.com, 537.

observed their faith, especially those who were within Rome and were surrounded by pagan practices.²²¹ However, Paul specifically gives information to indicate that his Jewish upbringing has been quite strict and orthodox. Those who might have been half-heartedly practicing their Jewish faith certainly would not have ended up as a Pharisee, as Paul did. What can be gleaned from the information available is that Paul's parents were careful about surrounding the future apostle with wholesome Jewish influences in his boyhood years by moving him to Jerusalem.²²²

Additionally, although we know little of the boy Paul, the apostle manages to give away much about himself in very few words in Philippians 3. Fee writes that Paul is using the example of his former life to compare to the "evildoers" in verse 2, and in doing so, he gives pertinent information for those studying his background.²²³ In verse 5, he writes that he is "a Hebrew born of Hebrews." In this simple phrase, Paul affirms his background of a strong Jewish lineage within his family. This would include parents who claimed Hebrew ancestry on both sides, differing from Timothy, who had one Jewish parental figure and one Greek (Acts 16:3).²²⁴

Throughout the beginning verses in Philippians, Paul outlines the fleshly assets that are steeped in his Jewish heritage.²²⁵ Paul's credentials regarding his Jewish identity are impeccable, including the apostle's notation that he is, in essence, of pure Hebrew stock.²²⁶ In this instance,

²²¹ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2003), 37.

²²² F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 43.

²²³ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), accessed October 30, 2022, app.logos.com, 136.

²²⁴ John G. Butler, *Paul: The Missionary Apostle* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publishers, 2002), accessed March 23, 2023, app.logos.com, 14.

²²⁵ Jeffrey E. Miller, *Philippians Confident in Christ* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), accessed November 2, 2022, app.logos.com, 41.

²²⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, 138.

he does not need to give further details about his family, as he only intends to show the strength of his Jewish background and demonstrate how embedded he was in the Jewish people's customs, culture, and lifestyle. In this, he succeeds, and his point is made.

Another hint that Paul possessed loyal Jewish parents and a decidedly Jewish upbringing is his given Jewish name. Reportedly of the tribe of Benjamin (Phil 3:5), the name "Saul" would have been handed down from the first king of Israel, who hailed from the tribe of Benjamin himself.²²⁷ This is akin to modern-day Christian parents naming their children after well-known Biblical characters, which is a culturally acceptable way of honoring one's religious roots. It is probable that Paul's zealous nature for all things Jewish came to him through committed familial influences.

Various other portions of the biblical text indicate that Paul's family was very strict when it came to upholding their Jewish heritage, which will be explored in future chapters as interest turns towards researching Paul's sense of identity in the Jewish community. For now, it is enough to say that there is plentiful evidence to make a firm determination that Paul's childhood was decidedly orthodox, which ultimately led him straight into the role of persecuting the burgeoning Christians in the first century. Indeed, Paul is a product of the first century, with many believing that he was born within the first few years of it. The apostle would have found himself within an eclectic and contentious time in history. In addition, Paul would have been very aware of Christ and the civil disorder that he sometimes caused. This would have been due to Paul's prominence in the Jewish faith and the fact that it is possible that Paul and Jesus were around the same age.

Growing up in a household surrounded by a strict tradition certainly influenced Paul in ways that can be seen in his biblically recorded actions before he met Christ. In the last chapter,

²²⁷ John G. Butler, *Paul: The Missionary Apostle*, 14.

it was shown that those who study identity place heavy emphasis on the development of identity in the adolescent years, and it seems that the Pharisee tradition heavily guided Paul during those critical, formative years. Formerly, scholars were known for believing that Paul was in mental distress over being Jewish, which contributed to his theology as a Christian.²²⁸ Yet, scholarship no longer widely holds this understanding of Paul. His Jewish upbringing is so ingrained in him that Pitre writes, "the gospel Paul proclaims is unintelligible apart from the Jewish world in which he was born."²²⁹ This upbringing will influence Paul's Jewish and Christian identities. In future chapters, the apostle's ethnic and religious background in Judaism will be consulted for identity cues.

Education

Paul's strict Jewish upbringing and heritage led to his initial encounter in the Bible as a Pharisee. Returning to Philippians 3, in verse 5, Paul writes, "As to the law, a Pharisee. " Bruce writes that this personal statement is consistent with information reported in Acts 22:3, where Luke writes that Paul states he was "educated at the feet of Gamaliel."²³⁰ Within that verse, Paul also affirms the strict upbringing that was previously discussed, stating that his education under Gamaliel was "according to the strict manner of our fathers" (Acts 22:3). Paul was very conditioned to practice obedience and adherence to that which he believed was right. Those traits would be taken directly into his walk with Christ when he converted to Christianity.

²²⁸ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thoughts, and Letters, Logos* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), accessed November 8, 2022, app.logos.com, 29.

²²⁹ Brant James Pitre, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 21.

²³⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 43.

It is significant that Paul found himself under the tutelage of Gamaliel, who was the leading Pharisee of his day.²³¹ In fact, Paul lays claim to his education under Gamaliel because he was aware that the name would bring recognition and understanding to the crowd he is speaking to in Acts 22. Furthermore, in Acts 23:6, Paul cries out to those gathered that he is “a Pharisee, son of Pharisees.” Much like Paul’s claim to being a Hebrew, the indication here is that the apostle’s heritage is that of coming from a line of Pharisees, or at the very least indicating that his father was a Pharisee. The Greek word for “son” in this verse can also be used to designate a pupil, with Paul perhaps meaning that he was a student of Pharisees. While the exact meaning will not be explored here, Paul’s attestation is the same; he was rooted in Pharisaic tradition and knowledge. Young believes that Paul’s Jewish heritage, and the extensive background of that heritage that is implied in Scripture and the apostle’s own words, is sometimes hidden from view because of his heralded work among the Gentiles.²³²

In Paul’s time, the rabbi Hillel and his school would have been busy heavily influencing the Judaism of the day.²³³ This is the school that Gamaliel would have hailed from, and he and the other Hillel followers are considered to have shown traits such as openness and generosity.²³⁴ Gamaliel is represented in Acts 5:34-39, where a small portion of these values can be seen as he speaks to and advises the rowdy group who is focused on silencing the apostles. Rather than punish the men, the teacher advises them to leave the apostles and essentially allow the Lord to handle it. Gamaliel's advice shows a mindset and values different from the angry mob, which

²³¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 43.

²³² Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), accessed November 8, 2022, app.logos.com, 6.

²³³ P.J. Hartin, “The Pharisaic Roots of Jesus and the Early Church,” *Neotestamentica* 21, no. 2 (1987): 113-124, accessed March 25, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43070387>, 114.

²³⁴ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 347.

may well represent the thread of thinking present in the school of Hillel. While Paul deviated from his teacher's more open and gentle ways when persecuting the followers of Christ, it seems that he may have found his way back to those roots upon his conversion. Hartin writes that the school of Hillel supported the idea that reaching out to God-fearing Gentiles was important.²³⁵ Thus, God using Paul to become the missionary to the Gentiles may have had something to do with the original school of thought and teaching that the apostle had been exposed to.

Pharisees

The Pharisees have often been referred to as stringent, religious, and unmoving in practicing the law, a belief that Paul seems to encourage through his words in Acts 23. However, the way the Pharisees are viewed has changed within recent scholarship, with even Bruce referring to the practice of the sabbath law and food restrictions as things that the Pharisees followed with "great care."²³⁶ Bruce's words, intentional or not, tend to convey the more recent attitude towards the Pharisees, with scholarship bending towards a more thorough understanding of the Jewish sect in their own cultural context. Bruce writes that in their study of the law, the Pharisees built up a body of application and interpretation that was quickly accepted as equal to that of the written law.²³⁷ Although to see this written out may seem shocking to the intellectual Christians of today, it could easily be argued that modern denominations have done the same thing. The Pharisees were attempting to ensure, through the oral law, that the written law was applicable to and practicable rather than becoming obsolete.²³⁸

²³⁵ P.J. Hartin, "The Pharisaic Roots of Jesus and the Early Church," 115.

²³⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 46.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 47.

The New Testament, along with extrabiblical sources, emphasizes the Pharisees as a group that is not only concerned with the accurate interpretation of the law but also their own tradition.²³⁹ The Pharisees were prone to deep study and interpretation of the law and tended to apply their findings to areas of life where other Jewish people chose not to.²⁴⁰ As noted in earlier sections, much of the Jewish population only loosely practiced their faith during this period. It is easy to seem radical when others are adhering to lesser standards. However, Abrami writes in his article on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees that the sect is "often described in severe and disparaging terms" in the New Testament.²⁴¹ He notes Mark 7:6, Matthew 12:34, and Matthew 23:13, where the Gospel writers recorded the Pharisees as evil and hypocritical.²⁴² Statements like these in the Bible make it clear why the term "Pharisee" has become synonymous with all modes of hypocritical and treacherous behavior in the church body today.

Josephus reported that the Pharisees maintained a simple lifestyle, were affectionate to others, and were respectful of their elders.²⁴³ This information is credible based on what is known about Gamaliel and the school of Hillel, along with other sources. For instance, Bruce refers to the Pharisees as "mild," writing that many of the admonishments given by Jesus were directed towards the Pharisees, who hailed from the more forceful school of Shammai.²⁴⁴ However, there were portions of the behavior of Christ that perturbed all of the Pharisees. Lea

²³⁹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 515.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 516.

²⁴¹ Leo Michael Abrami, "Were All the Pharisees 'Hypocrites'?", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2012): 427-435, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rlh&AN=83332640&site=ehost-live&scope=site>, 427.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 427-428.

²⁴³ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, 203.

²⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 59.

and Black observe that although there were many Pharisees who deserved to receive strong denunciation from Jesus, there were also many who were virtuous, and they give the example of Nicodemus (Jhn 3:1-17).²⁴⁵ Pharisaism has survived to this day to become the pattern of modern orthodox Judaism.²⁴⁶

Through this brief overview of Paul's background as a Pharisee, one can see that this school of thought was deeply embedded in the apostle. Young writes that Paul still chose to refer to himself as a Pharisee, even though he often crossed over into diverse cultural settings and relationships.²⁴⁷ However, simply because one refers to themselves as something does not stipulate that they take it as their identity, although Paul likely incorporated some of the Pharisaic principles he learned into his identity. The apostle may have had other motives in mind when referencing this portion of his background information.

Recall that the inner core of self-identity comprises values that show up in one's daily actions. For Paul to deny that he was a Pharisee would have been untruthful had he been asked. Yet, the fact that the apostle brings it up at all begs the question of his continued connection to his Pharisaic traditions. Fervent studies of Second Temple Judaism have exposed a religion in disarray, with no overarching school of thought or agreed-upon principles. Yet, Wright notes that the clashing elements within Judaism were ultimately clashing about the same Jewish issues and coming up with different answers.²⁴⁸ This lack of harmony within the Jewish faith community would work to Paul's benefit, as it paved the way for him to present ideas that seemed unsavory

²⁴⁵ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 58.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles*, 6.

²⁴⁸ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, Kindle (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 3.

to some. Those traditions and Paul's associated identity will be explored and given significant exposition in later chapters.

Roman Culture and Citizenry

Another piece of information pertinent to this exposition on Paul's self-identity is his status as a Roman citizen. In Acts 22:27-28, in his conversation with the Roman tribune, Paul reveals to the tribune that he is Roman by birth. There had been no need for Paul to disclose this information until the situation demanded it. Bruce writes that Paul could only have been born a Roman citizen if his father was one before him, although we do not know how that citizenship was obtained.²⁴⁹ Furthermore, although Paul makes the claim of citizenship and those who were about to question him “withdrew from him immediately” (Acts 22:29), we do not know how Paul proved his claim. It is likely that there stood some way to provide proof to keep everyone from making false claims about their status when it suited them. Paul may even have provided this proof right away since the text records the fear of the tribune upon realizing that he had dared to bind up a citizen of Rome (Acts 22:29).

Paul's Roman citizenship and Hellenistic background are essential to the conversation due to the tendency of some scholars to place the apostle's theology on the shoulders of the Hellenistic culture that surrounded him. Throughout Acts and his letters, Paul is recorded and depicted as having knowledge of the Roman Empire.²⁵⁰ Initially, this seems like something that would be obvious. In Paul's time, Rome was a superpower. The people of the Near East were under its control until the 7th century, and there is little chance that Paul would not have been

²⁴⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 37.

²⁵⁰ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thoughts, and Letters*, 16.

highly familiar with its culture, regardless of how much or little he participated in that culture. The Roman Empire was the world of the New Testament, and all of its inhabitants were firmly aware of this fact.²⁵¹ Regardless of how they acquired the honor, anyone who enjoyed the status of Roman citizen enjoyed special rights and privileges that were not available to other people.²⁵²

Some of the privileges that were enjoyed by citizens included the right to a public accusation and trial, exemption from various kinds of punishment, and protection against summary execution.²⁵³ The probability of a man being a citizen of a city like Tarsus, a citizen of Rome, and a highly educated Jewish Pharisee all at the same time is highly improbable.²⁵⁴ No matter how improbable, the evidence points clearly in that direction for the person of Paul, making his contribution to Christianity and the New Testament even more distinct. The Roman citizenship that Paul's family enjoyed has caused many to question their participation in pagan rituals that were common in his time.²⁵⁵ As Greece and Rome made contact, the Romans adopted the culture of the Greek gods, including their names and fables, into their own pantheon but granted them name changes.²⁵⁶

Graeco-Roman religion encompassed a few key features, including being nonexclusive, having a strong belief in the power of fate, being corporate, and religion and morality were separated.²⁵⁷ In addition, many "boutique" religions established themselves within Rome and the

²⁵¹ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 89.

²⁵² Ibid., 90.

²⁵³ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thoughts, and Letters*, 20.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁵⁶ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2003), 47.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 48.

Hellenistic culture. Judaism, therefore, was merely one more minority religion that was adhered to.²⁵⁸ These highly flexible viewpoints and practices would have been the antithesis of the Pharisee customs. Yet is it possible that Paul's theology was influenced by the Roman Empire? N.T. Wright claims that Paul's frequent use of imperial terminology indicates that he was highly influenced by the Romans.²⁵⁹ Wright also states that Paul was at home among the intellectuals and discourse prominent in the Hellenistic culture, "making fruitful use of the language and imagery of the pagan moralists while constantly infusing it with fresh content."²⁶⁰ The mere use of popular or well-known terminology does not point toward a person's identity, and while the influence of a culture has an impact on a person, neither does it point to a person's identity.

Hellenism, referring to the Greek culture that arose and spread throughout the ANE after the conquests of Alexander the Great, also played a role in the world in which Paul lived and operated.²⁶¹ Roman victories in the war did not keep the Greek culture from entering with a vengeance.²⁶² The results were that Greek became the most common language of discourse, and Jewish texts in Italy and Egypt are overwhelmingly in Greek.²⁶³ The most apparent cultural infiltration was seen in the urban centers more than in the Jewish countryside, a phenomenon that is not unheard of in any society.²⁶⁴ Many scholars have examined both Judaism and Christianity

²⁵⁸ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thoughts, and Letters*, 20.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶⁰ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 3.

²⁶¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters a Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), accessed November 18, 2022, app.logos.com, 383.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 385.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

against the influences of Hellenism, and therefore, the influence it may have had on Paul must also be considered here. Paul not only spoke Greek, but his letters also express standard rhetorical devices, perhaps indicating that he received a secondary Hellenistic education at most.²⁶⁵ In addition, Paul is thought to have quoted various plays and literary works, as recorded in Scripture.²⁶⁶

Christianity

It is against this religious and cultural backdrop that Paul encountered Christ, began to spread the Gospel message, and formulated the theology that the church still relies on today. A variety of the influences mentioned here, plus many that went unmentioned, could have swayed Paul's understanding of the Gospel message and the theology he penned. Not only were the culture and religion diverse, but Paul's background was multifaceted and quite unusual. The combination of being a Roman citizen, Jewish Pharisee, born in the city of Tarsus makes him a curiosity. His wide-ranging background also emphasizes that any number of things could have influenced him, his identity, and his writings. The problem with over-emphasizing portions of an individual's background is that, as previously acknowledged, those things can be proven to be superficial at best.

The tendency to emphasize schools, languages spoken, words used, religions encountered, towns lived in, and cultures that one is surrounded by represents a misunderstanding of identity. Scholars who focus on the peripherals of Paul—things that are external, easily changed, and therefore don't represent his inner core—miss out on understanding

²⁶⁵ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters a Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, 386.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

what drives the apostle. What does the apostle say about his values, and how does he act out those values in Scripture? Do those actions most clearly align with Judaism, Greco-Roman culture, Christianity, or some odd conglomeration of the three that has been previously unexamined? Before those questions can be answered, it is necessary to turn to another portion of scholarship on Paul so the apostle might be fully understood before the exposition begins. We now turn to an exploration of the apostle Paul and his influence on anti-Judaism.

Paul and Anti-Judaism

Deep diving into Pauline's studies led to a rather unexpected accusation leveled upon the great apostle. This accusation states that Paul spread anti-Judaism, even to the point of being accused as the very founder of anti-Judaism, leading even to any evident antisemitism of modern times, carried through the ages into the Western world. This charge against him is crucial to these studies, for if there is any truth to these matters, then it will need to be considered when studying Paul's values and, therefore, his identity.

Jipp writes of scholars who believe that Paul called upon Jews and non-Jews to separate themselves from all things that Judaism might have tainted.²⁶⁷ He has further been accused of rejecting Judaism and the synagogue in favor of their replacement by Christianity and the church.²⁶⁸ Scripture that has been used to support this viewpoint includes Galatians 6:15, where Paul speaks of the irrelevance of circumcision, his thoughts on his "former life in Judaism" (Gal 1:13), his association of Torah with a curse (Gal 3:10), and the contrast he makes between Torah

²⁶⁷ Joshua W. Jipp, "Is the Apostle Paul the Father of Christian Anti-Judaism? Engaging John Gager's *Who Made Early Christianity?*," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39, no. 1 (2017): 83-92, 83.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

and Christ in Galatians 2:16 and 3:22- 24.²⁶⁹ Other verses used for leverage in this argument include Romans 3:20, 9:31, and 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16.

What would have spawned such anti-Semitism in the ancient world? Leipold came to the conclusion that it emerged from the religious commitments that the Jews kept, which tended to attract many non-Jews.²⁷⁰ The very fact that the Lord chose the Jewish people to be His own possession (Deut 7:6, Ex 19:4-6, Ps 135:4), giving them instruction that they might look and act different from the pagan nations around them was enough to create interest in their way of life. Freud, too, believed that the motives for anti-Semitism had found their roots in “the jealousy which the Jews evoked, by maintaining that they were the first-born, favorite child of God the Father.”²⁷¹ Furthermore, Leipold believes that the Jewish peoples’ entrance into ancient political and economic frameworks, whether through intentionality or accident, also created various outbursts of anti-Judaism that may have spread.²⁷² If Leipold’s assertions are correct and anti-Judaism can be proven in the Old Testament, then the idea that Paul was the very founder of such an atrocity is easily dismissed.

Granskou writes that the most damage comes from some of the wording that is utilized in the New Testament, namely the phrase or term “the Jews.”²⁷³ This sets the tone for the negative

²⁶⁹ Joshua W. Jipp, “Is the Apostle Paul the Father of Christian Anti-Judaism? Engaging John Gager’s Who Made Early Christianity?,” 84.

²⁷⁰ Peter Richardson, David M. Granskou, and S. G. Wilson, *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity* (Waterloo, Ont, Canada: Published for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 6.

²⁷¹ Elliott Horowitz, “The Use and Abuse of Anti-Judaism,” *The Journal of Religion* 95, no. 1 (2015): 94-106, 94.

²⁷² Peter Richardson, David M. Granskou, and S. G. Wilson, *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, 6.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 215.

view of Judaism throughout the NT.²⁷⁴ The Jewish people are indeed chastised throughout the NT, with the Pharisees being a Jewish sect that is mentioned for their poor behavior quite often. It would be challenging to argue that this has not caused a low view of the Pharisees throughout the modern-day church. Indeed, the phrase, "they're behaving like Pharisees," is often used among Christians to emphasize those who insist on a rule-based representation of the Gospel message rather than salvation through faith and profession in Christ alone. This example alone illustrates how quickly a theme of anti-Semitism can get out of hand.

Lieu writes that the picture of Judaism at the end of the first century is portrayed as passive and without an active role in relation to Christianity.²⁷⁵ For the first-century Christians, it is now the church that has replaced them, becoming the 'new Israel,' with the Jews having lost God's election, a theme that can arguably be demonstrated in the New Testament and persists today.²⁷⁶ In this way, the idea of anti-Semitism is thought to be present among Christians today, with Christian believers being predisposed to understand that they take precedence over the Jewish people due to their acceptance of Christ. The complete discussion of that possible or prevalent belief does not have room to be addressed here. However, it is necessary to have a viewpoint of how some researchers have come to understand Christianity as a faith of anti-Semitism, beginning with the very first converts in the first century.

Addressing a progressing theme of anti-Judaism to anti-Semitism from the Old Testament into modern-day churches is different than accusing Paul, in particular, of practicing or founding such a practice. It is an especially interesting allegation, considering the man was of deep Jewish

²⁷⁴ Peter Richardson, David M. Granskou, and S. G. Wilson, *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, 6.

²⁷⁵ Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), accessed April 2, 2023, app.logos.com, 135.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

heritage, as outlined previously, and has been referred to as a Jewish theologian by those who would contend that Paul continued to hold fast to his Jewish roots. Indeed, Young writes:

By unwittingly rejecting the Judaism of the Apostle Paul, the church has adopted an anti-Semitism that echoes the teachings of Marcion, the second-century heretic who rejected the Old Testament for his interpretation of Paul's writings. Sometimes, as Christians, we have accepted Paul's teachings about Jesus while rejecting his love of the Hebrew Bible as well as his Judaic heritage. (Young 2012, 3)

It is due to claims such as these that understanding the true person of Paul and recognizing his values become less of an afternoon pursuit and instead become of utmost importance. It is quite a simple endeavor to misunderstand a person based upon a superficial understanding rather than seeking depth of character and consideration for the entire person, including their background.

Only a brief examination of the argument over Paul as the father of anti-Judaism has been explored here, with no exegetical examination, only a notation of verses in question. This chapter intends to examine the background of the apostle himself and the world in which he lived to obtain a starting point and understanding of the exegesis that will occur in later chapters. The verses that indict Paul as being against Judaism will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter as Paul's thoughts on Judaism and his identity in relation to his Jewish background are dissected. The context for the verses mentioned above will be determined to the highest ability before attempting to ascribe meaning to the writings and certainly before labeling Paul as the father of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Backgrounds of the 1st Century

Much of the reason that the apostle Paul himself was a man of such extraordinary background is due to the varied influences of his day in the 1st century. As evidenced through the explorations on sociological considerations in the second chapter, the society that one lives in has

considerable influence on the person that they become or are becoming. The degree of this influence is not known and has little way of being measured, yet the influence cannot be denied. Paul was immersed within the sociological power and authority of the Greco-Roman culture, the Jewish culture, and the Christian culture as it advanced through Christ. These cultures must be understood for what they were in the 1st century, as Paul would have encountered them. In this section, each will be laid out in turn. When trying to capture the nature of the first century, Jeffers writes:

If you suddenly found yourself in first-century Jerusalem in the home of a member of the Jewish ruling class, you might be surprised by what you discover. You would soon learn that your host speaks Greek and some Latin as well as Aramaic. He dresses in Hellenistic clothing, possesses Roman citizenship, and claims to worship the God of the Jews, but he does not follow dietary regulations very closely. In fact, the dinner he serves you seems more like a banquet in Athens or Rome than the meal of a devout Jew. The dinner table groans with various delicacies, some of which do not fit what you know of Jewish dietary regulations. The gleam of silver is everywhere, fine wine flows freely, and slaves bustle around you, each with his or her unique task. (Jeffers 1999, 14)

Jeffers goes on to describe the “patchwork” of cultural and political influences in Paul’s time, many of which the Jewish people saw no issue with adopting for themselves.²⁷⁷ It is in this varied, quilted-together culture that one finds Paul immersed in. Indeed, the apostle fits perfectly, being highly cultured and somewhat knit together in unusual ways himself. One must wade through the information of the first century to find pieces of where Paul may have picked up his attitudes, thoughts, habits, and the very identity that is being attempted to uncovered in this work.

²⁷⁷ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 14.

Greco-Roman Culture

Not unlike many civilizations throughout history, Rome arose through conquering the peoples around it.²⁷⁸ However, rather than banishing or killing the people they overcame, Rome found that it was much more profitable to incorporate them into their societies.²⁷⁹ It led to more peace and fewer uprisings. In addition, Rome quickly found that the leaders of those overtaken nations and peoples could be bought and convinced to acclimate to Roman control by appealing to their greed or fear of being eradicated.²⁸⁰ It was an efficient system that prevented many revolts and quickly spread Rome's culture.

Throughout Paul's lifetime, a handful of Roman emperors came to power. These included the likes of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius, culminating with Nero. The church has traditionally suggested that Paul was martyred during the reign of Nero.²⁸¹ Augustus was the emperor under whom Jesus was born, and therefore, likely Paul, as well.²⁸² The systems that Augustus put into place for the management of the Roman empire are those that the reader encounters when reading the Gospels. The offices of proconsul, which Gallio occupied in Acts 18:12, and prefect, which was the office held by Pontius Pilate, were created by Augustus.²⁸³ The leader separated the empire in a way that assisted in making it easier to manage.

²⁷⁸ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 17.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2003), 23.

²⁸² Ibid., 21.

²⁸³ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 21-22.

As far as Rome's attitude towards various religions was concerned, they employed a policy of tolerance.²⁸⁴ This made it difficult for the Jewish people to complain, nor did many of them feel the need to cause problems or fight against the Hellenistic culture. It wasn't always the case that they were left to practice their religion as they saw fit without being persecuted by the powers of the time, so many were happy to proceed with life as Rome had envisioned it. In fact, Keown writes of the special privileges that Rome granted to the Jews, noting that they were exempt from the worship of the pantheon of Roman gods, and they were not required to make sacrifices to Caesar or offer prayers on his behalf.²⁸⁵ These privileges granted to the Jews were not for the sake of any love of the Jewish people. Rather, they were orchestrated for the sake of Rome's political aspirations and control. It has been suggested that the Romans were aware of the Jewish people's messianic prophecies, suggesting another king would come to lead them in an uprising against Rome, so they were watchful of those promoting this belief.²⁸⁶

Ultimately, these Roman policies worked for the good of Paul. His parents were able to bring him up in the strict Jewish manner that they so desired, as has been determined earlier in this chapter. Upon following Christ and becoming an apostle, this upbringing allowed Paul to relate to the Jewish people, thus winning many of them over to Christianity. It is impossible to know for sure what the attitude of Paul's family was toward the Roman Empire, but it is clear that they took advantage of the benefits it offered their people. The three attitudes held by the Jewish people towards the Romans included pro-Roman, anti-Roman, and pragmatic.²⁸⁷ The

²⁸⁴ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), accessed April 3, 2023, app.logos.com, 29.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 32.

Pharisees are thought to have been in the anti-Roman camp, even while thoroughly enjoying the privilege of religion offered to them.²⁸⁸ Most of the common Jewish people fell into the camp of pragmatism, focused mainly on their own survival and ignoring the offensive nature of the Romans.²⁸⁹

While the Jewish people were free to practice their monotheistic religion, regardless of the curiosity of the Romans around them, the Greco-Roman culture remained polytheistic. The Greek and Roman religions featured a variety of gods, all of whom reigned over their own jurisdictions.²⁹⁰ The characteristic form of worship was either the public or private sacrifice, which Jews such as Paul would have been highly familiar with.²⁹¹ The followers of the pagan gods operated on a gift-exchange relationship, believing that if they supplied the correct ritual, sacrifice, or gift to the god in question, their requests would be heard and answered.²⁹² Therefore, the gods were seen as selfish beings, and by application, the more one brought to the god, the more likely one was to be blessed in the desired manner.²⁹³

Lea and Black add that the early religion of Rome was animism, and the rural society depended upon the worship of the gods who personified the nature that they dealt with on a daily basis and required for their survival.²⁹⁴ When Rome and Greece connected, the Romans kept

²⁸⁸ I Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 32.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Mario Ferrero and George Tridimas, "Divine Competition in Greco-Roman Polytheism," *Homo Oeconomicus* 35, no. 3 (September 2018): 143-166, 144.

²⁹¹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 91.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Mario Ferrero and George Tridimas, "Divine Competition in Greco-Roman Polytheism," 145.

²⁹⁴ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 47.

their own gods and simply added the Greek gods to their pantheon.²⁹⁵ The immense number of gods that the pagan people served and the various rituals and beliefs that surrounded their religion would have been highly offensive to practicing Jews, especially those such as Paul. The gods were difficult to please and selfish, which made the message of God coming to earth to die for the people an even greater oddity than the idea of a monotheistic God. However, that care and concern may be why Paul's message to the Gentiles was so often well-received.

Ultimately, the broader culture that Paul found himself immersed in was inescapable. The culture was the very antithesis to the conduct that Christ, and Paul after him, preached. Such stark contrast between the Greco-Roman values and practices and Jewish or Christian values and practices makes it easier to investigate Paul's identity. According to John 15:18-21, those who belong to the "world" are loved by the world, with those chosen by Christ being treated in the same hated manner in which Christ was treated. Strong's writes of the word "world" or *kosmos*, that in the context of the book of John, the *kosmos* is a system opposed to God.²⁹⁶ Through this exegesis on Paul's identity, the research will allow a conclusion to be reached on Paul's involvement with Roman culture. It should be easily seen if Paul was accepted by this system or denounced by it.

Emperor Worship and Cults

Another portion of Greco-Roman society that must be understood in order to understand the culture in which Paul ministered is the notion of emperor worship. Lea and Black write that

²⁹⁵ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 47.

²⁹⁶ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1565.

many Romans considered Augustus a savior after he brought peace, and the emperor encouraged this feeling towards himself.²⁹⁷ This led to the idea that the destiny of the ruler's soul was different than that of the people, and the emperor was given the status of "more than human but not fully divine."²⁹⁸ Here is where some of the overlap in language use can be seen that Paul is often heavily accused of. Paul is accused of using both imperial and anti-imperial language throughout his writings. Keown writes that while Paul may have been influenced by the various mystery cults and the Imperial cult, it is more likely that he was simply utilizing the general religious language of the time.²⁹⁹ The Pharisees have been grouped with those who were anti-Roman, so Paul's use of anti-Imperial language may have some validity.

Terms such as "son of god," "lord," and "savior" were common names that were used of the emperor Augustus.³⁰⁰ In addition, while the term "euangelion" or "good news" can be found in the book of Isaiah, it was also a term that applied to any announcements that had to do with favorable news concerning the emperor.³⁰¹ As is often the case in Scripture, God reverses human ideas to show their true meaning. Thus, the reference to Augustus as "lord" and "savior" is set aside when the true Lord and Savior arrives in the person of Christ. The world of the New Testament was tolerant of many religions and different religious thoughts, yet Paul preached a Gospel message that was counterculture to all of them.

²⁹⁷ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 47.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 78.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

Philosophy

Philosophy was regarded as highly important in the first century. Keown writes that it was held in high value and was considered a normal part of education, much like math or science would be for an American child today.³⁰² Lea and Black write that Greek philosophy was an effort by the intelligent to explain world problems and questions.³⁰³ Some of the philosophies that were circulated at the time are encountered in the New Testament. Indeed, they were widespread enough that it would be unusual for them not to be encountered by the disciples and Paul. Seen as only being within the reach of the educated elite, the ideas put forth by the various schools of thought were often too abstract for many to grasp.³⁰⁴

Due to the likelihood of schools of philosophical thought being encountered through the study of Paul, they will be mentioned here. The Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics were all philosophical schools of thought. Each varied widely in their beliefs. The Stoics, for instance, emphasized self-control and perfectionism, while the Cynics turned to shocking behavior and abandoned standards, with Lea and Black stating that they "were utterly indecent in talk and action."³⁰⁵ Not only did Paul's hometown of Tarsus contain a philosophy school, but the apostle would have also encountered it in Jerusalem, where training under Gamaliel would have likely been related to Greek philosophy.³⁰⁶

³⁰² Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 78.

³⁰³ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 54.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 54.

³⁰⁶ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 81.

Although much of the population was not educated or wealthy enough to be concerned with things such as philosophy, Paul's education and connections indicate that he would have been familiar with it. Therefore, in any studies surrounding the person of Paul, it is wise to understand the philosophies of the first century to see how they may have influenced Paul. Dunn writes that Greek philosophy could be as critical of idolatry as Judaism itself.³⁰⁷ The overarching belief among philosophers was that the gods were incorporeal, lacked any indication of human feelings, and did not require any kind of sacrifice.³⁰⁸ It is unknown how philosophy may have been incorporated into the school of Gamaliel, but any ideas that Paul encountered have the possibility of shaping his thoughts in some way.

The Jewish People

Did Paul become a Christian, or did he consider himself Jewish? What was his status after experiencing the risen Christ? Today, the distinction between Judaism and Christianity is clear, although in the New Testament, the waters are a bit muddier, with many scholars offering their ideas on how the two religions related to one another and if they were one and the same. Wright poses several questions pertaining to Paul and the two religions. Did the apostle see the people of God as a company of “saved sinners,” a new group who had abandoned the faith they had known due to being justified by faith?³⁰⁹ Or did the apostle view the people of God as the

³⁰⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 34.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding the Apostle* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 65.

"new Israel," in which the entirety of the people of God had been turned into something new through Jesus' death and resurrection?³¹⁰

The answers to those questions are important to an overall understanding of Paul's identity. Many wonder if he threw off the cloak of his Jewish background altogether or if he retained portions of it. Wright, for all of his discussions and exegesis on Paul, has been accused of creating a Paul that is "Jewish, but not that Jewish."³¹¹ However, Paul was undoubtedly Jewish and deeply embedded in the Jewish community. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine Judaism in the New Testament briefly.

Josephus estimated the population of the Jews in Israel to be around one- to one-and-a-half million during the life of Christ, with the worldwide population at roughly seven million.³¹² Five million Jewish people still lived outside of Israel in the diaspora, and Jerusalem was still a center of religious pilgrimage and festivals, as can be seen in multiple verses in the NT.³¹³ Rome and Alexandria boasted the largest center of Jewish populations in the world at that time.³¹⁴

Most of the population was poor, another problem seen vividly in the NT. In fact, Jesus alludes to the problem in Matthew, noting that the poor will always be present (Matt 26:11). Keown estimates that 90 percent of the population was poor, often losing their land due to debts, which sheds light on the excitement and community taking place among the believers in Acts

³¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding the Apostle*, 65.

³¹¹ Stephen L. Young, "So Radically Jewish That He's an Evangelical Christian: N.T. Wright's Judeophobic and Privileged Paul," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 76, no. 4 (September 26, 2022): 339-351, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00209643221107910>, 347.

³¹² Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 16.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 37.

2:42-47.³¹⁵ Scott writes, “the vast majority of Jesus’ contemporaries in the land of Israel were common people whose chief concern was basic survival.”³¹⁶ On top of the burden of the temple system, tithing, and priests who exploited the poor, the people still had to contend with taxation from Rome.³¹⁷

In the first century, Jews were identified by their observance of male circumcision, Sabbath rest and adherence to other holy days, and the keeping of food and purity laws.³¹⁸ Paul was careful to observe these things as a Pharisee. Scott writes that the Jewish people were not an irreligious mass; they were instead devoted to the tenets of their religion in varying degrees of intensity.³¹⁹ Paul would have been one devoted in a very intense manner, while there would have been others who were referring to themselves as Jews while failing to practice their faith at all. There is little difference between the situation just described and the situation that one finds within Christianity today. This knowledge allows the study of Paul and his identity to proceed with the understanding that his passion for his faith would have fallen on the higher end of the spectrum for his day.

The fact that not all Jewish people were practicing their faith with the same degree of urgency as others led to the admiration of those who chose to do so, and Pharisees like Paul commanded respect and imitation.³²⁰ This could indicate that Paul had much to lose by choosing

³¹⁵ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 18.

³¹⁶ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 233.

³¹⁷ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 18.

³¹⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 537.

³¹⁹ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, 234.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

to believe in Christ, especially if he commanded respect from his fellow Jews. The law was central to Jewish daily life, including the Torah, the Decalogue, and the oral law.³²¹ The oral law was created by the Pharisees and intended to clarify the laws of the Torah, although the Sadducees soundly rebuked it.³²²

Within Judaism, there were various sects with differing beliefs, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. What remained were the common people, most of whom did not belong to any particular sect.³²³ The Pharisees were, by far, the most unyielding when it came to the law. In part, their stern observance of the law was due to their belief that the way out of the oppression of foreign rule was through the law, as history had taught them.³²⁴ They felt that they were doing what was required of the nation in order for God to deliver them from the situation they were currently in and restore blessing. Although they were militant about the observation of the law, they, unlike the Sadducees, accepted the whole Old Testament as Scripture, and they were willing to examine it and be more open to the theology in some of the later writings.³²⁵ Despite the intense scrutiny that has been given to the Pharisees due to some verses in the New Testament, a careful reading will demonstrate that there were those who were of upstanding character.

The hope of a messiah continued to be prevalent among all Jewish people in the first century. Regardless of how the people felt about Roman rule, it was still the generalized hope

³²¹ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 33.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid., 47.

³²⁴ Ibid., 44.

³²⁵ Ibid., 33.

that the messiah would arrive to release the Jewish people from pagan rule.³²⁶ Because the messiah was promised to come through the Davidic line (Jer 23:5), it was assumed that he would also be a fierce warrior and king like David, thus able to remove Roman rule. Politico-religious deliverance was still a widespread hope for the Jewish people, even as Christ was upon them.³²⁷ It is against the backdrop of a scattered people steeped in poverty, surrounded by pagan offenses, and awaiting rescue from Roman rule that Paul develops his understanding of his Jewish and then Christian faith.

Conclusion

If the study of sociology in chapter two led anywhere, it is here. As mentioned above, there is no formula for determining how much the Hellenistic framework influenced his understanding and development of thought. The best that can be accomplished is to understand the world in which he lived and then look carefully for clues in his writings and the things that others wrote about him. If there is, for example, Imperial cult language or anti-imperial language within his writings, there will be actions that back up what he actually valued and identified with. If a theme of anti-Judaism is present in his theology and understanding, his background, cultural influences, and words taken together should be able to shed light on it.

It has been established in these pages that far from the Jewish people succumbing to the pagan roots around them, most adhered to their faith and continued to cling to the promise of a coming messiah, Paul included. There may have been aspects of the culture that they adopted,

³²⁶ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes*, 33.

³²⁷ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, 235.

but they were not the portions that would impede their faith, as they believed that they were still the chosen nation of God. These choices can be compared to Western Christians today, who take part in the culture and its styles, foods, education, entertainment, and practices only to the point where those things do not interfere with their faith. Paul's part in the culture of his own time can be viewed in much the same way.

Paul's historical situation was varied, and not having lived it, it seems complicated to those on the outside. However, it made perfect sense to him and can make sense to his readers with just a bit of research. While Young advocates for placing the apostle back within the stream of Pharisaic thought, neither can he be removed from the culture that surrounded him, despite the effort that his family may have made to ensure that he was raised thoroughly Jewish.³²⁸ It is with a better understanding of the complexities that Paul faced during life in the first century that this paper turns to an examination of the apostle's Jewish identity.

³²⁸ Brad Young, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles*, xi.

CHAPTER FOUR: PAUL AND HIS JEWISH IDENTITY

Introduction

When exploring the identity of Paul, the Jewish portion of the apostle's personhood cannot be overlooked nor understated. Paul spent his childhood and formative years fully immersed and growing in Judaism. Those who believe that Paul abruptly disenfranchised himself from all that was Jewish after his encounter with Christ view the Bible through the lens of Western culture rather than first-century culture. In Western culture, there is a sharp contrast between Christianity and Judaism. In Paul's time, the understanding of Christ to the Jews who first accepted Him was as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. Wenham emphasizes this when he writes, "Paul the Pharisee did not, on his conversion to Christianity (in his own view, at least), discard his Jewish heritage; on the contrary, he saw his new-found faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of the faith of Abraham."³²⁹

This chapter seeks to determine what portion of Paul's Jewish background and thought process is seen in his identity. If Wenham is right and Paul did not discard his Jewish heritage, then an appropriate examination of Scripture should allow any remaining connections and subsequent disconnections to appear. The exposition in this chapter will lead back to the understanding that a Jewish portion of Paul's identity, expressed as his values, is evident when it connected him to the Lord that he devoted his life to serving or the Gospel message he sought to spread. In essence, it will be seen that Paul did not emphasize being Jewish simply for the sake of being Jewish. Rather, the portions of the apostle's identity that stemmed from his Jewish nature served a particular purpose.

³²⁹ David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 51-52.

The problem of determining the degree of Paul's Jewishness is not new. Jacobs writes of the contentious communication that was present in antiquity between Jerome and Augustine on this very subject matter, with Augustine adhering to the idea that Paul was a Jew and Jerome roundly sneering at a perceived atrocity against Christianity.³³⁰ For these two men, the subject of Paul's Jewishness was either all or nothing due to early Christians feeling the anxiety of their original Jewish background.³³¹ Having been given to them by God, that background could not be completely repressed and abandoned, yet the question of how to incorporate the Jewish background into Christianity loomed heavy on the minds of Jewish converts. Yet, Paul stood ready to be the premier example of how to mold and melt the two together.

Pitre ponders what kind of Jew Paul was when examining the apostle's relationship to Judaism.³³² Those possible classifications include "former Jew," "eschatological Jew," "Torah-observant Jew," or "new covenant Jew."³³³ The category or classification of Paul's Judaism may become important as this chapter seeks to explore the question, "To what measure did Paul value his Jewish heritage?" One can place various degrees of worth upon aspects of one's heritage and accept or deny various portions of that same background as one's identity. Paul identified with his Jewish heritage to the degree that it allowed him to serve and share the Savior his life was devoted to.

³³⁰ Andrew S. Jacobs, "A Jew's Jew: Paul and the Early Christian Problem of Jewish Origins," *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006): 258–286, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499635>, 261.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Brant James Pitre, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 32.

³³³ Ibid.

Paul and Second Temple Judaism

Although a full understanding of the apostle Paul may never be truly reached due to missing items in the research that cannot be overcome, attempting to understand the Judaism of the apostle's time is necessary to accomplish the task at hand. The missing items referred to include things that the research has no choice but to go without, including the lack of firsthand interaction with second temple Jews, gaps in the information pertaining to the same, and lack of a clearer explanation from Paul himself. Grasping the apostle's understanding of himself to the extent that is desired from this research means that his faith must be comprehended, as well. It is a faith that many state he "converted" from, which will be deliberated over further in this chapter.

Second temple Judaism is complex. There were many Jewish people of the time who didn't practice the faith of their ancestors at all or only practiced their faith in a minimal format. The encroachment of the Greco-Roman culture that surrounded them made it easier for many Jews to take part in much of the culture of their day without a second thought. However, the fact that Rome left the Jews to practice their faith as they saw fit also left them without an excuse for turning their backs on the God of their ancestors. Being "Jewish" in the first century could indicate either an ethnic or religious identity but did not necessarily have to be both.³³⁴ Yet, while there were Jewish people who identified as being ethnically Jewish without putting the Jewish faith into practice, there were also those like Paul. Jews that were so immersed in upholding Jewish law that they justified murder in that endeavor (Acts 7:54-60). Today, such variation in zealousness or excitement for faith can be seen amongst Christians. However, due to the ethnic side of Judaism, one was Jewish, no matter if they were deeply immersed in the practice of their faith or not.

³³⁴ František Ábel, *The Message of Paul the Apostle within Second Temple Judaism, Faithlife* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), accessed August 30, 2023, www.app.logos.com.

To the modern and common Christian believer, it is no surprise that the Christian faith does not encompass an ethnicity. In fact, if it did, many would be bewildered by such a thing. Nations, which often meant ethnicities, each adhering to a particular God/god and being united not only through a shared culture but through a shared deity, is not something that Western civilization is familiar with today. In Paul's time, gods were local, with family ties, traditions, lands, sanctuaries, and common language cementing people-groups together.³³⁵ Even within such strict boundaries, differences in the Jewish religion often presented themselves. Newsom, for instance, writes of the varied “startling alternatives” to the traditional Deuteronomic model of moral agency, with those alternatives being found in Second Temple Jewish literature.³³⁶

Being a person who was studied in his faith and who “was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people” (Gal 1:14), Paul was likely familiar with the aforementioned alternative models of moral agency found in Second Temple Jewish literature. This lack of any set standards or solid agreement for a moral standard seems to melt into the Torah itself in the first century. Sheinfeld writes:

In second temple texts, the range of meaning of the Torah is just as broad as it is in rabbinic literature, scholarly literature, or in Jewish communities today. It can mean divine instruction, divine wisdom, the natural order, or God's ways, in addition to law and tradition. I argue that for Paul's writings and especially for thinking about Paul as a Jew, references to the Torah and its translations are flexible and do not delineate a specific set of laws for all Jews. The Torah does relate broadly to conceptions of a shared Jewish history and the relationship and obligations between the Jewish God and the Jewish people. What this means for our reading of the Pauline Epistles, especially in the light of the Radical New Perspective, is that while I agree that we must read Paul as a Torah-observant Jew, what exactly that meant is uncertain. (Sheinfeld 2020, 3)

Sheinfeld's point is that Second Temple Judaism varied widely. Turning our eye upon modern-day Christianity for a moment, we can come to an understanding of what she means. If

³³⁵ František Ábel, *The Message of Paul the Apostle within Second Temple Judaism*.

³³⁶ Carol A Newsom, “Models of the Moral Self: Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 1 (2012): 5–25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/23488209>, 5.

thousands of years into the future, a scholar was attempting to examine one such as Carson, Moody, or N.T. Wright, they might begin from the broad designation of "Christian," but where does one go from there? Were they Protestant, Catholic, or Evangelical? Did they attend a Baptist church, Assemblies of God, Methodist, or some other denomination? What were the beliefs of that particular denomination, and how did they differ from the beliefs of others? We can easily answer those questions without feeling confused regarding the differences. However, such studies would likely encounter far muddier waters in the future.

There is little difference in our attempt to study Paul in the realm of Second Temple Judaism. Even in the first century, Judaism and the beliefs and understandings held by those who practiced it both heavily and loosely differed widely. With Paul, we have the benefit of having available to us the knowledge that he was a Pharisee. Having information on the Pharisees' workings gives deeper insight into the practices and understandings that Paul was directly involved in, and thus the apostle himself. Just as the other aspects of the culture that Paul found himself in contributed to his overall identity, so did the religious practices of his people and time. Wright sums up the aims of the Pharisees as, "If we can be obedient enough, get pure enough, keep Torah most accurately, then maybe the 'son of David' will come."³³⁷

Josephus writes of the Pharisees' power to influence the masses, noting that if the sect were to say something against the king or even the high priest, "they are presently believed."³³⁸ Additionally, he writes that the Pharisees proclaimed that they had a desire to please God.³³⁹ The

³³⁷ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians, Faithlife* (London: SPCK, 2019), accessed August 29, 2023, app.logos.com, 118.

³³⁸ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 354.

³³⁹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 355.

traits that Josephus mentions can be seen in Saul's actions and person, and to some degree, they can be seen after he meets Christ. Saul's emphatic desire to please God remains throughout his life. Although his view on the "who" of who Christ was changed dramatically, there are aspects of Paul's Pharisee background that served him well throughout his evangelistic endeavors.

Josephus writes of additional attributes that typically afforded to the tradition of the Pharisees, including that they were considered to have “virtuous conduct” in things such as “the actions of their lives and their discourses also.”³⁴⁰ This historian's description of the Pharisees clashes with the modern-day vilification of them. Yet, Josephus's description of their conduct can be seen to be ingrained in Paul in all that he did, even if his response to the things of God changed over time and through his experiences.

Interestingly, Josephus writes that the Pharisees “are not apt to be severe in punishments.”³⁴¹ This demonstrates a detour from the tradition that Saul is associated with due to his severe punishment of the believers of Christ. That change from the typical behavior of both the Pharisees and the school that Saul was associated with will be explored in future sections. Inasmuch as detours go, Josephus does not fail to mention that the Pharisees have included in their practices many things that are not in the Torah but were instead handed down from previous generations.³⁴² It was this, in particular, that put them at odds with the other sects, although they had a fair amount of support from the Jewish populace. To support some of the ideas already mentioned earlier, Wright writes:

³⁴⁰ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 477.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 355.

³⁴² Ibid.

the Jewish world was anything but monolithic in its views, beliefs, and aspirations. If we were to collect together people like Ben-Sirach, Philo, the Teacher of Righteousness, Rabbi Gamaliel, and the apostle Paul and ask them, ‘What is a good Jew?’, there would be a rather free and frank exchange of ideas. Added to that, we must remember that the Jewish way of life was just that, a way of life; people did not think of it as a ‘religion’ in the modern sense. (Wright 2019, 137)

Wright believes that throughout the various disputes that the Jews had among themselves in the second temple period, and despite the diaspora and being ruled over by pagan authorities, the core of the Jewish belief remained "one God, one people."³⁴³ Understanding the overall condition of Judaism in the second temple period allows for a broad look at the religious environment that Saul was a part of before honing in on the exact practices that he followed as a Pharisee. It is through these differing communities and beliefs that we must wind our way through in order to uncover Paul’s sense of self-identity.

Saul, the Zealous Jew

There is a difference in identity between the persecutor Saul and the apostle who encountered the risen Savior. It benefits this research to consider the man both before and after he met Christ in order to highlight the differences more clearly. Hultgren writes that as a loyal Jew, Paul’s persecuting activities would have been directed at the newly formulated church due to it either being a sub-community within Judaism or a community that was close enough to the fringe of Judaism that it caused concern and seemed threatening.³⁴⁴ Who was this Jewish man who was concerned enough for his faith that he was willing to see others beaten and killed for threatening it? If Paul was Jewish both before and after the interruption from Christ at Damascus,

³⁴³ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*, 137.

³⁴⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, “Paul’s Pre-Christian Persecutions of the Church: Their Purpose, Locale, and Nature,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 1 (1976): 97–111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3265475>, 97.

then why is such a radically different person seen regarding his identity? For those answers, Scripture must be consulted, beginning with the man who was considered a Jew to his very core.

Acts 7:54-8:3

This portion of Scripture depicts the death of the first martyr for the name of Christ and the following persecution that overtook the church. Although Stephen's martyrdom is highly significant to the church, for the purpose of this study, the focus is on the presence of Saul at the execution. Saul is mentioned only once during the actual stoning of Stephen, with the beginning verses of Acts chapter 8 giving more insight into his nature. Hultgren writes that Luke, as the author of Acts, likely chooses the stoning of Stephen as the moment to introduce Saul due to the man being a known persecutor of the church and due to the “great persecution” (Acts 8:1) that followed Stephen’s death.³⁴⁵ In his commentary, Exell marvels at the progression of Saul’s persecution on the church body as he goes from watching over the garments to expressing satisfaction at the man’s death and finally taking control of the persecution himself.³⁴⁶

The first mention of Saul arrives when Luke writes that those stoning Stephen “laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58). The action of the mob one by one removing their garments and laying them at the feet of another calls to mind someone taking off an extra piece of clothing in order to accomplish some form of dirty work, or to better carry through a task. No number is given for the amount of people present at the stoning, but it can be assumed that the crowd was rather large, based on the information given in Acts 6:12, where it

³⁴⁵ Arland J. Hultgren, “Paul’s Pre-Christian Persecutions of the Church: Their Purpose, Locale, and Nature,” 100.

³⁴⁶ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: The Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 640.

states that not only were the people “stirred up,” but also the elders and scribes, and Stephen is brought before the entire council. If, indeed, the crowd was large and they were laying their garments before Saul’s feet, it is appropriate to believe that Saul had ample time to stop what was occurring. Peterson writes that the witnesses leaving their garments at Saul’s feet is a clue that he was already an acknowledged leader in the opposition of the early church.³⁴⁷ In Luke’s account and Paul’s own mention of the event in Acts 22:20, he admits to watching over the garments and approving of the shedding of Stephen’s blood (Acts 8:1).

At this point in the narrative, Luke does not mention any reasoning behind Saul’s heated persecution of Stephen and the church.³⁴⁸ In fact, followers of Christ must use the words of Paul in Philippians 3 to make a connection to the “why” of Paul’s pre-Christ actions when he writes that his zeal for the law led him to the persecution of the church (Phil 3:5-6). Yet, regardless of Luke’s lack of shared reasoning, the events of Acts chapter 7 spawn an apparent fury in Saul that births in him a willingness to control, imprison, terrify, and even eradicate the followers of “the way.” Stephen’s last words apparently infuriated Saul to such a degree that he was convinced that these followers of Jesus were a threat to his Jewish way of life.

A look at Stephen’s accusations quickly explains Saul’s escalated violence in the beginning of chapter 8. Ultimately, the charge against Stephen is brought back upon his accusers as he passionately details their blasphemy against the temple and the law.³⁴⁹ If Saul is as zealous for the law as Scripture repeatedly describes (Gal 1:13, Phil 3:6), the accusation that he has

³⁴⁷ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Faithlife Logos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 268.

³⁴⁸ Arland J. Hultgren, “Paul’s Pre-Christian Persecutions of the Church: Their Purpose, Locale, and Nature,” 99.

³⁴⁹ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), accessed May 20, 2023, app.logos.com, 206.

broken that law would be a charge that would undoubtedly anger the Pharisee. At the conclusion of Stephen's speech, his accusers, including Saul, either have to admit that their judgment of Jesus was mistaken and that they are murderers and lawbreakers as Stephen has said (Acts 7:52-53), or they must accuse him of blasphemy to acquit themselves.³⁵⁰

Rather than examine Stephen's words and consider their validity, the crowd allows rage to consume them. Stephen dies by stoning, and Saul stands by and approves (Acts 7:60-8:1). Saul does not seem to regret his actions or the incident that he gave his approval to, as he instead increases the persecution to such a degree that all of the Jerusalem church except the apostles are scattered (Acts 8:1). Excell writes that after expressing satisfaction at the martyr's death, the future apostle "took up the matter earnestly himself with both hands."³⁵¹ Acts 8:3 details this earnest attempt to destroy the church, writing that Saul was "ravaging" the church.

The ESV states that Saul "was ravaging" the church, but the more appropriate translation of the phrase "ἐλυμαίνετο" is "began ravaging," which is more consistent with the progression of events that takes place from the point of Stephen's death.³⁵² "Lymainomai" is a verb that indicates physical injury, as well as oppression or indignity.³⁵³ Truly, Saul sought to make the church a mere memory through whatever means necessary. Gangel writes, "The picture here does not describe some religious administrator seated at a desk and sending others to do his dirty

³⁵⁰ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 268.

³⁵¹ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: The Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 638.

³⁵² James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1568.

³⁵³ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Faithlife Logos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 277.

work. Saul led the charge in the streets, house to house, men and women.”³⁵⁴ As Luke details in these verses, Saul pursued Judaism and sought to protect it by any means necessary.

Acts 9:1-2

After briefly departing from Saul's pursuits, Luke returns to the future apostle's activities in Acts chapter 9. Only two verses depicting Saul's reign of persecution remain before he encounters his living, risen Savior. In Acts 9:1, Luke documents that Saul is "still breathing threats and murder" against those following the Lord. As has been made previously clear, the death of Stephen was not a benign act; rather, it was the beginning of a concentrated effort to destroy the church. As a prelude to the incredible change that Saul is about to experience, Luke reminds the reader that Saul is still actively fighting against believers, to the point that he seeks approval from the high priest to travel outside of Jerusalem and pursue other followers of the Way, since they had fled the city after the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1, 9:1-2).

The term "breathing" used in Acts 9:1 is meant to convey Old Testament imagery for anger, building up a picture of Saul as a rampaging beast in his opposition to the Lord's people.³⁵⁵ This terminology breeds the idea that Luke is saying the persecution of Christians is the very thing that drove Saul's existence. That idea connects with Paul's words in Acts 26:10-11 where the apostle speaks of his actions against the "saints" and how "in a raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." By his own admission, Paul is so enraged against the church that it dominates his actions. Knowing that the church body has fled following

³⁵⁴ Kenneth O. Gangell and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1998), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 120.

³⁵⁵ William J. Larkin, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Acts*.

Stephen's death, Saul does not begin burning things to the ground. His rage is far more calculated, and he offers up a sophisticated, officially authorized persecution befitting his person.³⁵⁶

Due to Paul's own testimony regarding his actions, the reader can be sure that Luke is not exaggerating in order to obtain a more impressive story of conversion through Saul. The urgency with which he desired to stamp out the Christian movement is evidenced in the lengths that he goes to in pursuing Christ's followers beyond Jerusalem.³⁵⁷ Paul was not satisfied with the scattering of the believers to areas outside of Jerusalem. Instead, their mere existence and beliefs were so threatening to his Jewish way of life that he was willing to pursue them even to their safe havens. Josephus wrote that although the Jews were “deprived of our wealth, of our cities, or of other advantages we have, our law continues immortal.”³⁵⁸ It was for this “immortal” law that Saul so heavily pursued the followers of Christ.

What do these small bites of Scripture tell us about Paul and his identity at this time in his life, when he is known primarily as Saul? Paul's values will direct us towards his self-identity. We can see him behaving in particular ways, no matter how atrocious that behavior may be, due to unspoken values that he holds. Although unspoken, those values manifest in Paul's actions. Despite the fact that the given knowledge on determining self-identity has been gleaned from sociology and psychology thus far, the Bible backs up the two disciplines, also giving evidence that our values manifest themselves through our outward actions. When Jesus addresses the

³⁵⁶ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 138.

³⁵⁷ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), accessed May 20, 2023, app.logos.com, 233.

³⁵⁸ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 811.

problem of false prophets in Matthew 7:15-20, he states in verse 20, “Thus you will recognize them by their fruit.” Rydelnik writes of this portion of Scripture, “Not all who claim to be a part of the covenant community are.”³⁵⁹

Similarly, Blomberg writes that Jesus takes this moment to address the situation in which greater numbers profess Christ than truly follow him.³⁶⁰ Jesus notes that the false prophets disguise themselves well as meek sheep who are also following along with the ways of Christ, yet they are actually wolves (Matt 7:15). The example of the fruit-bearing trees in verses 16-17 gives an indication that the fruit of those who truly follow the Lord can be seen. Christ's helpful advice on how to recognize such people culminates in the aforementioned verse 20. Thus, one should be able to use outward behavior to make a determination between true and false Christians.³⁶¹ If the person in question is practicing obedience to the ways of God, their fruit is considered to be good, and they can be trusted to be true followers of Christ.

Keener writes, "Yet the image of the tree and fruit also reminds us that behavior flows from character, and in Christian teaching, character comes through being born again rather than merely through self-discipline."³⁶² While Keener's use of the word “character” is not altogether incorrect, he misses a piece of the puzzle. Both character and action flow from a person's inward values, and those values comprise one's identity.

³⁵⁹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1465.

³⁶⁰ Craig L Blomberg, *The New American Commentary. / Matthew*, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 132.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 133.

³⁶² Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

Saul's Self-Identity

Rosner writes, “To understand who you are, you need also to know whose you are.”³⁶³ Saul knew Who he belonged to. He was a Hebrew, given a cherished position of being among God's chosen people. Knowing that he belonged to God, he was passionate about the Law of God. Although mistaken, Saul believed he was aligning his values with the Lord's. From those perceived godly values expressed outwardly through his actions, we see Saul's resolute Jewish identity.

Saul so greatly valued the Law that he sought death and soiled his own hands with blood to destroy those who might threaten it. As an out-and-out zealot for the law, the customs, and ancestral traditions—everything that was of value in Judaism—Saul sought to protect the interests of his religion.³⁶⁴ As a Pharisee, he claimed passionate devotion not only to the law but also purity.³⁶⁵ Thus, the values of Judaism and the values of Saul line up in apparent perfection.

As previously demonstrated by the disciplines of sociology and psychology, the exposition of the biblical texts that speak of Saul, and the application of the biblical test of knowing others by their “fruit” (Matt 7:20), we can conclude that Saul's self-identity before meeting Christ is thoroughly Jewish. It is not Jewish because he proclaims himself Jewish. No, Saul's self-identity is clearly Jewish because the values that emanate from Saul's core and then exhibit themselves through his behavior and actions are Jewish. These values create a Jewish identity in Saul because they are inner values that cannot be changed without a radical, and even miraculous, upset to Saul's person. Millar writes that when it comes to personal change, humans

³⁶³ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 46.

³⁶⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 2000), 70-71.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

are afflicted with a high degree of inertia.³⁶⁶ This inertia is what prevents us from moving away from our core and values once they are set. Saul's identity is wrapped up in his Jewishness because it comes from the inside of him, and it is an identity that is set in place until something revolutionary comes to upend it.

Paul's Jewish Identity After Christ

Having established from Saul's actions in Scripture that his self-identity is thoroughly Jewish, one must wonder if that utterly Jewish identity holds after meeting Christ and becoming more widely known as Paul. Again, the Bible, psychology, and sociology all tell us that a person's values can be determined by their actions. After his experience with Christ, Paul undergoes a transformation. Millar writes, "Personal change (or transformation) involves decisively altered behavior, consistently modified thinking, choices, and decisions and permanently reshaped character."³⁶⁷ As we consult Scripture, we will seek to uncover any personal change in Paul that has led to a change in his Jewish values and, therefore, his self-identity.

Acts 20:16

At the end of a short passage detailing Paul's travels from Troas to Miletus, a seemingly benign note is included by Luke. In verse 16, the author notes Paul's choice to sail past Ephesus rather than stopping because he was "hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost" (Acts 20:16). This reasoning is given for the apostle's decision to skip a visit to

³⁶⁶ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2021), 4.

³⁶⁷ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 4.

Ephesus at that time, although a follow-up reason for why Paul was energetically attempting to reach Jerusalem for Pentecost is not mentioned.

Most commentators skip over this portion of verse sixteen as if Paul is expected to rush back to Jerusalem to be present for the feast of Pentecost. Although Acts is silent about Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem, in the book of Romans, Paul explains that it was necessary for him to deposit a collection that he was carrying for the Jerusalem Christians (Rom 15:25, 28).³⁶⁸ Still, this does not explain, nor is there any explanation given in Romans, why this must be done during Pentecost. Larkin surmises that Jewish piety may have motivated the apostle, and he also ponders the possibility that Paul desired to celebrate the first Christian Pentecost, as well.³⁶⁹

Considering Paul's Pharisaic background, his deep desire to stick to Jewish traditions may be manifesting itself in this passing information. Personal values make themselves obvious in one's actions, and Paul's actions, as described by Luke, demonstrate an urgency to reach Jerusalem. Urgency does not typically surface in a matter unless that matter is of utmost importance to a person. Paul gives no direct reason in his writings for the urgency to return by Pentecost, so it would stand to reason that Merida's assumption that the apostle is attempting to retain Jewish traditions is accurate. Here, Paul demonstrates through his actions that his identity remains Jewish.

Acts 22:2-14

This portion of Scripture is the beginning of Paul's testimony, which he gives to the angry Jewish crowd that incites a riot and attempts to kill him when they see him in the temple (Acts

³⁶⁸ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 406.

³⁶⁹ William J. Larkin, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Acts* (Downers, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

21:27-31). The entirety of this testimony will be examined in the following chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, only the verses in which Paul refers to his Jewish heritage will be examined as this research attempts to determine how much of Paul's Jewish identity he retains after finding life in Christ.

As Paul addresses the crowd, he does so in Hebrew, causing the crowd to become quiet (Acts 22:2). Paul's choice of language in this context is important. He immediately seeks to relate to the crowd through their commonalities. The apostle identifies with the audience by using their language.³⁷⁰ What Paul had not accomplished through participation in the Nazarite vow, he instead sought to accomplish through addressing the crowd, utilizing their native tongue in order to underline his Jewishness.³⁷¹ Once the crowd is quiet, the apostle immediately launches into a description of his Jewish background (Acts 22:3-5). From these brief verses, we see Paul explain that he was zealous for the law and had once believed as his own persecutors did, to the point where he took it upon himself to "persecute this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women," (Acts 22:4). Paul's initial words to the angry mob are intended to establish a rapport with them. He also seeks to demonstrate to them that, rather than being a lawbreaker, Paul's former life had been full of the zeal for the law that the crowd was so adamantly showing in attempting to kill him.³⁷²

It is important to take note of scholars' consistent use of the phrase "former life" when referring to this portion of Paul's address to the Jews. In verse 3, at the beginning of Paul's

³⁷⁰ William J. Larkin, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Acts* (Downers, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

³⁷¹ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), accessed May 20, 2023, app.logos.com, 457.

³⁷² John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 457.

defense, he states, "I am a Jew." The word "am" as a present term shows that as Paul stood, addressing the crowd, he considered himself a Jew. Yet, mention can be repeatedly seen of Paul speaking of his "former" life in Judaism. Peterson writes of Paul's former life in Judaism and then provides some clarification by referencing his former persecution of Christians.³⁷³ Polhill, too, writes of Paul's reference to his former days, namely as a persecutor of Christians.³⁷⁴ It can easily be concluded that Paul's former life is not a reference to being a Jew in the past but being a persecutor of the church in the past.

In this defense speech in Acts, Paul does not use this moment to explain away his Judaism. Instead, he makes the claim, "I am a Jew," followed by a description of his Jewish upbringing (Acts 22:3-5). This is not a message that is intended to display a transition from life as a Jew to life as a Christian. It is a message with the purpose of demonstrating his life as a Jew who did not understand who Christ was, to his life as a Jew with an understanding that Christ was the Messiah that was prophesied to be given to them. In verse 12, the apostle continues to make connections between Judaism and Christianity when he brings Ananias into his testimony, stating that he was "a devout man according to the law, well-spoken of by all the Jews who lived there" (Acts 22:12).

Paul's loyalty to Israel is then connected to his commitment to proclaim the hope of Israel in the person of the Messiah.³⁷⁵ He gives evidence that he himself was a devout Jew and then goes on to mention another to exhibit that this understanding of who Jesus is does not merely belong to him. In essence, Paul uses Ananias to make the point that Christian faith does not

³⁷³ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 598.

³⁷⁴ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 458.

³⁷⁵ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Faithlife Logos*, 596.

detract from his loyalty to Judaism.³⁷⁶ Other language that Paul utilizes to underline his continued connection to Judaism is in verse 14 when he references “the God of our fathers,” which he also use in Acts 24:14. All of the Jewish people present and listening to Paul's emphatic speech would have understood that he was referencing Exodus 3:15-16. Gangel writes that Paul uses phrases like "the God of our fathers" and "Righteous One" as a part of a Jewish explanation of Christian conversion.³⁷⁷ Always seeking to spread the gospel, it is likely that a secondary reason for Paul's use of these phrases is to connect the God that the Jews knew to the Christ that they were unwilling to receive.

There are scholars who believe that Paul firmly saw himself as a former Jew, with a discontinuity between the practices and beliefs of Paul as a Christian apostle and Saul the Jew.³⁷⁸ However, if there is a point in his life that Paul begins to believe that he is no longer Jewish, there is no evidence for that in these verses. Instead, Paul affirms his status as a current Jew and then takes the opportunity to demonstrate that other prominent Jewish people have arrived at the same conclusion as he, thereby bolstering his argument. Rather than take this moment to separate himself from his Jewish background, he works to connect the truth that his listeners know to the truth that he now knows, that Christ is the fulfillment of all they have been eagerly waiting for.

Acts 26:4-7

Again, Paul finds himself making a defense for himself. His defense is very similar to the one in Acts 24 due to the fact that he is speaking to a Jewish audience. Herod Agrippa II was

³⁷⁶ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 461.

³⁷⁷ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 372.

³⁷⁸ Brant James Pitre, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology*, 33.

well acquainted with Jewish laws and customs, meaning that he would have had an understanding of what Paul was talking about (Acts 26:3).³⁷⁹ Peterson writes that Agrippa isn't someone with just a professional interest in Judaism but that he believes in the prophets, and the prophetic hope spoken of in them matters to him a great deal.³⁸⁰ Regardless of where Agrippa's interests lie, Paul is allowed to speak.

As Paul begins to give his testimony and describe his background, it is distinctly similar to the one in Acts 24. Particularly in verses 4-8, his speech reveals some thoughts regarding his current state within Judaism. In verse 4, as the apostle begins to outline his background, he refers to "my own nation." Here, Paul's wording allows him to lay claim to inclusion in the nation of Israel not only in his childhood but in the present situation, as well. His terminology is "tō ethnei," in reference to the Jewish nation.³⁸¹

When writing of how the Jews are depicted by Luke in the book of Acts, Wills writes, "It could be argued that a distinction between 'Jews' and 'Christians' is anachronistic, since early Christians composed a sect within Judaism."³⁸² This certainly seems to be the way Paul is thinking as he speaks of belonging to the "party" of the Pharisees in verse 5. His understanding seems to be that he was Jewish and had belonged to a sect of Judaism called the Pharisees previously, and currently, he belonged to a fresh sect of Judaism that was referred to as "The Way." The difference in sects would have been the belief/unbelief in the fulfillment of the

³⁷⁹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1733.

³⁸⁰ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 654.

³⁸¹ Allison A. Trites, William J. Larkin, and Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2006), accessed June 1, 2023, app.logos.com, 624.

³⁸² Lawrence M. Wills, "The Depiction of the Jews in Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 4 (1991): 631–654, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267663>, 645.

Messianic Hope, in much the same way the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead while the Pharisees did. In modern times, this can be compared to denominations within Christianity; we are all Christians. However, due to differing understandings of theological matters, denominations have formed where believers group around their shared understanding of the biblical text.

As his defense continues, Paul continues to align himself with the Jewish people. In verse 6, Paul once again refers to "our fathers" when speaking of his Jewish ancestry. He continues in verse 7 with the reference to "our twelve tribes" as he speaks of sharing in the hope of the entire nation of Israel. Larkin writes that Paul stood on firm footing here when he claims continuity with the writers of the Old Testament and the nation that had planted their hope around messianic deliverance.³⁸³ That continuity displays itself in Paul's words as he orients himself firmly within the Jewish nation and its hope for a messiah.

Romans 11:1

At the beginning of chapter 11, Paul is discussing the remnant of Israel. He begins in verse 1 by posing and then answering a question, "Has God rejected his people?" His answer to this question starts with a personal example and references himself. Rydelnik writes that Paul cites himself as the "textbook" example to demonstrate that God has not rejected the Jewish people.³⁸⁴ This is yet another small verse in which a little bit of information goes quite a distance in understanding how Paul viewed himself and understood his self-identity.

³⁸³ Allison A. Trites, William J. Larkin, and Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts*, 628.

³⁸⁴ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1762.

As Paul explains that God has not rejected his people and a faithful remnant remains, he states, "For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom 11:1).³⁸⁵ Utilizing his own person to prove his point, Paul once again grounds himself as an Israelite, a Jew. It is not in the past tense that he grabs hold of Judaism but in the present. The KJV translates Paul as writing, "I *also am* an Israelite" (Rom 11:1 KJV). When attempting to understand Paul directing attention towards his Jewishness, Morris writes of the possible reasons for this choice:

Luther suggested that Paul had opposed God with all his might so that if anyone would be cast off, it would be him; his existence as a Christian shows that God had not rejected his people. Others think that the fact that Paul is both a Jew and a Christian proves that Christian Jews may exist (he did not teach his own rejection!) Or he may mean that since he is an Israelite, he finds the suggestion just as blasphemous as other Jews did. Or that he, a Jew, is God's apostle to the Gentiles, and thus, through him, Israel's missionary vacation is on the way to fulfillment. (Morris 2018, 398)

In this instance, the target is not to determine why Paul used himself as an example but to notice a commonality across most of the theories. Three of the four theories are based on Paul's understanding of himself as a current Jew, allowing him to cite himself as a textbook example that God had not permanently rejected his covenant people.³⁸⁶ Paul wrote the letter to the Romans; it appears that he addresses Gentiles in some portions of the letter and Jewish Christians in others, making it plausible that the church in Rome consisted of a diverse group of believers.³⁸⁷ This topic would have been of high concern for any Jewish Christians in the church in Rome, and Paul's personal example would have served to set them at ease regarding their future in God's plans.

³⁸⁵ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), accessed June 2, 2023, app.logos.com, 287.

³⁸⁶ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1762.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 1741.

Thus, Paul emphasizes that he is a Jew and lays claim to that status in the present. He does so through three different statements: he is an Israelite, he is descended from Abraham, and he hailed from the tribe of Benjamin, the one tribe that remained faithful to Judah.³⁸⁸ He not only writes in terms that he is currently an Israelite, his language also depicts being a current member of the tribe of Benjamin. Although the tribes had been all but lost, after the return from exile, there were re-settlements of people who continued to be known as "the children of Benjamin," from which Paul's family likely traced their descent.³⁸⁹

Ultimately, there is no reason to believe that Paul's words mean anything other than what is plainly stated here. He continues to claim, and seemingly embrace, being Jewish. Here, he utilizes it to help the believers understand that even though some of Israel had rejected their Messiah, Jews like Paul were an example of the surviving remnant.³⁹⁰ Paul claims to be Jewish here, but does he place value on that claim? In this instance, there are few actions to go along with the words to determine value. However, the apostle could have easily taken this opportunity to distance himself from his Jewishness, especially considering the accusations that the majority of the Jewish people had rejected God's grace (Rom 11:7-8). Rather than rejecting being Jewish in light of those circumstances, he reiterates it three times in a row and then claims to be one of the elect of Israel who obtained what they were seeking (Rom 11:7). When presented with an opportunity to turn from the embarrassing ways and "hardened" hearts of much of Israel, he instead doubles down, making it clear that his identity is Jewish.

³⁸⁸ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 398-399.

³⁸⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 41.

³⁹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), accessed June 2, 2023, app.logos.com, 208.

Romans 11:13-14

Moving just a few verses forward, Paul clearly separates himself from the Gentile believers. He also aligns himself with the Jewish people and speaks of their treatment of him. Runge sees these verses in terms of Paul “switching sides” in a way, moving from addressing Jewish misconceptions about the gospel to addressing misconceptions that might be held by the Gentiles.³⁹¹ This shift in the audience that he is addressing allows and perhaps necessitates that Paul orient himself with one group or the other. This he accomplishes in verses 13 and 14 when he first states that he is “speaking to you Gentiles,” and then in the following verse, “to make my fellow Jews jealous.” Osborne writes, “Paul wants them to understand the motivation behind his ministry. He has not forgotten his Jewish heritage; indeed, part of his reason for ministering to the Gentiles is to use it as a wedge for the salvation of Israel.”³⁹²

The phrase “speaking to you Gentiles” in verse 13 would fail to cause adequate separation between Paul and the Gentile believers if it were not for his immediate linking of arms with the Jews in the following verse. Paul seeks to make it clear that he is meant to be an apostle to the Gentiles and affirms that he is proud of that particular role, but still notes that his roots reside with the Jews. Morris writes that the phrase, “Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles,” expresses Paul’s conviction that God alone had called him to the special responsibility of bringing the gospel to the Gentile people.³⁹³ This deliberate reminder to the Gentiles seems to partially serve the purpose of making sure that the people knew that he was not upset with his

³⁹¹ Steven E. Runge, *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide, Faithlife* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), accessed June 3, 2023, app.logos.com, 194.

³⁹² Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 294.

³⁹³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 409.

God-given appointment to them before noting that he was, in fact, Jewish and concerned with the state of Israel. The apostle is enthusiastic about his ministry to the Gentiles, but after all, he is still Jewish.³⁹⁴

Within these verses, one can see that when it comes time for Paul to align himself with either the Gentiles or the Jewish Christians, he clearly associates himself with the latter. The apostle could have easily taken this moment to claim the Way, and only the Way, but he instead writes of his "fellow Jews" (Rom 11:14). It is worth noting that the Jews that he is speaking of are those who do not believe in Christ as the Messiah. Paul seeks to "make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them" (Rom. 11:14). He expresses that his current ministry to the Gentiles actually complements his accessory goal of the salvation of his kinsmen.³⁹⁵

For those who might believe that the Paul, who experienced salvation, then distanced himself from all Jewish things and people, these verses prove otherwise. At this point in writing to the Romans, Paul still makes very Jewish claims, considering even those Jews who have thus far rejected Christ to be his kinsmen. He has not shunned them nor turned his back on them. In fact, he continues to assert that he is one of them and desperately seeks for them to come to the knowledge of Christ as the long-awaited Messiah (Rom 9:3; 10:1). In fact, in Romans 9 Paul also refers to the Israelites as his "brothers" and "kinsmen according to the flesh," (Rom 9:3). Although Paul typically refers to other Christians as his "brothers" in this singular instance of distress over the unsaved state of his people, he uses the term here for the only time to describe a special family relationship to the Jews.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Faithlife* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), accessed June 3, 2023, app.logos.com, 368.

³⁹⁵ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 368.

³⁹⁶ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 237.

It is interesting to note that Paul designates the Jewish people as his "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom 9:3). By using the term "flesh," Paul does draw an unseen line between himself and other Jews. Osborne writes that the term likely has a double meaning, referring to both physical descent and fleshly existence that Paul mentions in Romans 7:5, 18, 25, and 11:14.³⁹⁷ Dunn writes that Paul develops eschatological tension between flesh and spirit in Romans 8, with his ideal types of people being the flesh person who is wholly cut off from God and the Spirit person being wholly at one with God.³⁹⁸ However, in this particular instance, it is unlikely that Paul is referring to the "flesh" as in one cut off from God, since he also refers to them as his "brothers" and "kinsmen" in verse 3. Paul himself, by his own standards of "flesh" and "Spirit," would have been in the category of "Spirit" and, therefore, would not have demonstrated that he was a brother to those who were spiritually separated from the Lord.

In these verses, it can be seen that Paul still considers the Jewish people to be his people. He refers to them with terms such as "fellow Jews," "brothers," and "kinsmen" (Rom 11:14; 9:3). These are not terms that one uses unless there is an attempt to make a connection. The apostle's use of the term "brothers" is especially interesting since he only uses it for the Jewish people in this instance, as he agonizes over their spiritual well-being. All of this combines to serve as yet another indicator that Paul considered himself to still be a part of the Jewish community, no matter their theological differences. Rather than separating himself from his non-believing community members, he instead continues to hold fast to the Jewish community, ardently hoping that one day they will come to know the Savior as he did.

³⁹⁷ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 237.

³⁹⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 477-478.

Paul's Former Life

In other portions of the Bible, Paul details a past life and seems to refer to his time as a Jew in a manner that would, at first glance, make the reader believe that he was no longer interested in Judaism and made no association with it. This section will briefly examine those verses since Paul is referring to his Jewishness. They will then be revisited with further context in future chapters.

Philippians 3:3-7

In his writing to the Philippians, Paul once again details the reasons that he has to boast in his Jewishness. Paul brings up the subject of his life as a Jew in a section he writes to the Philippians on false teachers. In verse 2, he refers to them as "dogs," "evildoers," and "those who mutilate the flesh." Paul is speaking of those who are teaching that Gentile Christians must be circumcised, that is Judaizers. He implies that the Judaizers are putting confidence in the flesh by championing circumcision and then presents a self-portrait of his own list of things that allowed him to be confident in the flesh (Phil 3:4). Paul then writes of his impeccable Jewish pedigree and blameless moral life unto the law to demonstrate that he was the greatest of the great in Jewish society.³⁹⁹

In verses 5-6, Paul gives a detailed list of things that he had accomplished as a Jew, many of which are in other portions of the Bible and have been discussed. He writes of his circumcision that was right on time according to Jewish laws, his lineage that can be traced back to the tribe of Benjamin, being a Hebrew and Pharisee, and zealous in persecuting the church (Phil 3:5-6). As Fee notes, there are no new assertions here, aside from the announcement that he

³⁹⁹ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians, Faithlife* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), accessed June 4, 2023, app.logos.com, 222.

is blameless as to the law, and if we are utilizing a sociological point of view, Paul is rattling off items that indicate his status under Judaism.⁴⁰⁰ In essence, he is comparing his achievements within Judaism to the achievements of the opponents that he is speaking against. Not only can Paul play the game the Judaizers are playing, he can play it better than they can.⁴⁰¹

After the stunning list of Jewish achievements, one might expect the apostle to express affirmation for those achievements, but Paul instead makes a startling pronouncement: none of those things matter. In verse 7, he writes, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." Rather than align himself with his Jewish accolades, he takes a stark step away from them. Here, his values take a turn away from that of his Jewish background, and his words show a turn toward the values of Christianity. Additionally, his words do not show that he is in the process of stepping away from valuing those portions of his Judaism and identifying with them; instead, Paul speaks as if the break has already happened. This is noted in verse 7 when he uses the phrase "I had." He had gain, but no longer. Barth writes that he does not simply become indifferent to them; instead, he "rejects them with horror, and treats them as liabilities."⁴⁰²

If this assessment of how Paul feels about his Jewish heritage is correct, it calls into question all of the previously examined verses in which he seems to come alongside his Jewish connections. A closer look reveals that the tense of "I now consider," as translated in the NIV, is the Greek perfect, denoting a past action that is now effective in the present time.⁴⁰³ It would

⁴⁰⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), accessed June 4, 2023, app.logos.com, 138.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 1987), accessed June 4, 2023, app.logos.com, 153.

⁴⁰³ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 153.

certainly seem that after all of the positive agreement that Paul had previously given to Judaism, his values suddenly change, and he takes a large step towards identity in Christianity. In the following verses, he continues to discuss Christ, abandoning any subject of Jewishness altogether. When examining Paul's identity in these verses, Duling writes:

Ethnic identity is only the beginning of his self-identity. The change that had come over Paul when he was recruited to Christianity—he thought he was recruited by God, as in the prophetic tradition (Gal 1:15)—needs to be developed in detail by comparison and contrast. I would argue that Paul believed that he had entered another *ethnos*, which had its own boundaries, its own values, and its own symbols. This *ethnos*, however, was not specified as rooted in *genos* from Israel, the *phyle* of Benjamin, the Hebrew language and culture, the norms of Torah, and the rite of circumcision. It was a different sort of *ethnos*. (Duling 2008, 814)

Duling also notes Paul's statement of ethnic concept in Romans 9:3-5 and his references to the Israelites being his "own people" in Galatians 1:14 and 2 Corinthians 11:26.⁴⁰⁴ It seems that Duling both notes a distinct change in Paul when he became a follower of Christ, yet also acknowledges that the apostle remains connected to the Israelites in some way. The items that Paul has listed in Philippians 3:5-6 are portions of his Jewish background that he had admittedly thrown to the side in the light of following Christ. When compared with his previous mentions of being Jewish, it would seem that these are the only things that Paul no longer values. It has been seen that he still considered himself Jewish; he still valued Jewish celebrations such as Pentecost, and it appears that upholding certain Jewish traditions was of value to him. Yet when approached with circumcision, being of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the church, and righteous under the law, his allegiance turns towards Christianity (Phil 3:5-6).

Paul's reasons for confidence in the flesh are related to his Jewish origins and achievements, reflective of the universal elements of human pride.⁴⁰⁵ He had previously had

⁴⁰⁴ Dennis Duling, "'Whatever Gain I Had ...': Ethnicity and Paul's Self-Identification in Philippians 3:5-6," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 64, no. 2 (2008): 799–818, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v64i2.58>, 813.

⁴⁰⁵ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 230.

great pride in things that he had accomplished as a faithful Jew, but upon meeting Christ, he realized that they would not attain anything for him. These passages are not a representation of Paul throwing away the value that he places in being Jewish, but instead leaving behind those things that would not serve him in achieving salvation. Fee writes that Paul has not given up his heritage but has simply refused to put any kind of confidence in them since righteousness does not lie in the accomplishments that one collects on earth.⁴⁰⁶ In the following verses, Paul will continue speaking against the things he has mentioned, not because he has turned on his heels regarding his Jewish heritage, but because they have nothing to do with knowing Christ.⁴⁰⁷

Galatians 1:13-14

Paul writes to the Galatians to combat false teaching, and it can be assumed that these false teachers were challenging Paul's authority and title of apostle.⁴⁰⁸ It is due to these circumstances that Paul is once again found giving his testimony of being called by God in order to solidify the authority that he has to preach the word of God. In verses 13 and 14, he once again recounts his "former life in Judaism," although not to the depth that he has covered in other writings. Presumably, this is because the church in Galatia is one that Paul founded himself, and therefore, they know his backstory.⁴⁰⁹

In this instance, Paul directly links his "former life in Judaism" to the persecution of the church to the point that he "tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). However, this could still be taken as a

⁴⁰⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, 141.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1828.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

renouncing of his Jewishness as a whole, especially in the light of the plight of the Galatians to whom he was writing. The church was turning from its focus on Christ to become focused on the Jewish way of life.⁴¹⁰ If Paul was demonstrating that he had renounced his Jewish heritage, it might serve to draw them away from such errors. In verse 14, Paul writes that his extreme zealousness “for the traditions of my fathers” led him to advance quickly in Judaism (Gal 1:14). His explanation here serves to show the Galatians that he had been both committed and successful in the Jewish faith and there was no reason for him to begin to follow Christ.⁴¹¹

Paul's reference to his "former" life must be considered in light of his statement in verse 14 where he makes mention of "my people." If the apostle is still making present tense claims to being a part of the people of Israel, then it stands to reason that in verse 13, he is not speaking of the renunciation of his Jewish identity in its entirety, but instead, the particular Jewish ways that he mentions. When he was a Jew who had not met Christ, his former ways included the persecution and attempted destruction of the church, along with zealousness for traditions. After meeting Christ, those were portions of Judaism that no longer coincided with being Jewish and Christian; therefore, they were left behind in the former life.

Paul refers to the Israelites as “his own people/kinsmen” on multiple occasions, even as he refers to his “former life” in some instances (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:5-6; 2 Cor 11:26).⁴¹² Paul clearly separates himself from the Gentiles, and when it comes to including himself with the Jewish people, he does so in certain instances, yet not others. These two verses in Galatians are

⁴¹⁰ G Walter Hansen, *IVP New Testament Commentary Galatians, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), accessed June 5, 2023, app.logos.com.

⁴¹¹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1830.

⁴¹² Markus Cromhout, “Paul’s ‘former Conduct in the Judean Way of Life’ (Gal 1:13) ... or Not?,” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.127>, 3.

an excellent representation of this prevailing Pauline issue, as it can be seen that he determines that some of his former actions in Judaism are terrible and should not be emulated, all while self-identifying with the Jewish people (Gal 1:14). These things seem contradictory at the outset, but they were not contradictory to Paul.

Rather than abandon the whole of Judaism, Paul had left behind the portions that were in direct opposition to serving Christ. He leaves behind the persecution of the church when he realizes that they are actually correct in recognizing their Messiah. He leaves behind his desire for earthly accolades that do not earn him anything in the sight of the Lord. Such things were the portion of his "former life" that he so often writes of and uses as an example of what not to do as he seeks to guide Christians, no matter if they are Jewish or Gentile in origin. Also of importance is Paul's knowledge that divine favor no longer applies exclusively to Israel, as the Gentiles have been included.⁴¹³

Conclusion

Ultimately, if one were to enter the first century and sit down to have a conversation with Paul, would the findings be that his values were still steeped deeply in Judaism? It would be difficult to defend that idea when he throws off some of the vestiges of his heritage in passages like Philippians 3:3-7. There is little indication that the apostle considers himself to be a Gentile in any form, as when the option is given between the two, he chooses Israel. Through his words and actions of, more often than not, situating himself within Jewish contexts, it can be determined that Paul placed value upon his Jewish heritage and, therefore, self-identified as

⁴¹³ Markus Cromhout, "Paul's 'former Conduct in the Judean Way of Life' (Gal 1:13) ... or Not?," 3.

Jewish. There are instances in which Paul throws off aspects of his Jewishness that he considers to be in opposition to following Christ, but that doesn't have to mean a complete desertion of that background altogether. Cromhout poses the idea that Paul sees himself as belonging to a group that is distinct from both the Gentiles and the Israelites.⁴¹⁴ That thought will be pursued in later chapters.

Throughout Romans, Paul consistently identifies himself as Jewish and does so in a positive way without dismissing that identity as irrelevant.⁴¹⁵ Yet, the apostle's claim to being Jewish looks different than it previously did, even by his own admission. This can be seen where he writes of "my people" (Israelites) and yet also references his "former life" where he pursued Jewish practices that he now considers unacceptable (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:5-6). This is an abandonment of certain Jewish traditions and not Judaism in its entirety. However, one can be sure that those Jews who didn't believe in the Messiah would have considered Paul to have abandoned his faith. Ethnicity, however, is less able to be abandoned.

Of all the world religions, the Christian faith is the most culturally adaptable, something evident from the very beginnings of Christianity.⁴¹⁶ Paul must have understood this as he left portions of his former beliefs behind in order to fully embrace Christianity. In agreement with Cromhout, Rosner writes that in Paul's day, the world was either Jewish or Gentile, yet the apostle eventually breaks with that viewpoint and introduces the idea of a third option, of which he himself was a part.⁴¹⁷ This could have something to do with the value and self-identity that he

⁴¹⁴ Markus Cromhout, "Paul's 'former Conduct in the Judean Way of Life' (Gal 1:13) ... or Not?," 3.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 47.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

still carries for Judaism. Perhaps the third option that Paul came to emphasize came about because he realized that he did not fit fully within the options that had previously existed, and the human need to be included is a powerful one. Wright captures Paul's problem when he writes:

Second Temple Judaism was a many-sided and vibrant mixture of what we would not call (though they would not have recognized these distinctions) religion, faith, culture, and politics. But even its clashing elements were usually clashing about the same issues: what it meant to be a part of God's people, to be loyal to Torah, to maintain Jewish identity in the face of the all-encroaching pagan world, and (above all it the view of some) to await the coming of God's kingdom, of the 'age to come' promised by the prophets, of Israel's redemption, hoping that when the day dawned one might have a share in the vindication and blessing. This was the world from which Paul came and in which he remained even though he said things that nobody within that world had thought of saying before and which many in that world found shocking, even destructive. (Wright 2009, 3-4)

Simply because one redefines a world does not mean one abolishes it. So it was with Paul. At his core, he remained Jewish, even if it looked different at the end than it did before. It only makes sense that he continued to value his Jewishness; it was from this religion and nation that his beloved Savior had come to fulfill that which he had so zealously pursued. Yet, by the very nature of his God-given mission, Paul must speak both Jewishly and non-Jewishly.⁴¹⁸ It is not necessary that Paul must be either fully Jewish or not Jewish at all. In fact, there would be instances where Paul was more than happy to briefly set aside his Jewishness to gain something that he considered to be even greater.

Is his Jewish identity, which by now cannot be denied, his identity of greatest value? And what is this third identity option that various scholars have posed? The answer to those questions can only be revealed by examining Paul's other possible identities to determine if his actions and words indicate that those values are a part of his core. It is in that vein that we turn towards the Paul that most parishioners gracing the seats in churches are familiar with: the Christian Paul.

⁴¹⁸ Andrew S. Jacobs, "A Jew's Jew: Paul and the Early Christian Problem of Jewish Origins," *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006): 258–286, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499635>, 260.

CHAPTER FIVE: PAUL AND HIS CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Introduction

Paul is often described as a radical convert to Christianity. Due to the sharp contrast that is evident between Judaism and Christianity in the modern world, Paul is often understood in the same fashion. Readers of the Bible approach Paul as first radically Jewish, followed by becoming radically Christian. It is thought that he must be one or the other, with a person surely not being able to identify themselves as both fully Jewish and fully Christian. Within this chapter, that very subject will be explored. Chapter Four determined, through the apostle's own words to others regarding himself, that he saw himself as thoroughly Jewish. How, then, can the apostle also identify as a Christian? Paul's words will be examined to assess his value system in regard to Christianity, which will provide information on his Christian identity.

During the slow plod toward understanding Paul's identity as a Christian, there will be several necessary stopping points along the way. The starting point of Paul's personal understanding of Christ must be looked at so his conversion will be discussed. As in the previous chapter, attention will also be given to the things that Paul says about himself when speaking of following Christ. As exposition into Scripture takes place, it must be noted how Paul describes himself and relates to the recipients of his letters. Dunn writes that there is a possibility that Paul shared much in common with the recipients of his letters, assuming shared tradition even if he had not established the church in question.⁴¹⁹ Some of the things that Paul considered to have in common with Gentile believers, in particular, may come forth in his writings, thereby granting another avenue towards understanding the apostle's thoughts on being Christian.

⁴¹⁹ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 189.

Although a clear divide exists in modern times that separates the religion of Christianity from other world religions, that clarity quickly takes on a fog when placed in the context of the first century. How did Christianity relate to Judaism for Paul? The answer to this question will allow a more thorough look into Paul's Christian identity. If the two religions, completely separate in the mind of the modern world, do not relate in any way, then it stands to reason that Paul must base his values more on one system than the other. However, if they were related, or even the same thing, then the apostle is not forced to designate more of his identity in an either/or situation. It has been a challenge for scholars to trace and describe the process by which Christianity and Judaism completely removed themselves from one another and emerged as two distinct traditions.⁴²⁰ Yet the conclusions that have been reached, should there be any decisiveness, and the research that surrounds that subject matter contributes certain implications to Paul's Christian identity.

All of this, taken together, with the strongest influence coming from Scripture and Paul's words, will coalesce to allow the arrival of a solid conclusion regarding Paul's Christian self-identity. Having already determined that Paul's identity was decidedly Jewish, there is also little doubt that the apostle placed great value upon following Christ. Paul appears to place so great a value on the risen Savior that it has generated scholars who believe that Christianity is founded upon Paul's introduction of new ideas into the Jewish religion of Jesus rather than the teachings of Christ himself.⁴²¹ However, the evidence will show that Paul identified as a Christian, even if "Christianity" was not the designated and utilized name at the time, and was in unity with others who believed in Christ as the Messiah, regardless of Jewish or Gentile status.

⁴²⁰ Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 1.

⁴²¹ David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, 7.

Early Christianity

Did Christianity exist during Paul's lifetime? If it didn't, then what were the believers known as? Were they still seen as Jewish? Perhaps the Gentile believers were considered to have been adopted into the Jewish faith? This topic is a complicated one and will not be fully unraveled here. Yet, a brief look is required to use accurate terminology when addressing Paul's identity as a "Christian." For one's core values to align with something that is then part of their identity, that thing must exist in the first place.

Christianity finds its roots in Judaism. Lieu refers to Christianity as an “offshoot” of Judaism.⁴²² Judaism in the first century was not a monolithic entity, and the parties and sects that are well-known to those who read the Bible were far from the only ones in evidence at the time.⁴²³ Ferguson notes that modern scholars differentiate between first-century parties, which would be similar to modern-day denominations, and sects, which claimed to have exclusive possession of the truth.⁴²⁴ The parties in Judaism acknowledged one another as members of the same general belief system, with the differences seeming to be various theological differences. One of the more well-known differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees, for example, was their belief in resurrection. The Pharisees did believe in resurrection after death, and the Sadducees did not (Matt 22:23; Lk 20:27).

Turning further to Scripture, Acts 11:26 states, “And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.” Rydelnik writes that the term “Christian” is a term that means either “follower of” or “a miniature replication of.”⁴²⁵ The author, Luke, likely includes this bit of information

⁴²² Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 5.

⁴²³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 513.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1697.

due to the fact that the term had become a familiar one in certain areas at the time of his writing, with no information available to prevent the view that it first came into use as Luke records it here.⁴²⁶ Although the Christ followers may have made such great gains in spreading the gospel that they had made a name for themselves, the assignment of the name alone does not yet indicate a complete breaking of ties with Judaism. Again, the likes of the Pharisees and Sadducees had names for their own parties and yet were still very much a part of Judaism.

Gangel and Longenecker disagree with the idea that Christianity was still a sect or party within Judaism at this point. Once the new religious group had earned its own name, Gangel writes that they became a distinct identity in the Mediterranean world, no longer considered a grouping of Jews with differing beliefs.⁴²⁷ If the split between Judaism and Christianity indeed happened this early in the church's history, then it may be more prudent to consider the terms "Jewish Christian" and "Gentile Christian" to be sects within Christianity itself. Paul uses the designation of "Gentile" quite often in an effort to distinguish between the teachings of the faith required for the believers of different backgrounds. Gentile Christians, knowing little of Judaism, required different information from the apostle than the Jewish Christians did. Talented modern Christian communicators employ the same tactics—one does not preach the same message to nonbelievers as one does to seasoned believers. Paul understood his audience and their needs.

Longenecker does not consider the disciples having a name assigned to their belief system to be a victory. In fact, he points out that it posed problems for the church because it caused them to lose religious protection from Rome since they were not considered a legitimate

⁴²⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), accessed June 10, 2023, www.app.logos.com, 215.

⁴²⁷ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts, Faithlife Logos*, 181.

religion, and they now struggled to understand their community upon their differentiation from Judaism.⁴²⁸ Paul's letters would go a great distance in settling some of those problems. As far as the Christians, they preferred to refer to themselves as 'disciples,' 'saints,' or 'brothers,' a term that Paul used and will be studied in this chapter.⁴²⁹

Exell writes that when Barnabas arrives at Antioch, he finds "a strong, central, and organised Church" that is developing rapidly.⁴³⁰ Taylor writes that the distinctive term, *christianoī*, is indicative of a distinct identity, suggesting that the Christians had become identifiable, although they remained within the Jewish community.⁴³¹ His statement is compelling, implying that the split was recognized between the two religions long before some scholars claim that it actually happened. However, there remains an acknowledgment that Christianity remained within the folds of the Jewish community at Antioch. The fact that the Christians preferred to refer to themselves in other ways suggests that they saw themselves as embedded into the folds of Judaism. The World History Encyclopedia claims that the full split between the two religions officially happened with the Great Jewish Revolt of 66 CE.⁴³² In a

⁴²⁸ Frank Gaebelein et al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 9, Faithlife* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library/Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), accessed June 10, 2023, www.app.logos.com, 402-403.

⁴²⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, 215.

⁴³⁰ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Acts*, 223.

⁴³¹ Nicholas H. Taylor, "Caligula, the Church of Antioch and the Gentile Mission," *Religion and Theology* 7, no. 1 (2000): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157430100x00090>, 10.

⁴³² Rebecca Denova, "The Separation of Christianity from Judaism," *World History Encyclopedia*, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1785/the-separation-of-christianity-from-judaism/>.

similar fashion, Senior writes of the profound transformations that both Judaism and Jewish Christianity went through following the Jewish revolt.⁴³³

If sociology has brought anything to this conversation, it is the knowledge that the way that society perceives an individual or group can have much to do with the way the group views themselves. People tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, including religious affiliations, which provides a systematic means of defining others.⁴³⁴ The people recognized that this group preaching the gospel was different, and therefore, they assigned them a name in order to identify them. The term seems to have been initially derisive, containing an element of ridicule, explaining why the Christians tended to deviate towards other names for themselves.⁴³⁵

Dunn writes that the decisive parting of ways took place between the two Jewish revolts, with the clear-cut separation becoming final after the second.⁴³⁶ Although the final separation may have taken some time to come to full fruition, it is clear that the Christians were already seen as an anomaly, different from Judaism, to the point where they warranted a name, even if it was initially done to ridicule them. Paul was present at Antioch when Luke records the phenomenon of the disciples first being called Christians (Acts 11:25-26). This means that by the time Paul penned his letters, the name would have been circulating for some time and

⁴³³ Rev Donald Senior, "Understanding the Divide between Judaism and Christianity What Happened Centuries Ago? Why Does It Matter Now?," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1013 (January 2007): 67–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2006.00118.x>, 69.

⁴³⁴ Blake Ashforth and Fred Mael, "Social Identity Theory and the Organization," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (January 1989): 20–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258189>, 20-21.

⁴³⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, 215.

⁴³⁶ Dunn James D. G., *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity, Faithlife* (London: SCM Press, 2006), accessed June 10, 2023, app.logos.com, 312.

highlighting the continual divide between Judaism and Christianity. The apostle was right at the forefront of the lines that were being drawn as Christianity ceased being a party or a sect of Judaism and became seen as so different that the movement earned its own name.

What this means for the self-identity of Paul is that Christianity became separated from his mother religion enough during his lifetime that it was possible to call oneself a "Christian" and to identify as such. Therefore, it would have been possible for someone such as Paul to identify as both Jewish and Christian rather than necessitating an identity as one or the other. Paul especially would have understood and recognized the divide between the two, which seems to have been troubling to him as he laments his wayward Jewish people in Romans, wishing to put himself in their place in order for them to know their Messiah (Rom 9:1-5).

In Romans chapter 11, Paul writes of the Jewish people being “enemies” of the gospel (Rom 11:28). The Jewish people had rejected the gospel, even to the point of rejecting its proclamation to the world, and therefore had become enemies of God and the church.⁴³⁷ To refer to those Jews whom he identified with because of their shared history as “enemies” indicates that Paul was fully in tune with the collapse that had happened to cause the formation of Christianity apart from its original roots. Thus, Christianity quickly became something that people could identify as apart from Jewish. The divide, along with Paul's subsequent knowledge of it, allows the apostle to be able to take on another identity. It has already been made clear that he identified as Jewish, and now the possibility is open that he also identified as Christian.

⁴³⁷ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 308-309.

Paul Encounters Christ

Paul is often described as “converting” to Christianity upon encountering the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Preference is given to the term “encounter” within this paper, as the author agrees with the notion that Paul does not change religions, never turning from being loyal to the God with which he began.⁴³⁸ Paul was already loyal to God in the extreme. The apostle does not use the term “zealous” lightly throughout the descriptions of his behavior on behalf of the Lord. Like many other Jewish people, he simply didn’t recognize his Messiah. This blindness towards Jesus was born both of a misunderstanding of Scripture and the desire to protect the Jewish faith from being intruded upon and undermined.

Late Second Temple Jews held a variety of ideas about the “messiah.”⁴³⁹ To give one example, the community at Qumran expected that there would be both a priestly messiah and one who was royal.⁴⁴⁰ Regardless, Paul recognized Christ as the fulfillment of his Jewish faith. Dunn writes:

In an astonishing adaptation of the *Shema* (Deut. 6.4), Paul attributes the lordship of the one God to Jesus Christ. And yet his confession of God as one is still affirmed. Evidently, the lordship of Christ was not thought of as any usurpation or replacement of God's authority but was expressive of it. The one Lord attests to the one God. This also ties in with Phil. 2.10-11. As noted above, the universal confession of Jesus' lordship is understood as glorifying God the Father. (Dunn 2006, 253)

Paul realized that Jesus was, in fact, God. To say he “converted” would be to indicate that he changed his faith. Rather, he recognized his Lord. It would be later at Antioch that Paul would be lumped into the group that would come to be known as Christians. Yet, words and labels are important as they allow context and understanding. Therefore, although Paul does not “convert”

⁴³⁸ Philip H. Kern, “Paul’s Conversion and Luke’s Portrayal of Character in Acts 8-10,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 54, no. 2 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30254>, 64.

⁴³⁹ Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews the First Generation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 108.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

in the strict sense of the word, in the exploration of his encounter with Christ, this paper acknowledges that Paul went from being against Jesus as Messiah to recognizing Him and becoming His follower. Ultimately, those followers would be designated as Christians, first reluctantly and then with acceptance, regardless of the Jewish or Gentile background from whence they came.

Saul's Encounter with Christ—Acts 9:1-19, 22:3-16, 26:12-18.

Bruce writes that no single event aside from Christ's workings has proved to be as determinant for Christian history as the commissioning of Paul.⁴⁴¹ After detailing Saul's horrific plots against the church, making it clear that this man was the enemy of all enemies, Luke records in Acts 9 the event that would catch Saul completely off guard and change his understanding and his course. In addition to documenting the change that occurred when Saul finally realizes who Christ is, this passage of Scripture provides proof that there is no one who is so far from Christ that they are beyond a life-altering salvation story.

Verses 1 and 2 detail Saul's continued intense persecution of the church. In verse 3, everything changes. A blinding light suddenly engulfs Saul and all of those traveling with him, and all the man can do in that instance is stop traveling and fall to the ground (v 3-4). It is at this point in verse 4 that Luke records the voice calling out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul's well-known response is to pose the question in verse 5, "Who are you, Lord?" Bibles tend to capitalize the name "Lord" because it is clear that Saul is speaking to Christ. However, the word "Lord" in both Hebrew and Greek is the equivalent of "sir" in English.⁴⁴² Clearly, Saul

⁴⁴¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 75.

⁴⁴² Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1692.

is truly unaware of who is speaking to him, as he wouldn't have otherwise needed to ask, nor would it have been necessary for Jesus to explain.⁴⁴³

With Christ's answer comes the major turning point for Saul. Minutes earlier, he had been self-assuredly on his way to do what he believed was right, and he was doing it with all enthusiasm. Yet, Jesus' reply, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," must have shocked Saul to his core. The man who thought he was doing his utmost for God has just been informed by Christ himself that he is doing it all wrong. Following Christ's instructions to enter the city to be told what to do, Saul spends the next three days unable to see, not eating or drinking (v 6-9).

Although Scripture does not mention the reason for Saul's lack of eating and drinking, one can only assume that he was stunned, perhaps even depressed. Saul's blindness reflected his spiritual condition, having been blind to Christ, a fact that could have hardly been lost on this spiritual man of high intelligence. Acts 9:11 mentions that Saul was praying, so the fasting may have been in accompaniment to prayer as he attempted to make sense of what had just fallen upon him. Saul certainly could have been mulling over the implications of encountering Christ, speaking from heaven. If it had been Christ, speaking in resurrected form, then the very God he served was whom Saul was truly persecuting.⁴⁴⁴ Millar writes that according to Paul, the gospel produces a multifaceted transformation consisting of ten identifiable aspects of change that he details in his letters.⁴⁴⁵ These transformative processes that Millar details were undoubtedly just beginning to be mulled over in Saul's mind as he sat blind, praying and fasting in Damascus.

⁴⁴³ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1692.

⁴⁴⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, 375.

⁴⁴⁵ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 144.

Millar writes that change does not simply happen, often requiring a trigger of some outside stimulus.⁴⁴⁶ When it comes to Paul, three of the five reasons Millar gives for major change seem to apply in Acts 9 after he meets Christ. First, Paul recognizes that something is broken and needs to be fixed.⁴⁴⁷ His theology, which he had previously believed was solid to the point of persecuting unto death followers of Christ, is proved in an instant to be completely wrong. The second point applicable to the change that is happening in Paul as he sits in Damascus is that crisis/shock produces impetus for action.⁴⁴⁸ Levine writes that posttraumatic growth only occurs if the trauma in question has been upsetting enough to drive the person to make positive meaning of the negative event.⁴⁴⁹

Despite the personal reflection and dramatic change that must have been going on in Saul as he waited for further instruction from the Lord (Acts 22:10), it is interesting that the apostle does not feel the need to recount any details of the transformation that happens when personally giving his testimony in Acts 22 and 26. Rather than focus on the change that his thinking and values underwent in such a short period of time, Paul instead points towards Christ as the reason for his change. His recounting of his commissioning in Acts 26 follows a similar way of thought, exalting Jesus over himself. Polhill agrees, writing that Paul “telescopes” his Damascus Road experience in Acts 26, focusing on his call to bring the gospel to all people and bring that same gospel to the nations.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁶ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 5.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Stephen Z. Levine et al., “Examining the Relationship between Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 22, no. 4 (August 10, 2009): 282–286, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20409>, 285.

⁴⁵⁰ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), accessed May 20, 2023, app.logos.com, 502.

Paul's encounter with Christ, ending in regaining his sight and being baptized (Acts 9:18), produced a dramatic change in his life. Yet, it is up to readers of the Bible to track and see that change through his changed character because Paul's focus is on Christ and the mission that Christ gave him. The apostle doesn't speak of what happened internally while he was blind; he doesn't speak of his own thoughts and feelings surrounding the change; he only speaks of the goals and desires that Jesus had for him. The events of Acts chapter 9 lead to a stunning reversal in Saul's behavior and character.⁴⁵¹ That change in values, the personal transformation, can be seen throughout Scripture.

Dunn writes that the most influential part of Paul's conversion is that it transformed not only the way that he viewed Jesus but also the way that he viewed the law.⁴⁵² With the human desire to resist change and view oneself as overall "good," it is remarkable to see the instantaneous change in Paul's overall behavior and thought. No attempt to make light of Paul's experience can explain his immediate surrender to the will of the risen Christ.⁴⁵³ Millar's assertion that humans are "afflicted with a high degree of inertia" when it comes to change, along with Paul's self-professed "zeal" for the law (Phil 3:6), may well explain why Christ had to go to such lengths to transform the apostle by intercepting him in the manner that he did.⁴⁵⁴

Outside of the recorded speeches in Acts where Paul speaks of his encounter, the apostle refers to it very little in his letters. This is likely due to the churches already being familiar with Paul and his experience; there was little need to reexamine it. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul details

⁴⁵¹ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 133.

⁴⁵² James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 346.

⁴⁵³ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 75.

⁴⁵⁴ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 4.

the resurrection of Christ and all who saw him live again, tacking his own experience on at the end of that list in verse 8. "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:8). In the list of witnesses, he lists himself last and mentions that he is "untimely born," with Taylor writing that the term occurs only in this spot in the New Testament, carrying with it the meaning of a stillborn child.⁴⁵⁵

Indeed, the term *ektrōma* has demonstrated a challenge for scholars as attempts are made to determine what Paul meant as he speaks of his own apostolic calling. Tracing his thought process into verses 9 and 10, Paul speaks of his unworthiness to be an apostle due to his previous persecution of the church (1 Cor 15:9) and yet "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor 15:10). It seems that as Paul reflects briefly upon his encounter with Christ, he is stating that before Damascus the state that he was in was like that of a child born too soon; without hope of life, doomed to death. Yet the Lord appeared to him and lavished him with grace, calling him and allowing him to be in the state of apostleship that he currently finds himself in. Although Paul does not provide a full account of his experience with Christ here, he gives insight into his thoughts on the subject. He acknowledges that it is only through the grace of God that he did not continue down the path of death, wholly giving Christ the recognition for his complete change. In addition, we hear in Paul's words in verse 10 a desire to ensure that the grace Christ exhibited towards him was not wasted, as he writes of working "harder than any of them" (1 Cor 15:10).

He continues in verse 10 to state that "it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" that allowed him to work harder than the others. From the Damascus moment on, Paul is acutely aware that he is undeserving. When writing to the Corinth church about resurrection from the

⁴⁵⁵ Mark Edward Taylor, *1 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2014), accessed July 27, 2023, app.logos.com, 369.

dead and the many who witnessed the proof of Christ's real and natural resurrection, he is naturally brought back around to his own witness and reminded of his own spiritual resurrection, of which he is poignantly aware that he did not deserve, least of all because of the atrocities he had committed. Long after his actual encounter, Paul seems to continue to be thoroughly amazed by it, and his instantaneous change remains in evidence.

There is only one additional place in which Paul refers to his unexpected midday meeting with Christ: Galatians chapter 1. Although Paul refers to his life before Christ in Philippians, here, at the beginning of Galatians, he provides the clearest autobiographical account of his call.⁴⁵⁶ In his effort to display to the Galatians that "the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel," Paul gives less detail and mention of his life before Christ than he does in Philippians (Gal 1:11). In verse 12, he insists that he didn't receive his gospel from a person, nor was he taught it from any person, but he "received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Exell writes, "His principles of Christianity were not derived from human authority. He was not a retailer of other men's notions."⁴⁵⁷

In verses 13 and 14, Paul once again tells of how he regularly operated in Judaism. He gives witness to how he was "advancing" due to his "zealous" nature for the "traditions of my fathers." Here, Paul sets the stage for the recipients of his letters. He was a zealous Jew. He was apparently better at upholding Judaism than others around him, even those who were of his age (Gal 1:14). Yet here he was preaching the gospel. What could account for such a change? According to Paul, only Christ can bring about such a change, and the apostle gives credit to

⁴⁵⁶ Derek R Brown, *Lexham Research Commentary: Galatians*, ed. Douglas Mangum, *Faithlife* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), accessed July 27, 2023, app.logos.com.

⁴⁵⁷ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Galatians, Faithlife* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1962), accessed July 27, 2023, app.logos.com, 36.

Christ both as he proceeds to speak of being "set apart" and having the Son revealed to him in verses 15 and 16. In addition, in Galatians 2:19-20, Paul continues to detail the complete change in identity that occurred in him when encountering Christ. It is shocking for the Jew who, a chapter earlier, wrote of the extreme tenacity with which he upheld the law to suddenly write, "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God" (Gal 2:19).

Paul's descriptions of the change that the gospel brings forth in an individual are striking.⁴⁵⁸ Taking into consideration Paul's own shocking change that his Christ encounter brought forth, it is unsurprising that the apostle expects great works of transformation in any and all who encounter the gospel. Against all odds, Paul testifies that he is a completely different person, with completely different focuses and goals than in the previous life that he often alludes to (Gal 1:13; Phil 3:5-6). It cannot be so simply stated that the man Saul simply moved from nonbelief to belief in Christ; instead, the entirety of who he was and his core values went from being centered around the law to being centered around Jesus. His language in his letters regarding himself strays from the references of his past exuberant execution of the law (Acts 22:3; Phil 3:6; Gal 1:14) to referencing himself as an apostle (Gal 1:1; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1, 9:1-2; 1 Tim 2:7) and a servant of Christ (Rom 1:1, Ti 1:1).

This shift in Paul's understanding of himself is extremely significant in the exploration of his identity. However, for now, it is only important that one recognizes the distinct and forceful change that took place in Paul as he journeyed towards Damascus on that fateful, life-altering day. His understanding of God, the law, and his very identity and purpose turned, and it can be seen and understood through the presentation of himself in his letters and the way he ministers to those around him, themselves with differing backgrounds, worldviews, and needs. This statement

⁴⁵⁸ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 14.

doesn't mean that Paul no longer valued other portions of his heritage and utilized them in ministry and his understanding of God. Yet there is one portion of Paul's identity that, from this moment on, defines him both in word and deed. On a dusty road, with a startling flash of light and a heart-stopping revelation of Christ, a new identity was born.

What It Meant to be "Christian"

What, then, did it look like to identify as a Christian? It is necessary to have such markers for identification in order to determine if someone's words and actions match those markers. As it turns out, some of those markers are given to us in the Bible by Paul himself. Rosner writes that being known by God is what defines a Christian, much in the same way as being a part of Israel as the people of God.⁴⁵⁹ In the Old Testament, those who are known by God are chosen by Him, but the New Testament takes that information a step further and notes that being known by Christ is critical, followed by being known by God and Christ in the age to come.⁴⁶⁰ Here, the markers of Christianity will be explored so that they might be applied to the person of Paul and his identity.

Evidence through the Healthy, Growing Church—Acts 2:42-47

Immediately preceding this passage, the reader will find Peter preaching a sermon that leads to three thousand people being added to the body of Christ (Acts 2:14-41). However, in the verses following that event, Luke gives a description of the activities that the body of Christ was engaging in. Gangel writes that this is a summary account of how the church is doing, along with

⁴⁵⁹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 114.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

an example of what a biblical church really looks like.⁴⁶¹ As part of a biblical church, there were activities that the body was engaging in to both take care of those within the body and keep them healthy. Evidently, these things allowed the continual addition of believers, as Luke writes that the Lord was adding to the group "day by day" (Acts 2:47).

What were the things that the church body was doing so well that it, along with the Spirit and Word (Acts 2:38; 2:40), made their numbers grow by the day? Rydelnik writes of the devoted learning, fellowship, sharing of food and resources, and the signs and wonders being performed among them as major themes listed within the passage.⁴⁶² These activities fulfilled the two greatest commandments that Jesus gave when asked in Matthew 22:36-40. Not only were the believers showing love for God by devoting themselves to the teachings that He rendered through the apostles, but they also devoted themselves to the other believers, thereby loving their neighbors (Acts 2:42). The early, growing church spent their energy fulfilling the Great Commission and the Great Commandments.

Gangel writes that Luke desires for the reader to see how good the church was; their obedience to Christ and their witness caused them to enjoy favor with the people and fantastic growth within their midst.⁴⁶³ There is an internal spirit of rejoicing, generosity, and obedience combined with an external popularity and respect from the people for these mutually exhibited character traits.⁴⁶⁴ Here, it can be seen that some marks of a Christian are obedience to both the Great Commission and the Great Commandments. Jesus stated that the entirety of the law and

⁴⁶¹ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 31.

⁴⁶² Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1678.

⁴⁶³ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 32.

⁴⁶⁴ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1678.

prophets could be summarized into the two commandments given in Matthew 22:37-39. Divine love shows itself in love for others.⁴⁶⁵

These are marks of the Christian that Paul himself would wholeheartedly agree with. In fact, they likely directly influenced much of Paul's frequent tendency to dwell upon love as the greatest virtue.⁴⁶⁶ When attempting to decide if Paul valued his Christianity and if he valued it in a degree above that of his Jewishness, these are valuable markers that can be used. Christians attempt to live by the commandments that Jesus himself gave us, loving the Lord and loving others. In Acts 2, the church lived by and valued those commandments, leading to a faith that was visible and inviting to those around them.

Evidence of Fruit—Matthew 7:15-23

Blomberg writes that in this section Jesus addresses the common situation in which greater numbers of people profess Christ than actually follow Him, describing some of those pretenders as “false prophets.”⁴⁶⁷ Utilizing the example of fruit-bearing trees, Jesus explains that bad fruit cannot come from good trees (v 16). Although Christ begins by specifically mentioning false prophets, He points towards everything in nature producing fruit after its kind, and Christians are not an exception.⁴⁶⁸ Referring back to the early church in Acts, their actions or “fruit” of following the great commandments was evident to all around them, resulting in the growth of the kingdom. Those preaching the gospel falsely, claiming to have heard from God

⁴⁶⁵ Craig L Blomberg, *The New American Commentary. / Matthew*, vol. 22, 335.

⁴⁶⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

⁴⁶⁷ Craig L Blomberg, *The New American Commentary. / Matthew*, vol. 22, 132.

⁴⁶⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*, vol. 1 (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor/Cook Communications Ministries, 2001), 31.

when such was not the case or claiming to be called by God when they were not, would have produced the opposite results that were experienced by the church in Acts 2.

False prophets, and likewise false Christians, can only produce false righteousness.⁴⁶⁹ Jesus informs those listening that those who are true and likewise false will be known by their fruit (v 20). Just as one can recognize a species of tree by the fruit it produces and the health of a tree by the health of the fruit, so it is with followers of Christ. As verses 21-22 continue, Jesus gives examples of how people are capable of masquerading as Christians.⁴⁷⁰ He states that not everyone who calls out to Him will be allowed to enter the kingdom of heaven; rather, it will be those who do the will of the Father (v 21). Those who may be denied heavenly entrance may have prophesied in the name of Jesus, cast out demons, and may have utilized the name of Christ to perform many mighty works (v 22). V

Yet, even verbal affirmation of Christ and external demonstrations do not prove that one is a Christian.⁴⁷¹ It is the fruit of obedience to the desires of God that the Lord is seeking. Exell writes that the description of the person in verse 21 is that of one who makes an external profession of religion but walks unworthy of its precepts.⁴⁷² The fruit in evidence that Jesus refers to in verse 22 is bad fruit due to the fact that it is counterfeit.⁴⁷³ Those who claim the identity of Christian will exhibit fruit that is in accordance with obedience to God. Paul himself has additional theological instruction to offer on the theme of “fruit.” The evidence of fruit in the

⁴⁶⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*, 31.

⁴⁷⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: / Matthew*, vol. 22, 133.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 131.

⁴⁷³ David L. Turner, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Darrell L. Bock, *The Gospel of Matthew, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2005), accessed June 13, 2023, app.logos.com, 116.

life of Paul is a marker on the way to determining his identity as a Christian and the value he placed on recognizing himself as such.

Evidence of Obedience, Love, and Salvation—1 John 3:1-4:6

One of the reasons that the writer of 1 John fashions his letter is so the recipients might "know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). To receive eternal life, one must be a Christian, placing faith in Christ as the risen Savior (Acts 16:31; Jh 6:44, 6:47; Rom 10:10). Therefore, 1 John provides several markers that allow one to know if they have the assurance of salvation and identify as Christian. Briefly clarifying these three forms of Christian identification will give us three new avenues to look at when attempting to connect Paul's behavior to his Christian identity.

In attempting to arm the recipients against any false doctrines, what emerges is a full picture of the essence of what practicing Christianity looks like in a practical sense. The first method of seeking one's assurance of salvation, according to 1 John, is to measure the obedience and righteous living that one practices. In verse 4, it is stated that those who "make a practice of sinning" are also in the practice of "lawlessness." The phrase "sin is lawlessness" identifies them in a way that makes them interchangeable terms.⁴⁷⁴ Sin is lawlessness, and lawlessness is sin, going against the divine standard for moral behavior. A startling accusation is made in verse 8, where the writer pens the words, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning."

⁴⁷⁴ John Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), accessed June 13, 2023, www.app.logos.com, 125.

The one who makes a practice of sinning is essentially influenced and dominated by Satan.⁴⁷⁵ This is in direct contrast to being obedient to God, as the remainder of verse 8 points out that the entire reason that the Son of God came “was to destroy the works of the devil.” Therefore, being influenced and dominated by the devil while following Christ cannot be accomplished side by side. The characteristic work of the devil in these verses is that of sin, while the characteristic work of the Son of God is to save from that sin.⁴⁷⁶ Advancing to verse 9, the writer makes another qualification of the believer, that he does not “make a practice of sinning” nor does he “keep on sinning.” In this, the writer of 1 John is speaking of a settled habit of sin.⁴⁷⁷ Those who do not do what is morally right as a lifestyle do not show that they have been born of God (v 9).⁴⁷⁸

Verse 10 summarizes the discussion about the evidence of who is a child of God and who is a child of the devil, along with leading into the next subject. The summation is that “whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God” (v 10). However, the writer takes this moment to add another qualifier, including “nor is the one who does not love his brother” (v 10). The values of righteousness and love for one’s “brother” should both be practiced and proclaimed in the life of a believer if they are truly following the Lord and claiming Christian identity. Rather than stating that this is what a child of God should be doing, John puts the issue in negative terms by stating, “whoever does *not* practice righteousness” and “the one who does *not* love his brother.”⁴⁷⁹ This use of negatives emphasizes that those same people are *not* children of God.

⁴⁷⁵ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1979.

⁴⁷⁶ John Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 127-128.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁷⁸ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1980.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

The subject of living a morally correct life gives way to the subject of love in verse 11 and thus brings up the second marker of true Christians, which is that they love one another. To begin, the writer gives an example of what the opposite of loving your brother looks like through a brief recounting of the story of Cain and the murder of Abel (1 Jhn 3:12). In John's recounting, Cain represents the world, and Abel represents the children of God. This can be seen in the fact that Cain's deeds were evil, and Abel's were righteous (v 12). In addition, John writes that we should not be surprised "when the world hates you," relating directly to the words of Christ in John 15:18-19 when Jesus says that the world hated him first and that the world loves those who are their own. When Christians hate their brothers rather than love them, they are aligning themselves with the world and not with Christ.

Cain was the prototype of the world, which continues to manifest the type of ugly qualities that Cain displayed in the form of jealousy, hate, and murder.⁴⁸⁰ Contrasts like this provide a clear way to recognize Christians through whom they align themselves with—the hatred of the world or the love of God? Rosner writes, "If the affective impact of having God as your Father is the experience of love and intimacy with God, a corresponding love for and intimacy with fellow believers is communicated by the family of God metaphor."⁴⁸¹ Those identifying as followers of Christ should be the prototype for Christ.

John addresses this in verse 16 with another comparison. We know the greatest love, in that Christ laid down his life for us, and He is our example of what we should do for our brothers (1 Jhn 3:16). It is through this love that we are assured of our salvation, while "whoever does not love remains in death" (v 14). Osborne writes that here, John reduces the world to the two simple

⁴⁸⁰ John Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 142.

⁴⁸¹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 164.

spheres of life and death, with love being the evidence that one has entered into life.⁴⁸² As John continues into verse 17, he adds another example of the love of God showing itself through the actions of the professing Christian. He writes that love clearly does not exist in the “brother” who sees another in need and “closes his heart against him” (v 17).

Stott writes of this verse of Scripture, “True love is revealed not only in the supreme sacrifice; it is expressed in all lesser givings.”⁴⁸³ For those who are not called to lay down their very lives for the sake of another, opportunities to love other believers still abound. While it might initially seem odd for the writer to begin with the most difficult and extravagant way of showing love, the writer's point is that if believers are to emulate Christ and lay down the greatest thing that they have—their lives—then there shouldn't be anything in the world that shouldn't be shared and utilized to love others on behalf of God and through His example. This is a straightforward way to determine one's Christian identity, as these actions will demonstrate if one's values follow that of the values of Christ.

As far as action goes, John follows this with the instruction that love should not merely be verbalized, but it is an action to be taken (v 18). The action reflects values, and values reflect the core of a person, which is their identity. The love of God should manifest itself through the community's mutual love for one another (1 Jhn 4:7).⁴⁸⁴ John tells the believers that they should be reassured of their adherence to the truth through their actions according to the previous verses

⁴⁸² Grant R. Osborne, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Wendell C. Hawley, *The Gospel of John, 1-3 John, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), accessed June 14, 2023, app.logos.com, 353.

⁴⁸³ John Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 142.

⁴⁸⁴ Dirk G. van der Merwe, “‘Lived Experiences’ of the Love of God According to 1 John 4: A Spirituality of Love,” *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 51, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i3.2169>.

(v 19). Love is expressed in actions that demonstrate love for other Christians.⁴⁸⁵ This, in turn, reassures the believer of their status unto salvation, should there be any question.

As John transitions out of the subject of love, he moves towards the doctrine of incarnation by discussing the commandment to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (v 19). This transitions into the final way for believers to be assured of their identity as a Christian and salvation, not only through love but through the obedience that John has already discussed and by the Spirit abiding in us, “whom he has given us” (v 24). The way in which Christ lives in the believer is through the indwelling of his Spirit.⁴⁸⁶ This leads to a discussion of the testing of the spirits in chapter 4, where the writer relates a portion of the spirits that he is discussing to false prophets (1 Jhn 4:1). Therefore, “spirit” in the writer’s use is likely a metonymy for “prophet.”⁴⁸⁷

Stott writes that the readers that John was writing to were prone to accepting all teachings from any prophet claiming to be inspired.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, he writes to discuss another way of knowing if someone is a believer or not: do they confess Christ and that Christ is from God, or do they confess something (or someone) different (v. 2-3)? John has applied moral (righteousness/obedience) and social (love one another) tests, and now he includes a theological test.⁴⁸⁹ If a prophet speaks against Christ as the Son of God, he is not a believer. John specifically mentions one of these spirits by name in verse 3 when he speaks of the spirit of the antichrist,

⁴⁸⁵ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1980.

⁴⁸⁶ Grant R. Osborne, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Wendell C. Hawley, *The Gospel of John, 1-3 John*, 356.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴⁸⁸ John Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 152.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

noting that this spirit already exists in the world and indicating that believers must be vigilant for it.

In verse 5, John gives another identifier for false prophets and those who are not of God. They are from the world, so their words reflect what the world says, and the world is happy to hear those things (v 5). Those who are in the world desire to be validated, and they are against the righteousness of those who are in God, referring to the author's description of why Cain committed murder in verse 12. When John refers to the "world" with the term *kosmos*, he describes the world system in which each human lives, a system that is opposed to God's realm because Satan's influence is exerted on earth.⁴⁹⁰ The term that John employs indicates hostility and obstacles to the cause of Christ, both from humans and the idolatrous things they replace God with.⁴⁹¹

In an effort to give his recipients reassurance of their salvation, John sets forth markers of Christian identity that can be used to recognize not only Christ in ourselves, but in others, as well. Those who are followers of Christ will do three basic things: they will walk in obedience to His ways, they will love their brothers and sacrifice for them, and they will confess Christ. These three things abide alongside the display of fruit in one's life. In short, Christians are recognizable. They are recognizable not only for their own benefit and assurance of salvation but also for the benefit of the brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ. As this writing dives into Paul's Christian identity, the markers set forth in this section, extrapolated from the biblical authors themselves, find importance in this discussion. The reason for tabulating items that mark one with a Christian

⁴⁹⁰ Grant R. Osborne, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Wendell C. Hawley, *The Gospel of John, 1-3 John*, 359.

⁴⁹¹ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1565.

identity is to answer a question. Did Paul possess, embody, or demonstrate the markers of Christianity detailed here?

The apostle shows evidence that he worked to grow the church body in obedience to the words of Christ in Matthew 28:19-20. Three missionary journeys and numerous planted churches provide evidence of this. In an interesting take on growing the body of Christ, Mackenzie discusses Paul's sense of hospitality. He writes that the apostle sought to plant churches faithful to the gospel of Christ in such a manner that removed barriers to the Gentiles and allowed them to be welcomed and included.⁴⁹² Mackenzie further writes, “As Paul engages with congregations as apostle to the gentiles, he makes it clear that the God who comes to us in Jesus both welcomes us and transforms us.”⁴⁹³ This attitude of hospitality that extended from the apostle aids him in fulfilling the Great Commission, a Christian marker in both the form of obedience and making disciples.

In the book of Galatians, after describing those who wouldn't inherit the kingdom of God, Paul lists the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23). The list of the fruit that is produced by the Spirit is followed in verse 25 by Paul's instructions that believers should “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). Exell eloquently writes, “This is a rich coronet of graces, with which the apostle decks the Christian believer. He tells us here what a spiritual life in Christ means, a life that has its ripe fruit in these real virtues of the man.”⁴⁹⁴ If life in Christ displays these spiritual fruits as Paul has listed them, then the apostle himself should exhibit them in his own life. While

⁴⁹² Ed Mackenzie, “Transforming Hospitality in the Theology of Paul: Lessons for Today's Church,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 20, no. 1 (April 2023): 104–116, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07398913231183457>.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Galatians, Faithlife* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1962), accessed July 27, 2023, app.logos.com, 388.

there is no place within the Bible where a proclamation is made to confirm that Paul's character contained these attributes, his actions are consistent with one who valued and practiced these fruits.

Finally, obtaining salvation, showing love, and practicing obedience are also markers of a Christian identity. Paul's salvation has been extensively documented. He certainly knew his Lord and Savior and had obtained salvation through Christ. He demonstrates love through his aforementioned hospitality and his concern for the churches, which he mentions in 2 Corinthians 11:28. This is a healthy concern for the welfare of those outside of himself that Paul exhibits.⁴⁹⁵ Dunn writes of Paul's thought process in Romans 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:14, when the apostle links fulfilling the law of Christ to bearing one another's burdens, an example of loving the neighbor, thus fulfilling the law.⁴⁹⁶ The point to be made here is that the apostle was concerned with showing love as instructed by Christ and being obedient to him, thus meeting many markers that prove Christian identity.

Paul as a Christian

The stage has been set to examine Paul's Christian identity. Biblical information has been provided to determine how a Christian can be recognized, and Paul's encounter with Christ has been examined to give initial evidence of a personal transformation in the apostle's life. Attention will now turn toward the apostle's words and actions to establish his Christian values.

⁴⁹⁵ Colin G Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 191.

⁴⁹⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 654.

Rise and Be Baptized—Acts 9:18; 22:16

The very first sign of Paul's transformation and adherence to Christian values is his baptism. After Ananias lays his hands on Saul, he regains his sight and rises to be baptized (Acts 9:18). While Luke merely records that Paul was baptized, Paul himself recalls Ananias saying it like this in Acts 22:16, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

Baptism is the mark of obedience in a believer and follower of Christ. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus instructs the disciples that the new disciples they make are to be baptized. In 1 Peter 3:21, it is written, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism is a profound figure of escaping God's judgment through being united with Christ in his death and resurrection.⁴⁹⁷ As important as that is, the very fact that Jesus commanded it and that Christians are to be obedient to the commandments and instructions of God is enough to argue for its importance.

In previous portions of this chapter, obedience to the Lord was listed as a mark of the Christian. Paul's willingness to immediately submit to the command to be baptized after his eyes were opened is a sign of the value he placed on obeying God. In addition, by being baptized, Paul acknowledges that Christ is the Son of God who forgives sins. Paul's baptism expresses an extreme change of thought and values that is expressed through action.

⁴⁹⁷ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1963.

Proclamation of Jesus—Acts 9:19-22

Following the restoration of his sight, Paul spends time with the disciples (v 19). The amount of time is debated, with Luke writing that Paul was in Damascus with the disciples "For some days" in verse 19. He then "immediately begins preaching in the synagogues, declaring that Jesus is the Son of God (v 20). Paul is so convinced by his experience that he begins to attempt to set others straight regarding who Jesus is. He had been wrong, but his zeal is now pointed in the correct direction, and he amazes those who knew of his exploits to capture and silence the followers of The Way. If any "conversion" took place in Paul in Acts 9, it had nothing to do with switching religions and everything to do with moving from incorrect to correct understanding. Once he understood Jesus correctly, he began proclaiming it to everyone, confounding the Jews along the way (v 22).

This turn of events would have been confusing to Jews, and the Christians would have likely treated Saul with caution for some time, waiting to see if his change was real.⁴⁹⁸ However, Luke likely includes this section to provide authenticity of Paul's newfound faith in Jesus.⁴⁹⁹ Paul truly had turned to Christ, and the zeal that he naturally carried for that which he believed is transferred to Jesus, and Luke testifies that it shows itself in public. This public testimony in the face of those who knew of his anti-Christian tactics could have been embarrassing and, therefore, easily abandoned had it not been authentic. Millar writes that the way that Paul discusses the nature of change that the gospel brings forth in us is striking.⁵⁰⁰ This should not be a surprise,

⁴⁹⁸ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 143.

⁴⁹⁹ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 238.

⁵⁰⁰ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 133.

considering Paul's own change is striking, and one can immediately see the value that Paul places upon this change as Luke documents it here in Acts.

Slave/Servant of God

Paul frequently uses language that indicates slavery, servantry, or servitude towards God. This language would have been familiar to his readers and those he ministered to due to the high numbers of slaves that were present in the first century. Rome often took slaves as the spoils of war, and it is believed that as much as two-thirds of the Roman Empire were slaves.⁵⁰¹ A common thread that runs through Christian circles today is the idea of Jesus as a “friend” to those who believe in him. However, Paul’s language around slavery and servitude indicates a theology that is very different than the idea of friendship. In addition, it reveals much about his Christian identity.

When speaking of the slavery that pervaded Paul's world, Turner writes that the Greco-Roman world understood slavery in a way that we do not; with everyone knowing what slavery was like, everyone would have known slaves, and a great many would have lived in slavery for at least a time.⁵⁰² Thus, Paul is not unaware of the comparisons that he is drawing when he refers to himself as a servant, as he does in the opening greetings of several of his letters. In Romans 1:1, he refers to himself as "a servant of Christ Jesus" so quickly that only his name as an identifier comes before that statement. Mounce writes that not only was Paul confirming that he

⁵⁰¹ Daniel B Wallace, “Some Initial Reflections on Slavery in the New Testament,” *Some Initial Reflections on Slavery in the New Testament* | Bible.Org, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://bible.org/article/some-initial-reflections-slavery-new-testament>.

⁵⁰² Geoffrey Turner, “The Christian Life as Slavery: Paul’s Subversive Metaphor,” *The Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 1 (2010): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2010.00591.x>, 2-3.

belonged to Christ, but he was stepping away from the culture of the time, as cultured Greeks would never have referred to themselves in such a demeaning fashion.⁵⁰³

Osborne adds more details, adding that once Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt, they commonly began calling themselves "slaves of God" (Lev 25:55).⁵⁰⁴ Paul's familiarity with Scripture means that it is unlikely this connection would have been beyond his grasp. In Philippians 1:1, the apostle offers a similar greeting, this time including Timothy, "servants of Christ Jesus." Paul is indicating that he is not his own, and he answers to Christ. This is a willful removal of his autonomy, as he has given himself over entirely to the service and will of Christ. Once more, he mentions his servant status in the greeting of a letter in Titus. Much like the opening of Romans, Paul mentions only his name and then hastens to follow it with the title "a servant of God" (Ti 1:1). The repetitive nature of the greeting indicates that this is an aspect of his identity that Paul wishes his readers to know about; he is in service to Christ.

Turning to Romans 6:15-23, one finds Paul fully immersed in the analogy of slavery. In verse 16, Paul states that you are "slaves to the one whom you obey." There are only two choices for obedience. Humans can either be slaves to sin and, therefore, death, or they can be obedient to God and, therefore, righteousness (v 16). Utilizing the truth of the frequent occurrence of selling oneself into slavery in the first century, Paul makes the point that if you offer yourself to something, especially continually, you are then a slave to that thing.⁵⁰⁵ Either way, humans are

⁵⁰³ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans, Faithlife* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), accessed June 21, 2023, app.logos.com, 59.

⁵⁰⁴ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), accessed June 2, 2023, app.logos.com, 28.

⁵⁰⁵ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 160-161.

slaves to something of their choosing, so the choice is available to us regarding who or what we will be in servitude to. This is an important point. Paul is displaying the idea that you will gravitate towards your values even though, in this period of time, he may not even have an understanding of identity in the way that modern-day culture does.

Paul's underlying component of choice within this section of Scripture is compelling. Humans choose to align their values in some format with either the sin of the world or with the righteousness of Christ. When Paul speaks of the conversion of the Roman church, he writes that they have "obeyed from the heart" in verse 17. Those who choose Christ and are obedient align their core with him, identifying with him, and are those who "have become slaves of righteousness" (v 18). The typical imagery of slavery is that of one who has no choice in the matter, having been forced into a position of servitude. However, this wasn't always the case in the Greco-Roman world, with many offering themselves as slaves for the simple purpose of survival.

Paul does not indicate that the slavery he speaks of is servantry that is forced by the Lord. The great Christian paradox is that believers are freed from being slaves to sin to become slaves to God.⁵⁰⁶ Forced servitude does not necessarily indicate that one has aligned their core value with that of the master; it simply means that we are forced. The apostle does not eradicate one's ability to choose; he simply points out that being a slave is an inescapable dimension of human existence since all must be obedient to someone or something.⁵⁰⁷ The idea of entering into slavery to Christ could hardly be used as an example of one's value and identity if it was

⁵⁰⁶ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 160.

⁵⁰⁷ Geoffrey Turner, "The Christian Life as Slavery: Paul's Subversive Metaphor," 6.

imposed on us. Paul challenges his audience to choose their allegiance to sin or to obedience, in effect asking them which controlling agent it is that they prefer, for there is no third option.⁵⁰⁸

Obedience and righteousness are identifiers of the Christian life, and believers submit themselves to them as a slave would to their master. In verse 20, Paul says that before submitting to the service of Christ, the Romans "were slaves of sin" and "free in regard to righteousness." One can only have a singular master, and if the master in question is sin, then there is freedom from the requirements of righteousness. Those who are free from the requirements of righteousness do not display values that align with, nor identify with, the values of Christ. If that is true, then the opposite is true; those who make righteousness their master identify with the values of righteousness and of God.

Turner writes that Paul's way of thinking of and speaking of slavery are theological and metaphorical but are presented in a positive light due to the underlying themes of love through service to others and love through obedience to God.⁵⁰⁹ Galatians 5:13 is an example when the apostle writes "through love serve one another." A major part of servitude is obedience and obedience to God is one of the things that identifies a Christian. Paul not only speaks of slavery to Christ as a good and honorable thing, but he also adheres to it himself. The apostle's entire life is given in the effort to obey Christ and spread the gospel message.

⁵⁰⁸ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 161.

⁵⁰⁹ Geoffrey Turner, "The Christian Life as Slavery: Paul's Subversive Metaphor," 6-7.

Imitators of Christ

On several occasions in Scripture, Paul encourages fellow believers, both Jewish and Gentile Christians, to behave as Christ behaved. The idea that imitating Christ is essential for the Christian spiritual walk has played an important role in the history of Christian theology, coming from the framework that Christ is morally perfect, and therefore, in emulating him, we will work toward moral improvement.⁵¹⁰ Paul indicates that he attempts to follow the example of Christ, letting the Corinthian believers know that they should do the same in 1 Corinthians 11:1. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,” Paul says (1 Cor 11:1).

In verse 10:31, Paul writes that all that believers do should be done for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). He follows this by writing that he tries “to please everyone in everything I do,” not because he is egotistical or a people pleaser or due to seeking some advantage for himself, but because his hope is that these actions will cause some to be saved (1 Cor 10:33). It is after this verse that he instructs the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ. It was Christ who came seeking the good of humankind, not gain for himself, and it is likely this form of imitation that Paul is pointing to. The self-sacrificing nature of the work of Christ is the behavioral paradigm for Christians, and they should sacrifice certain things in order to demonstrate this aspect of their belief system, thus bringing others to the understanding of the saving work of Jesus.⁵¹¹

More than speaking of imitating Christ and pointing to the exact actions of Jesus, Paul seems to be pointing to the character traits of Christ. This is even more incredible in terms of the

⁵¹⁰ Joshua Cockayne, “The Imitation Game: Becoming Imitators of Christ,” *Religious Studies* 53, no. 1 (2016): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412516000196>, 3.

⁵¹¹ William R. Baker et al., *1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), accessed June 28, 2023, app.logos.com, 154.

current discussion; if Paul is pointing to imitating character traits of Christ and claiming that he imitates and values these traits, he is identifying as Christian. These traits include humility, self-denial, self-giving, sacrifice, and love.⁵¹² Cockayne writes that the process of imitating or becoming more like Christ is a radically transformative process that replaces the selfish desires and personal preferences of the believer with those desires and preferences of God.⁵¹³ Importantly, simple mimicry is different than imitation, with mimicry being focused on outward actions rather than the inward intentions.⁵¹⁴ The imitation that Paul speaks of goes beyond the actions of Christ, digging deep into the intentions and character traits that drove the action.

In Philippians 3:17, Paul again tells the believers to imitate him. The chapter begins with a discussion against false teachers, with Paul giving the positive example of his own life change and example of behavior beginning in verse 4. The apostle speaks of counting everything as loss because he gained the Lord (v 8). Paul writes that he seeks to be “found in Christ,” thus being united with him.⁵¹⁵ He also writes that he wants to “know him and the power of his resurrection,” even sharing in his sufferings so that the apostle might become “like him in his death” (v 10). In these examples, the Philippians are to follow and imitate Paul. As the apostle seeks after Christ (v 13), so should the Philippians follow his example and seek after Christ, remembering the resurrection and eternal reward that is promised to them.

Free writes that in the face of opposition from false teachers and internal struggles, the Philippians lost their vision and focus on the crucified Lord, with Paul taking this opportunity to

⁵¹² Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), accessed June 28, 2023, app.logos.com, 177.

⁵¹³ Joshua Cockayne, “The Imitation Game: Becoming Imitators of Christ,” 4.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1863.

remind them that they should focus upon the Lord in the pattern and way that the apostle focuses on the Lord, never losing sight of the gain that he will receive for doing so.⁵¹⁶ Following verse 17, Paul writes that many "walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (v 18). Paul implies that it is wise to imitate him, following his example, because there are others who will lead them to their destruction, as he mentions in verse 19. Although Paul does not directly state that he is imitating Christ, he does describe the ways he is seeking after Christ before then instructing the Philippians to follow his example.

Walking backward one book to Ephesians, we see Paul directing the church to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph 5:1). Children do what their parents do, following their example no matter if it is good or bad. Christ cannot provide a bad example, so only good things can come from the believers imitating the Lord. This instruction is followed by the edict to "walk in love as Christ loved him and gave himself up for us" in verse 2. The imitation that Paul desires here is specifically that the church loves in the same way that Christ loved and sacrificed. The apostle utilizes this idea of children imitating their parents when writing to the Corinthian church when he states that he is their "father in Christ Jesus through the gospel" and the church should "be imitators" of him (1 Cor 4:15-16).

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul writes commending the church for becoming imitators of the Lord, receiving "the word in much affliction." Rather than commending them for imitating himself or Christ through suffering in some form, Rydelnik writes that the Thessalonians are being praised by the apostle for receiving the word and the evangelistic efforts that they then put forth, "becoming an example" to other believers (v 7).⁵¹⁷ It is in these ways that the church

⁵¹⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), accessed June 28, 2023, app.logos.com, 160.

⁵¹⁷ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1880.

emulates Paul and Christ (v 6), proving that Paul doesn't only have suffering in mind when he considers what imitating Christ means.

One does not adopt the characteristics, beliefs, and practices of someone if they do not greatly value that person and the things they stand for, thus identifying with them. Paul wanted to emulate Christ down to emulating the suffering that Jesus experienced to attain salvation for the world. Dunn writes that Jesus himself provided Paul with a model for Christian conduct, which was summed up in the law command.⁵¹⁸ Loving one's neighbor was Jesus' example, conveyed to the churches through the Jesus tradition.⁵¹⁹ Paul valued the things of God and sought to be the example of Christ and therefore encouraged the churches to look to either himself or Christ for walking out the instructions of God and figuring out how to truly be "Christian."

Brothers

There are various verses in Paul's writings where he refers to fellow believers as brothers. Having already determined that Paul identified as Jewish in the last chapter, it would only make sense that he would refer to the Jewish believers in similar terms. However, what does it indicate about him when he refers to the Gentile believers as "brother?" Examples from 1 Corinthians will be given for this portion of the discussion out of the multitude of times Paul utilizes the term. His use of the familial term was not without specific intent, while also including insights into his own identity.

⁵¹⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 657.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

Metaphors can be tools that shape the way one thinks and acts.⁵²⁰ Paul is a prolific user of familial metaphors, with the address “brothers and sisters” appearing fifty-one times throughout the Corinthian letters alone.⁵²¹ The church in wealthy and wicked Corinth may have had a few Jewish believers, but it was likely made up of mostly Gentile converts to the faith. This makes it even more interesting that Paul refers to them as “brothers,” doing so for the first time in Corinthians in verse 10 of 1st Corinthians. He writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v 10). Not only does he identify them with a familial greeting, but he also identifies with them through the mutual idea that they all serve Christ. He repeats its use in verse 26, saying, “For consider your calling, brothers” (1 Cor 1:26).

The Greek term that Paul uses is ἀδελφός, which covers relationships ranging from actual blood siblings to other believers that are united simply through the bond of affection or the same belief in Christ.⁵²² The term is insignificant to most biblical commentators, as they skip over it and immediately begin discussing the situation that Paul is addressing in the Corinthian church. However, to ignore this address on the part of the apostle is to disregard an important portion of Paul’s thoughts about being a Christian. It is clear that he identifies with the Gentiles as one under Christ. The value that he places upon his Jewish identity does not stop the apostle from readily identifying with those who have come to the Lord from a different background, which is enough to make them adoptable as family.

After greeting the Corinthian church and referring to them as “brothers,” Paul begins to address the problems that are taking place within the church. The use of the term in this instance

⁵²⁰ Kar Yong Lim, *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians*, Kindle (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 84.

⁵²¹ Kar Yong Lim, *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians*, 85.

⁵²² James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1524.

may be carefully placed to bring the believers together when there was division in the church.

Lim writes that Paul sought to remind the Corinthians of their identity as belonging to one family through Christ, not only in the use of the word in 1 Corinthians 1:10 but in the six times that he uses it throughout the first four chapters of his Corinthian letter.⁵²³ If Paul wants to bring the church at Corinth out of division and into singular understanding and encourages them to do that through the subtle reminder that they are family, is he excluding himself from that family on the basis of his Jewish background?

Although Paul may be utilizing the term "brothers" to remind the Corinthians of the family and close relationship they have with one another through their mutual belief in Christ, it is unlikely that he isn't also applying this to himself. That conclusion can be reached on the basis of his language of adoption in Romans 8. In that language, the apostle includes himself through the use of the term "we:"

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:15-17).

Paul is not giving information that only applies to the Roman church in these verses—he very clearly includes himself as an adoptee, heir, child, and fellow heir. Additionally, while modern culture is familiar with adoption and its importance, adoption was not a common Jewish practice, making Paul's use of the ideology even more interesting.⁵²⁴ The apostle strays from his Jewish background in order to employ a metaphor that will fully encompass the relationship believers have with one another and with Christ and the Father, and he includes himself in that terminology. It isn't simply for the Jewish believers or the Gentile believers; no matter what

⁵²³ Kar Yong Lim, *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul's Letters to the Corinthians*, 90.

⁵²⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 436.

background the believers hail from, they are all adopted, they are all fellow heirs with Christ, and they are all children of God.

Paul is using the sibling metaphor to encourage the believers to remember their relationship with one another and, therefore, point them toward unity and love for family. Yet, the review of Romans shows that Paul is not simply out to manipulate the Corinthians. He does truly subscribe to the idea that they are all family in Christ, and his thought process identifies himself in that family alongside the Gentile Christians. No matter what initial designation comes before the term "Christian," it is evident that the "Christian" part is Paul's ultimate focus. Believers will inevitably have varied backgrounds. From the first-century viewpoint, there were only two background options. Yet they were adopted by the same Lord.

Banks agrees that Paul's use of familial language is overlooked too often, as it reveals the very essence of his thinking about community.⁵²⁵ The familial language points back to the way that family was arranged in the first century. In the Jewish household, a natural bond was often formed between siblings, as all members of the family assisted in caring for and raising new members.⁵²⁶ This undoubtedly plays a part in Paul's theology in creating an identification of Jewish and Gentile believers as family.

Conclusion

The apostle Paul did not "convert" to Christianity upon his Damascus road encounter. He remained Jewish and valued his Jewish heritage, seeing Jesus as the long-awaited fulfillment of that heritage, even if the Messiah looked different than he had imagined. When Paul was blinded

⁵²⁵ Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in Early House Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 52.

⁵²⁶ J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, 249.

by Christ, followers of "The Way" were not yet even referred to as Christians, and when that designation was given, Paul was already preaching the gospel. As the separation between Judaism and Christianity began to take hold, Paul did not see a need to identify with one or the other. He was Christian and Jewish. A follower of Christ with a Jewish heritage.

If Paul was one or the other, one would expect to see the evidence point toward the apostle distancing himself from the less-favored belief system. Yet, Paul checks all the boxes on the list of valuing Christianity. He placed great value upon salvation—both his own and the salvation of others—the spread of the gospel message and the growth of the church. He speaks of fulfilling the commandment to love (Rom 13:8-10) and clearly values obedience to the Lord as he teaches it to the churches he ministers to (Rom 6:15-19; Acts 26:19). The apostle commits his life to the servanthood of the Lord, making the Lord's will his own, and desires to share in Christ's sufferings (Phil 3:10-11). Finally, when writing to the Gentile Christians, Paul uses familial metaphors to show that they are all one and together in Christ Jesus.

Although he didn't forget his Jewish background and even continued to actively refer to himself as Jewish and participate in that heritage, Paul also exuded joy and excitement for his Christian identity. The apostle takes the core values of Christ and adopts them into his own life, imitating Jesus and encouraging others to do so as well. So enthralled was he with his Christian identity that he modeled the journey for the believers he disciplined. Paul experienced the transformation that all must experience when they genuinely give their lives to Christ, and his identification with that transformation was swift and intense. Paul's theology offers a sharp contrast between life before Christ and life after Christ, indicating the value and identity that he places on having life in Christ.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁷ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 15.

CHAPTER SIX: PAUL'S IDENTITY AS A ROMAN CITIZEN

Introduction

Although Paul met Christ and began ministering in the Greco-Roman world, he makes very few references to it in the scope of his own identity. The arguments that have arisen among scholars in the breadth and width of how much Paul agreed or disagreed with the Roman Empire center around his use of Roman Imperial language. In the context herein, it is important because if Paul was using Imperial language to agree with the Roman Empire, then he may have placed quite a bit of value upon his status as a Roman citizen, adopting that status into his core values.

The Hellenistic culture of Paul's day had permeated much of the Eastern Mediterranean world and a good deal beyond.⁵²⁸ During Jesus' lifetime, the disciples had followed him about, listening to him speak about the kingdom of God. Verses like Matthew 6:33, where Jesus speaks of seeking the kingdom, and verses where he mentions "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3, 5:10, 5:20) must have impacted the Jews who felt oppression from the earthly kingdom of Rome. From the Roman citizens themselves and certainly from the authorities in Rome, such statements may have brought feelings of alarm. The Messiah had come, and he had his own kingdom to bring with him. The continual language within the culture that surrounded these differing kingdoms would make it seem likely that Paul would adopt and use such language in his writings to the churches, especially the Gentile churches, who were used to wholeheartedly and unabashedly engaging in Hellenistic culture before turning to Christ. This is either a wise method of engagement on the part of the communicator Paul or else a subtle nod towards his feelings regarding Rome—perhaps a bit of both.

⁵²⁸ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 4.

The apostle himself draws attention to the fact that he is a Roman citizen in Scripture, and there is no denying that he resided inside the same Hellenistic culture as the believers he ministered to. Due to his overriding Jewish upbringing, there would have been facets of the surrounding culture that Paul and his family would have declined to be involved in. However, attention has been given to the idea that there are portions of Scripture where Paul may be using imperial language, picked up from his Greco-Roman culture. In addition, Paul has often been accused of using this language either in agreement with, or direct confrontation to, the Roman culture. Scholars began to come out saying that Paul's attitude toward the Roman Empire was far more critical than had been previously believed, and the apostle's subversive remarks can be found in the subtext of his letters.⁵²⁹ As much as Paul valued his Christianity and, knowing that Jesus had his own kingdom, it would not seem unusual that Paul would perceive the Roman Empire poorly and as a lesser kingdom.

Paul's personal references to his Roman citizenry are minimal. Yet, the position as a Roman citizen seems to have been a coveted status in the first century. In fact, in an exchange in the Bible between Paul and the Roman tribune in Acts 22:27-29, the tribune states that he only came about being a Roman citizen through the purchase of the status. Paul replies that he was born into his citizenry (Acts 22:28). Through the exchange, it is implied that Paul's citizenship was of greater value since he had been born into it rather than purchasing it. Rydelnik writes that at various times during the existence of the Roman Empire, it was possible to purchase citizenship, but the expense was so great that it was unattainable for most.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome, Faithlife* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2022), accessed July 4, 2023, app.logos.com, 2.

⁵³⁰ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1728.

It is intriguing that Paul seemed so uninterested in his identity as a Roman citizen that he rarely mentions it, yet some scholars find that the apostle has purposefully and intentionally used Roman Imperial language in his letters. Did Paul simply have no interest in being a Roman citizen? Is his use of imperial language purely due to the influence of the common language at the time, or does it indicate that he was adamantly against Rome? Elliott writes:

The arrogance of powerful nations blinds them to the impossibility of achieving through force the willing consent of the people whose labor and resources they would claim for their own. This impossibility generates tremendous tension within an empire's ideological system, a contradiction so threatening that it must be suppressed through ideological mechanisms that Fredric Jameson has termed "strategies of containment." The ideology of the Roman Empire, no less than contemporary imperial ideology, was preoccupied with the challenge of "winning hearts and minds" of conquered people. (Elliott 2010, 25)

There is little indication that Paul's heart and mind had been won by the powerful empire of Rome, even before he was transformed by Christ. Paul mentions his status as a Roman citizen only when it benefits him and his mission. There is evidence to show that he undermined many facets of Roman rule in his letters in favor of the rule of Christ, regularly diverting the Gentile churches away from Hellenistic behavior that was favored and applauded by other pagan citizens of the empire. Paul identified as Roman only when he could utilize the benefits that accompanied the title, and he regularly utilized imperial language to indicate that the kingdom of God was far greater than any kingdom that might rule the earth. In Paul's mind, kingdom language was more appropriate for the true kingdom, and any benefits that came from an earthly kingdom were only worthwhile if they could be used to spread the message of Christ.

The Roman Imperial Cult and Idolatry

As with any culture, specific ideologies were attached to Hellenistic cultures, with some that very specifically surrounded Caesar. Rome did not govern in a manner that was primarily for

the welfare of their people; instead, it was designed to support the leaders and their interests.⁵³¹

Any sign of goodwill that was given to the people, such as the Jewish people being allowed to continue practicing Judaism, always had the larger goal of benefiting Rome politically.

Ideologies surrounding royalty, religion, and political figures are of the most interest to this study, as they include the language that Paul seems to have been attempting to shift towards language surrounding Christ.

Only a few groups were purely of a religious character, although a religious dimension ran through most groups in Hellenistic society, generally through the patronage of a deity and their attached shrine.⁵³² Although there are some reports that many people were generally dissatisfied with religion, it was still a major part of everyday life. If, indeed, people were unhappy with the religion of the time, it would make sense that Christianity gained such popularity as it was markedly different from the other religions of the time, and anyone could be included. The promise of a God who cared for those who followed him was a change from the pagan gods who were distant at best and cruel at their worst.

Long before Jesus or Paul, religion and monarchy would ultimately overlap upon the death of Julius Caesar. The first to be declared *divus* after his death, it began a practice where Roman emperors could be elevated to the level of gods or demigods.⁵³³ This practice continued into the first century, with some scholars concluding that it granted a measure of unity to the vast empire. When Jesus came claiming ultimate authority, it may have irritated his followers that

⁵³¹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 110.

⁵³² Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in Early House Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 8.

⁵³³ Warren Carter, "Imperial Cult and Early Christianity," *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets* (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393361-0030>, 1.

anyone might claim the status of god over and above the one true God, although it was a societal norm to have many gods. Yet, in the first century, the Roman Senate moved to affirm the longstanding tradition of ascribing divinity to the Roman emperor.⁵³⁴

Augustus, in particular, pushed the point of divinity. In his lifetime, he accepted the status of more than human, but not fully divine, with the senate giving him full deity after his death.⁵³⁵ Thus, the worship of deceased emperors became more gods to worship in an already full pantheon for the populace to adore. This was seen as both a harmless and even a patriotic endeavor on the part of the Roman people, although it angered the Christians and set them against the common thought since they believed in a singular God (1 Cor 8:6).⁵³⁶ Both the Jewish and Gentile Christian identity surrounded the principle of one God, and they were unwilling to succumb to the emperor worship in the culture around them.

Carson and Moo write that it is in the book of Revelation that worship of the emperor can perhaps be seen as an issue for Christians.⁵³⁷ Domitian so enjoyed the title that he ordered that he should be addressed as “lord and god,” making this confession a test of loyalty.⁵³⁸ This requirement would have collided with the interests of the Christians, perhaps even more so if Paul, in his letters to the churches, had been turning imperial cult language around to make it applicable to Christian interests. Paul could have been exercising an overt method of polemics

⁵³⁴ Thomas Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 49.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁵³⁷ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 709.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

intended to make sense to the recipients of his letters about his disdain for the imperial cult while attempting to make it hidden from any Romans who might have viewed it.

Another consideration behind assessing the intent of Paul's use of Roman imperial language may be the length to which the cult was imbedded in Hellenistic society. Reports emerge that Pontius Pilate himself may have subscribed to the cult's ideology, as he had coins with images that advertised particular rituals of the exclusively Roman cult.⁵³⁹ Pilate's position as a Roman governor carried a religious dimension with it, and he would have been expected to follow Roman guidelines.⁵⁴⁰ If Rome was encouraging emperor worship, those are the guidelines that the governor would have been expected to follow, in part to ensure the maintenance of his elevated position. This leads one to question the additional motivation that Pilate may have had for condemning Christ to the cross, a motivation that Paul may have recognized in his time as he would have been well-acquainted with the imperial cult. His knowledge of it, and his disapproval of it, would have spanned both his pre- and post-Damascus road existence as his belief in a singular God didn't change.

In his review of *Kaiser und Gott. Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* by M. Clauss, Fears writes that ruler worship was a characteristic form of Greco-Roman polytheism, developing out of the hero cult.⁵⁴¹ The Hellenistic culture, composed of pagan groups who saw no problem with worshipping many different Gods, simply adopted the worship of their leaders into the pantheon. As far as the Jewish people were concerned, it is universally assumed that the Jews would not

⁵³⁹ Joan E. Taylor, "Pontius Pilate and the Imperial Cult in Roman Judaea," *New Testament Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 555–582, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0028688506000300>, 558-559.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 556.

⁵⁴¹ J. Rufus Fears, "Imperial Cult," *The Classical Review* 52, no. 2 (2002): 319–321, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/52.2.319>, 320.

have been willing to acknowledge the divinity of an emperor.⁵⁴² This assumption makes perfect sense after examining the lengths to which Saul was willing to go in order to eliminate Christianity and its followers, who initially seemed to be claiming that there was a different lord than the Lord of Judaism. If the Jewish people had trouble identifying with their very own Messiah, most Jews who were devoted to the fidelity of their religion would have found any practice of emperor worship to be an intrusion upon their ethnic, cultural, and religious identity.

In speaking of emperor worship concerning Christians, they and Jews were the exception to the accepted notion of the divinity of the emperors.⁵⁴³ On the basis of their faith, emperor worship would have been seen as idolatry, a concept so dire that it would not have been lost upon Paul.⁵⁴⁴ Paul's understanding of Scripture cannot be understated. The Old Testament repeatedly shows that idolatry brought the nation of Israel to ruin, resulting in the situation the nation was in during the first century. Dunn writes of Paul's deep-seated aversion to idolatry by pointing out Luke's reference to it in Acts 17:16, where he writes, "Paul's spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols."⁵⁴⁵

So great was the problem throughout the city that when Paul was brought to the Areopagus to speak (Acts 17:19), he spends part of his speech informing the listeners that the "divine" was not "like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29). This great city had housed the likes of Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, yet as a

⁵⁴² David Noy, "'A Sight Unfit to See': Jewish Reactions to the Roman Imperial Cult," *Classics Ireland* 8 (2001): 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25528377>, 69.

⁵⁴³ Zsolt Magyar, "How and to What Extent Were the Imperial Cult and Emperor Worship Thought to Preserve Stability in the Roman World?," *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 60, no. 2 (2009): 385–395, <https://doi.org/10.1556/aarch.60.2009.2.5>, 385.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 32.

former intellectual hub it had become the capital for idolatry with the city containing more idols than people.⁵⁴⁶ Recall that Paul comes from the background of being a Pharisee, a group that felt that adherence to the law was necessary to restore Israel to her former glory, and she had fallen from that glory due to idolatry. Paul, now knowing the full glory and goodness of the Messiah, would have faced deep distress over the level of idolatry happening in Athens.

Exell refers to Paul's strong feelings towards the idols as 'holy indignation.'⁵⁴⁷ Paul was deeply moved at the sight of such moral debasement, as indicated by the word 'provoked.'⁵⁴⁸ Strong records the term *paroxynō* as being greatly distressed, angered, or irritated.⁵⁴⁹ Although versions such as the NIV leave out the term "spirit" in this verse, the ESV writes that "his spirit was provoked" by the idols (Acts 17:16). In essence, Paul is not only angry, disturbed, and uncomfortable with the level of idolatry, these feelings go into the very core of his being.

Compare this to the worship of a human at the head of an empire. The common theme present is idolatry. Magyar writes that the Romans didn't believe in the divinity of the emperor in the way that Christians believe in Christ, with the emperors being worshipped as gods through very ritualistic manners.⁵⁵⁰ What, then, was the purpose of the imperial cult? Price gives some insight:

⁵⁴⁶ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts, Faithlife Logos* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1998), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 287.

⁵⁴⁷ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Acts*, 573.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1581.

⁵⁵⁰ Zsolt Magyar, "How and to What Extent Were the Imperial Cult and Emperor Worship Thought to Preserve Stability in the Roman World?," 386.

The imperial cult, like the cults of the traditional gods, created a relationship of power between the subject and the ruler. That is, the cult was a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society. The imperial cult stabilized the religious order of the world. The system of ritual was carefully structured; the symbolism evoked a picture of the relationship between the emperor and the gods. The ritual was also structuring; it imposed a definition of the world. The imperial cult, along with politics and diplomacy, constructed the reality of the Roman empire. (Price 2009, 248)

In short, emperor worship was a way for the Roman leaders to establish their power in the eastern Mediterranean.⁵⁵¹ Jeffers writes that the cult was readily accepted by the people of the eastern Mediterranean, who had long been taught to venerate their rulers as gods, a practice that had emerged from Egypt.⁵⁵² The Jewish people were exempt from the imperial cult, but they did not remove themselves from it entirely, often offering sacrifices on behalf of the emperor at the temple in Jerusalem.⁵⁵³ It seems that Rome saw the benefits of religion and the unity that it presented and, therefore, decided that it would form and encourage its own. There would be little desire to rise up and protest against a government in which the head was seen as a god.

The imperial cult would have been well understood by the Gentile converts entering the church. In many ways, it was seen as one more device to keep the people of the Roman empire in order, something that Rome generally did well. Combined with Paul's distaste for idolatry, examining his choice of words and possible reasoning for utilizing imperial language in his documents is worthwhile. Paul's use of this language and the rare times that he reveals his Roman citizenry is important in determining any value and identity that he might have placed upon that status.

What would be the basis for Paul's use of imperial language to refer to Christ, thus diverting its original meaning away from the source? As previously alluded to, the Gentile

⁵⁵¹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 101.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 102.

Christians would have been familiar with the language and rituals of the imperial cult, likely having taken part in it themselves for a time before their conversion. The use of such language towards Christ could have impressed upon them that Jesus was above all earthly things and people in a culture that deified whatever it pleased. It additionally could have highlighted idolatry and turned it back to Christ. While attempting to discern if Paul might have desired to make a statement about the elevation of Christ, one must ask, is the edification of Christ above all things something that Paul seems to be concerned about?

Exalted

For the answer to the question just posed, this study first turns to Philippians 2:9-11. In speaking of Jesus, Paul writes that he is “highly exalted” by God in verse 9. In addition, the name of Jesus is above every other name (Phil 2:9). Strong's definition of the phrase *hyperypsoō* (highly exalted) is “to exalt to the highest rank and power, raise to supreme majesty.”⁵⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that Paul's thought process in the “Christ hymn” begins by speaking of Christ's humility and self-sacrifice (Phil 2:5-8), and from these things proceeds the exaltation of Christ. The link can be seen below:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **Therefore**, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow (Phil 2:5-10, emphasis added).

The word “therefore” provides a link back to the previous verses, indicating that the reasons given, humility and self-sacrifice, are why Jesus attains the status and acclaim that is given to him in the remaining verses. He is “highly exalted,” God has bestowed upon him “the

⁵⁵⁴ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1599.

name above every name,” and all will both bow and confess verbally (every tongue) that Christ is “Lord” (Phil 2:10-11). In writing these things of Christ, it is a direct contradiction of the earthly rulers. They are neither humble nor self-sacrificing, attempting to elevate themselves to the status of god.

When Paul writes of the name of Christ being above all names in v. 9, Fee states that God has bestowed on the name of Jesus a significance that exceeds all other names.⁵⁵⁵ This significance, rising above all others on earth, could not have been lost on Paul when compared to the authorities of the Roman empire who sought notoriety and glory for themselves. For an apostle of Christ, working tirelessly to spread the gospel message and build and encourage the churches, the idolatrous nature of the Roman emperor who attempted to claim the status of divine must have been of concern. It likely would have been an ideology that would have attempted to enter the church through the rapidly accumulating Gentile believers, thus requiring the apostles to provide correction.

In addition, Fee writes that Paul “purposely throws the net of Christ’s sovereignty over the whole of created being” when he tells the Philippians that there is none in heaven, on earth, or under the earth that will not bow to Christ (Phil 2:10).⁵⁵⁶ The implications are clear on Paul's part—there is not an entity in existence, especially no earthly rulers, who eclipse the sovereignty of Christ. Finally, Paul tells the Philippians that all will verbally confess “that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:11). *Kyrios* is the word that Paul uses for “Lord,” with commentators pointing out

⁵⁵⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, 99.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

that the early Christian use of such a term for Jesus created a possible threat to the Roman emperor's claim to the title through imperial cult worship.⁵⁵⁷ Yet, Paul's use of the title remains.

Paul may have a high degree of intentionality behind his wording here. There is evidence that the people in Philippi enjoyed traditional Roman religion, which would have included the imperial cult.⁵⁵⁸ There are debates among scholars regarding Paul's use of Roman imperial language and whether the apostle used it with intention or quite by accident simply because it was language he was familiar with. Within this argument, it should be remembered that Paul often wrote to the churches to correct disagreements and mistaken practices, protect against false teachers, and ground them to their faith when they began to stray. In this case, it seems suspicious that Paul would write to a church body that was surrounded by those who took part in the imperial cult and "accidentally" use language that would make it clear that Christ was Lord above all.

As long as Christianity appeared to be a sect of Judaism, their strange religious views would have been protected. Jeffers writes that this was the initial way that the Romans perceived the Christians and so ignored them.⁵⁵⁹ However, by the 60s A.D., Rome began to recognize the difference.⁵⁶⁰ With it being estimated that Philippians was written between A.D. 60 and 62, it is possible that Paul needed to be somewhat clandestine in his language towards the Romans

⁵⁵⁷ John H.P Reumann, *Philippians, Faithlife* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), accessed July 7, 2023, app.logos.com, 358-359.

⁵⁵⁸ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 6-7.

⁵⁵⁹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 107.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

because Christians were no longer considered to be a protected religion under Roman rule.⁵⁶¹ At the very least, suspicion was beginning to arise.

Intentional or not, everything that Paul says here contrasts with the belief of the Roman imperial cult. This is one attestation that demonstrates that Paul was in profound disagreement with Roman ideology. This is an interesting clue along the journey to discover any value he placed upon his Roman identity, as one does not typically attribute value to that which one disagrees with. Paul was consistently respectful towards others with differing beliefs, but respect does not equal agreement.

Dunn writes that the emperor cult at this stage was still only spreading through the empire from the east, and “Caesar is Lord” and “Christ is Lord” could both be stated with few problems.⁵⁶² Yet, on the same page, Dunn writes that there is little doubt that Paul was very familiar with the various lords that were honored in the multitudes of cults that were in evidence in his day, quoting 1 Corinthians 8:5 as evidence of Paul's knowledge.⁵⁶³ This knowledge alone is enough to account for Paul's possible attempt to highlight the supremacy of Christ above the other gods and lords of his time. Thus, the apostle sets a profound separation between himself and the beliefs and practices of Rome, regardless of his status as a Roman citizen.

Paul, as a Roman Citizen

There are very few instances where Paul discusses being a Roman citizen. In fact, he often surprises those around him with the information, sharing the news under trying

⁵⁶¹ Michael Rydell et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1857.

⁵⁶² James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 247.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

circumstances. By Paul's day, the Jewish people were quite familiar with the experience of living under a pagan empire and attempting to adhere to their religious system under the shadows of such empires.⁵⁶⁴ Here, we see a person who not only holds religious views that are strikingly different than those of the culture around him but also, in a very real sense, is a citizen of that culture around him, even if it is only by title. In this portion of the study, as we continue to dig towards Paul's ultimate identity, examination will be focused on those portions of Scripture where Paul's Roman citizenship is discussed.

Roman Citizens Imprisoned—Acts 16:35-40

All throughout Saul's persecution of the church, his encounter with Christ, his recorded time with the disciples, and his subsequent thrust into wholeheartedly preaching the gospel, no mention is made of his status as a Roman citizen. Here, in Acts 16, is the first time that the information is put forth by Luke, although it is possible and probable that those around him were familiar with this designation. Although it might not have been a shock to the apostle's traveling companions, it was surely an unpleasant surprise to the Roman magistrates who received the news, which will be seen shortly. It is curious that Paul waits to reveal this part of his identity until he has need of it, and the extent of his reference to it, along with the use of imperial cult language, should give evidence to the value he placed on being a Roman citizen.

In the well-known story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16, the two find themselves thrown into prison after commanding a spirit of divination to come out of a slave girl whose owners were using the spirit within her to gain a profit for themselves (Acts 16:16-24). Mighty acts of God are recorded during Paul and Silas' impromptu overnight stay in prison, but in the morning, the

⁵⁶⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 65.

magistrates ordered that the two be released. Luke does not specify why their release was ordered, but theories abound. Gangel supposes that the magistrates only intended to keep them as prisoners overnight in the first place, assuming that being beaten and jailed would keep them from causing further problems.⁵⁶⁵ Upon realizing their mistake, the magistrates insist upon Paul and Silas making a prompt exit, as an angry mob remained a likely scenario.⁵⁶⁶

Rydelnik takes it quite a bit further, making the assertion that the magistrates wanted Paul and Silas to leave town quickly since they had violated Roman law by having arrested and punished the two without a trial.⁵⁶⁷ Yet Jeffers writes that crimes of common persons were judged case by case by a magistrate, who then utilized the advice of a council to determine if any illegalities had taken place and what the punishment would be.⁵⁶⁸ Thus, it seems that if Paul and Silas had been mere common people, the magistrates had done nothing wrong. They had only committed a crime due to the apostles' status as Roman citizens, which is not information that is known by the magistrates in verse 35. In verse 36, word arrives to Paul and Silas via jailer that they are to be freed and may "come out now and go in peace."

However, Paul is not about to simply leave town after what has occurred, and he reveals their citizenry and demands that the magistrates come and remove the two from prison themselves after the atrocities committed against them (v 37). Either Paul or Silas could have revealed their status as citizens and prevented their flogging in Acts 16:22-23. Yet, it seems they accepted the "attack" (v 22) and waited to be forthcoming with that pertinent information until

⁵⁶⁵ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 274.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1710.

⁵⁶⁸ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 154-155.

they had already been freed and given permission to leave. It is possible that the magistrates did not give the two an opportunity to declare their Roman citizenship or offer a defense for themselves.⁵⁶⁹ This may have been due to their appearance, fear regarding the situation, or simply being overwhelmed by the tumult.⁵⁷⁰ Cicero writes of an instance where a person is beaten even while shouting that he is a Roman citizen, so it may be possible that in the moment, the two were simply not heard.⁵⁷¹

Regardless of the reason that it has gone unnoticed and unknown so far, Paul will not allow it to stand. He appears indignant that the magistrates would attempt to remove them from the city "secretly," which may well indicate that something had occurred to make Paul feel as if this was information that they should have been in possession of (v 37). The two also could have chosen to leave the city without making their citizenry known, but Paul insists that the magistrates be told. Although it might initially seem that the apostle had a desire to exact revenge for his and Silas' pain and trouble, most commentators believe that Paul was actually out to protect the church by forcing the magistrates to acknowledge their grave mistake. Abuse of the rights of a Roman citizen was no small offense, and the magistrates were at risk of losing their office if Paul forced the matter.⁵⁷²

Paul insists on an official, public escort to demonstrate that the believers have done nothing wrong. More than anyone, Paul realized the damage that could be done and the people that could turn against them if the people began to think of the Christians as troublemakers.

⁵⁶⁹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 162.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero and Greenwood Leonard Hugh Graham, *The Verrine Orations: In Two Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 5.26.

⁵⁷² John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 357.

Therefore, his insistence that the officials admit their error protects the faith from being seen as an unfavorable religious movement.⁵⁷³ Polhill writes:

Paul may have seemed a bit huffy in his demand for a formal apology from the magistrates, but that is not the point. It was essential that the young Christian community have a good reputation among the authorities if its witness was to flourish. Christians broke none of the Roman laws. Luke was at pains to show this. It would continue to be a major emphasis in Acts. In this instance, Paul and Silas were totally innocent of any wrongdoing. It was important that the magistrates acknowledge their innocence and set the record straight. This was why Paul made such a major point of it. (Polhill 1992, 358)

After their apology and escort, Paul and Silas visit Lydia and then leave (Acts 16:40).

While Paul's Roman citizenry may have been *of* value in this situation, there is no indication that he valued the status itself. What he did value was overall good citizenship that would cast a favorable light on Christians and allow the gospel to be spread. As part of this, Paul outlines how Christians should interact with the secular world in Romans 13:1-7.⁵⁷⁴ It is important that Paul's interest is not misplaced here. When Paul deferred to his and Silas' Roman citizenship in this instance, it was for the benefit of the church as a whole.

Born a Roman Citizen—Acts 22:22-29

In Jerusalem, Paul is arrested at the temple (Acts 22:27-36). In order to determine why the people are so angry at the apostle and are attempting to put him to death (Acts 21:31; 22:22), the Roman tribune decides that the best way to obtain information from Paul about the reason for the mob's anger and the threat on his life is to flog him (Acts 22:24). This is no ordinary flogging that Paul is about to be put through. Lysias defers to the standard Roman method for getting the truth out of a slave or commoner, which is examination by torture from a *flagellum*, which Polhill records as having a rough piece of bone or metal inserted into the leather, which could

⁵⁷³ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1710.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 1766.

easily kill the victim.⁵⁷⁵ Such cruelty would have been illegal for a Roman citizen who had not undergone trial.

Paul, knowing that the flogging he was close to having to endure was far worse than the rods he and Silas had dealt with in Philippi (Acts 16:22), chooses this moment to invoke his Roman citizenship rights.⁵⁷⁶ Far more was at stake here; he could lose his very life, and his mission to the Gentiles was not yet fulfilled. Again, curiously, Paul waits for a seemingly odd moment to use this tool. In verse 25, Luke writes that Paul decides it's time to speak up "when they had stretched him out for the whips," with the ESV noting "or when they had tied him up with leather strips." Paul is bound and ready to be flogged when he decides to pose a question that he already knows the answer to in verse 25; "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"

Not only was the beating illegal, but the previous one had been, as well, along with Paul being bound in chains.⁵⁷⁷ Paul's rhetorical question puts an immediate halt to the proceedings, and the centurion proceeds to the tribune to raise the alert regarding this new information. This results in Lysias coming to receive the needed verification from Paul. During the verification questioning, Lysias mentions that he "bought this citizenship for a large sum," with Paul replying, "But I am a citizen by birth" (v 28). Although not directly stated, it is implied that Paul's citizenship by birthright may have carried a higher value than Lysias' paid-for status. Polhill writes that it may be that Lysias was being a bit sarcastic when he says he paid "a large

⁵⁷⁵ John B. Polhill, [Acts](#), vol. 26, 464.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 375.

sum" for the right to be a citizen, with the sarcasm indicating that if Paul could afford it, anyone could.⁵⁷⁸

Interestingly, Polhill goes on to note that Paul was a Roman citizen of considerable status, which would play a large role in the narrative of Acts hereafter.⁵⁷⁹ This high status and the extent to which Paul used it and valued it is of particular concern to this study. It is true that Paul carried civic superiority as a free-born citizen of Rome, information that caused the soldiers to recoil as they understood the laws well.⁵⁸⁰ In this situation, Paul experiences gain from his status, but utilizing something that one already holds in ownership does not necessarily mean that one values it beyond the help that it gives. So far, in the two instances that Paul has claimed his Roman citizenship, it has been a surprise to those around him. This is an initial clue that he did not go around making regular claims to this status, such as he did frequently with being Jewish or proclaiming Christ. At this point in the investigation, his interest in his Roman citizenship status seems low.

Appeal to Caesar—Acts 25:6-12

For a third time in Acts, Paul evokes his rights as a Roman citizen in a situation. In this instance, however, he fails to startle anyone around him with the news. At this point, those he is interacting with are aware of his status. The apostle has addressed the crowd in Jerusalem in Acts 22:1-21, the Jewish council (23:1-6), and the Roman governor (Acts 24:1-21).⁵⁸¹ In this portion

⁵⁷⁸ John B. Polhill, [Acts](#), vol. 26, 465.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 466.

⁵⁸⁰ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Acts*, 245.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 367.

of Acts, Paul addresses Festus, and it is in this address that Paul makes use of his Roman rights. Festus, as the new governor, travels to Jerusalem, where he endures complaints about Paul from the religious leaders.⁵⁸²

Although the apostle's primary concern was always religious matters, he was well aware of the way in which religious and state matters intertwined in the first century. To his credit, he manages those two relationships well, typically manipulating one to the benefit of the other. When Paul appears in front of Festus in verse 6, he is surrounded by his Jewish accusers, who bring "many serious charges against him that they could not prove" (v 7). Paul's rebuttal (v 8) is that he has done nothing against any of these people, including the Jews, the temple, or Caesar himself. Polhill writes that it was the charge "against Caesar" that kept Paul in Roman hands, which is exactly where he wanted to be.⁵⁸³ The temple charge would place him under Jewish jurisdiction, and this would cause him considerably more difficulties than being under the jurisdiction of Rome as a Roman citizen.⁵⁸⁴

Jeffers writes that Paul was frequently able to escape the clutches of the Romans because his status as a Roman citizen was far more important to them than his religious activities.⁵⁸⁵ However, in this instance, he needed to escape the ill intent of his own Jewish brethren, and he did this by making use of his citizenry. In verse 9, Festus asks Paul if he would prefer to be taken to Jerusalem and tried on the charges, doing so in order to "do the Jews a favor." Paul was concerned by this, as one of the crimes he was accused of was a capital offense within the

⁵⁸² Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1733.

⁵⁸³ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, 490.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 107.

jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin, and it does not appear that he will receive justice if he is removed to Jerusalem.⁵⁸⁶

In the following verses, Paul realizes what he must do to receive justice. He makes it clear to Festus that he has done nothing wrong, and that Festus is aware of that truth (v 10). Following his assertion that he is willing to face death if he has done something warranting it, he reiterates his innocence by essentially telling the Jews that they cannot have him and evokes his Roman right to appeal to Caesar (v 11). Paul does not use this option lightly. In fact, in Acts 28:19, Paul states that he "was compelled to appeal to Caesar," suggesting that he saw it as a last resort in this particular situation.⁵⁸⁷

It is not typical practice for a person to only utilize something of high value to them as a final option. However, before making assumptions in that regard, it is important to have an understanding of the process of appealing to Caesar in Paul's time. Would it have been appropriate for Paul to appeal to Caesar as more than a final option? Nothing in Roman law prevented Festus from releasing Paul after he had voiced his appeal.⁵⁸⁸ However, the governor himself has much at stake, similar to the apostle before him. Gangel writes that Festus is eager to remove himself from this dispute while also doing the Jews a favor.⁵⁸⁹ Yet, sentencing Paul at this point would be going outside the confines of Roman law.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁶ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 167.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁸⁹ Kenneth O. Gangel and Anders Max (general ed.), *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 417.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

Paul had a full understanding of the politics surrounding his situation and the motivations that would have driven Festus' decision. He also knew what he would be facing depending on what decision Festus makes. Ultimately, rather than leave the power in the governor's hands, Paul keeps the decision-making in his own hands by appealing to Caesar. Some scholars conclude that this was an unusual or less common employment of this right of citizenry, and they demonstrate this by noting that Festus conferred with his advisers in verse 12, which may be a clue that he was not compelled to grant the appeal.⁵⁹¹ If the appeal to Caesar had been a request that was automatically granted, it seems that there would have been little reason for Festus to seek advice. However, if the possibility existed that the governor could have released Paul even after his appeal to Caesar, then he may have been deciding between releasing the apostle and granting his request for an appeal.

Marshall writes that Festus was bound to honor an appeal, and conferring with his colleagues may have been to question if the procedure applied in this case.⁵⁹² Importantly, Keener states that appealing before a case had been heard, as Paul does in this portion of Acts, is not common because it wasn't typically advantageous to the accused.⁵⁹³ As usual, however, Paul is never found to be typical. His personality and background are not typical, nor are the circumstances he repeatedly finds himself in, perhaps with one stemming from the other. In this situation, it is certainly highly advantageous for Paul to appeal to Caesar. Festus grants the appeal with the words, "To Caesar, you have appealed; to Caesar, you shall go" in verse 12. Ultimately, it is beneficial all around; Festus does not have to deal with the political ramifications

⁵⁹¹ Allison A. Trites, William J. Larkin, and Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts*, 617.

⁵⁹² I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, 405.

⁵⁹³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), accessed July 2, 2023, app.logos.com, "Hearing Before Festus."

of dismissing an appeal to Caesar, he remains in good grace with the Jewish leaders, and Paul escapes the clutches of the Jewish leaders while simultaneously fulfilling his intent to go to Rome.⁵⁹⁴

Ultimately, Paul's use of his Roman rights in this situation does not appear to be due to any affinity for his Roman citizenry itself. Indeed, he waits until he is in somewhat desperate circumstances before utilizing these particular tools at his disposal. Rather than being a portion of his identity that he feels particularly connected to or that he holds in esteem above others, his Roman citizenry is a simple tool in his toolbox for accomplishing that which God has overall called him to do. He only picks up the tool in question when absolutely necessary, sometimes waiting until a situation has advanced considerably before doing so. However, before drawing final conclusions on Paul's Roman identity, another facet of his background in the Greco-Roman culture must be discussed, which is his possible use of imperial cult language in his writings.

Paul and Imperial Cult Language

It is common for Paul to use known cultural norms to redirect the churches and provide a solid example and better understanding of the Christ-like principles that he attempts to impart upon them. Jeffers' explanation of 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 is a prime example of this. He writes that Paul's references to running for the believers in Corinth can possibly come from his knowledge that the Greek Isthmian games were held only a few miles from those who would be reading his letter.⁵⁹⁵ The ability to use references to the world around a person to prove a point is

⁵⁹⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, "Hearing Before Festus."

⁵⁹⁵ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 32.

an ages-old, powerful tool of communicators, with Paul being no different. What is seen here is Paul's use of tangible and practical application for his readers so that they might have a full understanding of what the instruction looks like.

Yet, the conversation changes subtly but seriously when referring to the apostle's use of imperial cult language. There is concern that he used such language with very specific intent, which is valid, considering that Paul is a highly intentional personality, led deeply by the Holy Spirit. Christians were known to refuse to take an oath by the emperor's "guardian spirit," which led to the correct suspicion that the Christ-followers did not support the emperor's earthly supremacy.⁵⁹⁶ Throughout Paul's writings, he makes it clear that only God is to be honored as supreme. Therefore, it would be of little surprise if Paul is found to be using imperial cult language to demonstrate that Jesus reigns above any earthly leader, despite any status said leader might attempt to claim.

Either one of the following is in evidence through Paul's language: he was using imperial cult language unintentionally through the natural adoption of it through culture, he was using it to spawn angst against Rome, and its use demonstrated that he was highly connected to his Roman identity, or he was intentionally attempting to redirect the application of the language towards the only entity who he saw as fit to be described in such ways. It must be remembered that as the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16; Acts 22:21; Eph. 3:7-9), the Gentile Christians often attempted to bring their understanding of the world through Greco-Roman eyes into the church body and Paul fought against these incorrect understandings. To speak of Jewish things to

⁵⁹⁶ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 107.

Gentile believers would have left them scratching their heads—leadership needed to approach them from their level of cultural understanding.

Paul's use of imperial cult language and his reason for its use is important to this study due to his reasoning for using it. Was its use out of some recognition of his Roman identity? Referring back to the former section, there seems to be little indication that he highly valued his Roman identity and the benefits it provided him. However, a failure to examine a subject so highly discussed among scholars would do a disservice to the job of thoroughly dissecting the person of Paul. This section seeks to coax forth from Paul a reason for his use of the language in question to aid in the determination of the value he placed upon being a Roman citizen. As will be seen, Paul's use of this language can be extensive and is scattered throughout his letters.

Lord—*Kyrios*

Paul's use of the word *kyrios* is prolific throughout his letters. Strong translates the word to "lord" or "master" with the intent of it being a title of address to a person of higher status or the proper name of God in both the Old and New Testaments.⁵⁹⁷ In a speech he gave, Wright states that the proper context for the term is its Jewish roots and also its pagan challenge.⁵⁹⁸ Paul's views on idolatry and paganism have been discussed in other portions of this writing. For Paul, any of the pagan culture's attempts to displace the proper position of God was something he stood firmly against. He would not allow pagan idolatry to enter the Gentile churches under any circumstances.

⁵⁹⁷ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1566.

⁵⁹⁸ Jani, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," *NTWrightPage*, accessed July 15, 2023, <https://ntwrightpage.com/1998/01/01/pauls-gospel-and-caesars-empire/>, 7.

Caesar himself was considered the living example of the uniting of the divine and human spheres, hence the Roman imperial cult and its agreement with this belief.⁵⁹⁹ In the Greco-Roman world, the term "lord" was used in a wide range of contexts, including that of the Roman emperor and Greek deities, and in the Greek-speaking synagogues, it exclusively referred to Yahweh.⁶⁰⁰ This would have been the context in which Paul knew it best and in which he saw its most appropriate use. Between his distaste for paganism, his understanding of who Christ was, and his Jewish background, it is unlikely that Paul's use of this title for Jesus was random. However, the aforementioned varied and extensive use of the title makes this particular word a bit more unclear. It seems typical for the apostle to use it as a title for Jesus rather than being abundantly clear that he was attempting to subvert the Roman attitude towards Caesar as Lord. As Wright so astutely notes, "By hailing Jesus as king, as son of God, as the world's true Lord. Paul was saying that Jesus was Lord, and that Caesar was not."⁶⁰¹

For Wright, it is not simply one aspect of Paul's writings or his use of one word, such as "Lord," that makes the apostle's pushback against Caesar evident. Instead, it is the whole of Paul's theology and the context in which he preached it that makes the evidence solid. If a preacher or theologian stands in a church in the West in modern times and preaches the message that "Jesus is Lord above everyone and everything," nothing is thought of it. However, when a theologian in Paul's time writes to the church in Rome, where Caesar is called Lord and refers to "Jesus Christ our Lord" in the opening introduction, that might be more prone to raise eyebrows and cause the recipients some pause (Rom 1:4). The same response could be evident when the

⁵⁹⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 60.

⁶⁰⁰ David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, 121.

⁶⁰¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 58.

apostle writes to the church in a Roman colony that was patterned after Rome itself, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above *every* name, so that at the time of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11, emphasis added).⁶⁰²

Whether intentional or not, Paul's use of the term "Lord" for Christ is the opposite of the culture of the time. This is another indicator that he did not hold his Roman identity in high esteem. Yet, there are other terms of the Roman imperial cult that can be examined along the way to come to a conclusion about Paul's Roman identity.

Gospel

Euangelion—good news.⁶⁰³ It is the news that Paul claims to preach, news that he claims to be “set apart” for in Romans 1:1. Yet Paul was not the only one claiming to hail and regale with good news in the first century. Rome also had *euangelion*, announcements of themes that constituted "good news" and focused upon the person of the emperor who accomplished and guaranteed them.⁶⁰⁴ Paul goes on to say that the “gospel of God” that he speaks of is “concerning his Son” (Rom 1:1-3). This is not an announcement of good news on behalf of Caesar; it is good news that is on behalf of God.

Although the emperor proclaims his own good news, Paul makes it clear that from God comes the best news—that which comes before any news from an earthly entity. However, Dunn

⁶⁰² Michael Rydell et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1857.

⁶⁰³ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1554.

⁶⁰⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 63.

writes that although the term was used within the context of the imperial cult, it is also used consistently within the book of Isaiah, and this Isaianic theme was influential in Jewish theological reflection around the time of Jesus.⁶⁰⁵ In the book of Isaiah, a similar term, *euangelizomai*, is used to proclaim Zion's release from exile.⁶⁰⁶ Paul was very familiar with the book of Isaiah, which can be known not only through his Jewish background but also from the fact that he quotes it in Romans chapters 9-11. Yet, the origination point from which he adds the word to his vocabulary has the potential to be different from the intent with which he uses the word.

The church in Rome was made up of a variety of believers, both Jewish and Gentile, and both would have interpreted Paul's use of the term *euangelion* in different ways. Perhaps this is how the apostle intended it to be, knowing that the term would appeal to Jewish believers by connecting them to Scripture and appealing to Gentile believers by making it clear that Christ was above their pagan backgrounds. Dunn writes that it is most probable that Paul coined the usage as a new technical term for his own proclamation, with an adaptation of old vocabulary to a new use for expressing the Christian message as something the apostle is known for.⁶⁰⁷

Runge writes that it is not possible for us to know exactly what the use of the word gospel brought to mind for the Roman believers, but it is interesting that Paul uses it in conjunction with Old Testament quotations.⁶⁰⁸ It is completely possible that he had more than one intent in mind when using the term, and it also seems to be highly likely. Regardless of his intent to either

⁶⁰⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 167.

⁶⁰⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, Faithlife*, 78.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Steven E. Runge, *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide*, 11.

improve the understanding of Jewish believers through making connections to Scripture or to provide enlightenment to the Gentile believers by putting Caesar in his proper place, Paul's use of the word certainly does not provide any indication that he valued his Roman background. In fact, if we return to Dunn's thoughts on the subject matter, Paul may have simply repurposed the word in order to give himself a way to explain the message he was proclaiming. No affinity for Rome can be ascribed to the apostle here.

Romans 13:1-7

Within Paul's exhortations on submitting to the authorities, it could be argued that his Roman identity and intent to uphold Roman laws shines through his theology. This seems to be even more confusing when looking at the historical context of Paul's Roman writings; Nero was emperor. At the time Paul wrote Romans, Nero had not yet become the evil emperor that he would eventually be remembered as, yet there were already concerning signs of anti-Christian activity.⁶⁰⁹ Yet the opening verse of the chapter challenges any assumptions about who Paul actually is submitting authority to when read carefully.

In verse one, Paul writes that "every person" should be "subject to the governing authorities" (Rom 13:1). At the outset, this is alarming, especially coming from Paul. He, as a messenger of Christ, knew the level of evil and paganism that was evident in the world, standing in direct contrast to the way God desired things to be. However, the remainder of verse 1 gives further information in Paul's line of thinking. "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom 13:1). This thought continues into verse 2 as

⁶⁰⁹ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 341.

Paul writes that “whoever resists” authority is in direct resistance to “what God has appointed” and those who do the resisting “will incur judgment” (Rom. 13:1-2).

The apostle mentions nothing of the behavior of the ruling authorities. His call for the church to obey the authorities is rooted in the authority of God, who has used his overarching, sovereign authority to place them there.⁶¹⁰ It is not prudent for the believers to resist the authorities that God has set in place, thus incurring the possibility of making the message of the gospel unpalatable to unbelievers. Reminiscent of this is Paul’s directive in the preceding chapter: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18). Regardless of the status of a person as a believer or non-believer, peace is the goal and a reason that society will look favorably upon the church body.

Keener writes that synagogues in Rome had to remain apolitical or face dissolution and Paul is clearly concerned about how others in Rome will view the church body.⁶¹¹ Paul was never shy about holding the Roman authorities to their own standards, as shown when discussing his and Silas’ imprisonment and standing up for himself before various Roman officials (Acts 16:16-40; Acts 22:22-29; Acts 24:10-21; Acts 26). Although he is decidedly against much of the pagan culture, Paul is advocating that the body of believers should not cause direct societal problems when unnecessary. Osborne agrees with Towner when he states that Paul’s purpose is likely for the people to be a transforming influence in society, with his overarching emphasis being transformation rather than disengagement or radical separation.⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ Steven E. Runge, *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide*, 227.

⁶¹¹ Craig S Keener, “Romans 13,” *Romans* (2011): 152–159, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgdvz5.19>, 153.

⁶¹² Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 342.

Paul, in his exhortations to submit to the authorities in Rome, does not do so out of any affinity for Roman culture or identity. His main goal is to avoid stirring up trouble that would impede the message and growth of the church. The church is not in existence to spread political upheaval or discord. Paul gives a clear command to submit to authority based upon the origin of that authority, which is God.⁶¹³ The idea of God giving authority to evil leaders as well as good is one that is expressed in both the Old and New Testaments, with the message often being that God will remove unworthy rulers in his own time and also judge them at a time of his choosing.⁶¹⁴

In verses 3 and 4, Paul writes that "rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" and that they are "God's servant for your good." Ultimately, the purpose of civil authority is to protect the people, which is a good thing. The believers are to have a good relationship with the authorities and submit to them, knowing that those in leadership in question are also subject to the authority of God. Paul does not give the Roman church an excuse to ignore the laws simply because their worldview is so radically different from the pagan government's. Instead, in verse 5, he writes that it is important to obey "not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." The Spirit within the believer and their conscience to do what is right unto God will not plague them if they are "in subjection," as Paul instructs them.

While this section of Scripture is difficult for some to understand when living under governmental authorities that don't submit to God, the point here is that Paul is not hailing the Roman authorities as supreme or placing his values upon them in any way. Paul demands

⁶¹³ Steven E. Runge, *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide*, 229.

⁶¹⁴ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 343.

submission, but not blind obedience, and there is no authority that should ever be listened to when it is something that comes against honoring God above all.⁶¹⁵ Nowhere is it seen in these verses that the apostle believes that the Roman authorities are wonderful or perfect; he had enough encounters with them to know that such an idea was not truthful. In addition, these verses, although penned to the church at Rome, do not mention the Roman authorities in particular, indicating that Paul meant this as a universal idea. It didn't matter what government one was under; they had all been placed by God and should be honored as such. Paul was not lifting up Rome or his Roman identity; he was simply teaching the believers how to live in peace with those in charge and why they should do so. Wright summarizes it best when he states:

Within the broad-brush ethical exhortations of chs. 12-13, Paul argues that, however much the emperor may proclaim himself to be sovereign, without rival in the divine as well as the human sphere, he remains answerable to the true God. Reminding the emperor's subjects that the emperor is responsible to the true God is a diminution of, not a subjection to, imperial arrogance. But if this is so, then the Christian owes to the emperor not indeed the worship Caesar claimed but appropriate civil obedience. The subversive gospel is not designed to produce civil anarchy. (Jani 1998, 15)

Paul upholds his Jewish Christian identity here rather than putting his Roman identity on a pedestal.

Conclusion

Paul's interactions with the Roman government, his use of language that was also blatantly used by the imperial cult, and his references to obeying the government of the time have been examined here in this chapter. Within those examinations, no hint of Paul placing value on his Roman citizenry has been located. If it exists, it remains hidden. Wright states that at every point in Paul's relations with Rome or in reference to the Roman authorities, the same

⁶¹⁵ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, 348.

response is found that is to be expected of the apostle: Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not.⁶¹⁶ Even within his instructions for the believers to adhere to the law in Romans 13, Paul inserts the idea that those leaders are only granted their authority from God.

Paul was keenly aware of the many lords that circulated throughout the cults of his day (1 Cor 8:5).⁶¹⁷ Yet, he emphasizes to the church at Corinth that there is "one God, the Father," and recognizes that not all people have this knowledge (1 Cor 8:6-7). Although Paul's attribution of lordship to Jesus was not derived from or modeled upon the cultic worship of the Hellenistic environment, having been carried over from customary ways of speaking of God in Jewish circles, understanding from the communities with pagan backgrounds would have been different.⁶¹⁸ In Paul's time, it would have been necessary to create a correct understanding of who was lord in those Gentiles coming into the body of Christ who believed that there were many gods.

The idea that the imperial cult was so widespread in Paul's time that it requires the apostle's writings and overall mission to be examined against this context is found to be lacking.⁶¹⁹ Instead, what can be seen is a church leader who is passionate about providing instruction against the worldly practices that many in the church body could claim as a background. In this, Paul is not acting any differently than when he himself speaks against his

⁶¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 69.

⁶¹⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 247.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 247-249.

⁶¹⁹ Colin Miller, "The Imperial Cult in the Pauline Cities of Asia Minor and Greece," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (April 2010): 314-322, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/89154884/fulltextPDF/4FE8E2AC31A2426APQ/1?accountid=12085&source=Scholarly%20Journals>, 314-315.

own background because portions of that former behavior no longer coincide with the things of Christ (Phil 3:4-7).

At times, it can be seen that Paul does, indeed, use the Roman rights that are afforded to him through his citizenship. However, if one combines Romans 13:1-7 with the apostle's use of those rights, it can be argued that Paul saw those rights that came down through Roman authority as something given to him by God. They were tools given to him through the authorities that were put into place by the Lord for him to utilize for the kingdom, which he did at the appropriate times. Also, in accordance with his words in Romans 13, he did not abuse those rights and tools but used them in the proper way. In addition, he expected those in leadership in the Roman government to stand by their own laws. Dunn writes that Paul is principally concerned with relationships between the Roman congregations, the outside communities, and the civic authorities.⁶²⁰ This is a theme that is consistent throughout Paul's ministry—his concern for how the church relates to those around them, how they are viewed, and the body's overall public identity.

Paul would have needed no reminding of the political realities of his time, as they were an issue that the new, small groups of believers would have to confront.⁶²¹ Emperors typically moved against a cult when they believed it threatened law and order, which explains the apostle's insistence on adhering to Rome's laws when it didn't cause the church body to go against its faith.⁶²² A primary consideration had to be successful survival, which meant that sometimes Paul

⁶²⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 674.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 107.

encouraged the early Christians to get along with the pagan culture without immersing themselves in it.⁶²³

His mention of his Roman citizenry is only made when absolutely necessary. In comparison, he speaks of his encounter with the risen Christ as frequently as possible, and nearly any time he is given a public platform to make it known. In this way, it can be seen what his values were truly attuned to. There is a high degree of the rhetoric of imperial Rome in Paul's writings, and none of it points towards Paul having a high opinion of the empire.⁶²⁴ Instead, his use of the language of his citizenry all points back to a high view of Christ, that of Christ being supreme. Paul challenged emperor worship and the very idolatry that was so pervasive in his time. However, he did not do this in a manner that would cause a political uprising, instead encouraging the church body, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2) that they might better understand the ways of God.

It would be incorrect to state that Paul stood against everything that Rome stood for, simply due to his instruction on being an obedient citizen, in order to create good relationships within the community so that it would look as favorably as possible upon the church. However, it would be prudent to state that Paul stood against anything or anyone that claimed to be above Christ, with grand titles and language at the very least being subtly repurposed for the cause of Christ, even if not used in outright defiance. It cannot be denied that Paul was, indeed, a citizen of Rome. Wright states, "Paul is at home, in fact, in the street-level world of Hellenistic discourse, while being aware of the need, as he puts it, to 'take every thought captive to obey the

⁶²³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 674.

⁶²⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 80.

Messiah.’ He makes fruitful use of the language and imagery of the pagan moralists while constantly infusing it with fresh content.”⁶²⁵

To the surprise of some, Paul was a Roman citizen, and he made good occasional use of that privilege.⁶²⁶ However, there is no indication that he found value in such identification, instead writing in Philippians that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20). As the leading city within a Roman Colony, Paul stresses that their allegiance is not to a particular country or government, nor is there room for nationalistic arrogance.⁶²⁷ Therefore, it is interesting that Paul tells them that their citizenship is in heaven. For Paul, his citizenship rested in heaven, and the citizenship that he carried on earth was only as good as the tools it provided him with for spreading the gospel.

⁶²⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 3.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶²⁷ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1864.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

Introduction

In this chapter, the discussion will center around Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 9:22, where he writes to the church that "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." In chapter 4, it was made clear that Paul deeply valued his Jewish heritage and wouldn't have viewed himself as departing from Judaism, instead simply adopting his understanding of Christ as the fulfillment of the Jewish Messianic hope into his Jewish heritage. In chapter 6, it was determined that the split between Judaism and Christianity began after Paul's Damascus Road encounter, even if it was not complete for some time, demonstrating that he would not have considered himself a "Christian." His letters to the Gentile churches, full of familial language, indicated that far from simply trying to manipulate them, the apostle identified with them through their mutual belief in Christ. The apostle identified as both Jewish and Christian, greatly valuing both his Jewish heritage and his inclusion in those who had put their hope in Christ.

The discussion in this chapter will answer questions posed at the outset of the study: If the apostle stood in front of us today, would he tell us that his identity was based upon the culture of his time, his childhood background, his time spent as a faithful Jew, or just Jesus? Having studied both Paul's Jewish and Christian identities for the last two chapters, did he rely more heavily on one or the other? A further examination of Paul's actions in Scripture will direct that conversation. When a person introduces themselves, they often will give clues as to what portion of their personhood they value the most. A stay-at-home mom, for instance, might introduce herself with her name, followed by the number or names of her children. A CEO might follow

his or her name with their title or the company they work for. Due to that, this chapter will also explore the manner in which Paul introduces himself in his letters. There may be some indication of the apostle's thoughts on his self-identity simply through the personal description of himself in his letters' greetings.

Placing one's identity in such things is far from solid, and when it comes time for the mother to face the inevitable empty nest or the CEO faces a layoff, it can leave one scrambling for an identity, unaware of who they are due to the fact that they have placed their identity in that which changes, rather than that which is unchanging. Rosner writes that having a personal identity is a mark of our humanness.⁶²⁸ However, in Paul's case, his identity thus far has proven to circulate around that of his faith and the Lord, with the former chapter demonstrating that his Roman citizenry was only found to be valuable on the basis of its usefulness to his cause in spreading the gospel message to the Gentiles.

What portion of his identity enabled Paul to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22)? Was it his Jewish religion or ethnicity? Perhaps it was his Christianity and the sense of unity that he emphasized for those who believed in Christ? Standard identity markers such as culture, race, ethnicity, religion, personality, character, and others all combine to create a person that God designed for a purpose. The Bible even affirms that such identity markers are important but denies that they are a sufficient foundation on which to rest your identity.⁶²⁹ They might well be referred to as one's "minor identity" rather than their "core identity." On the road to Damascus, Paul discovers the only thing worth resting your identity on, which is Christ himself. It is only

⁶²⁸ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 33.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Christ who can transform the core of a person, only Christ who can save a person and give them an eternal inheritance (1 Pet 1:4), and it is only in Christ that the human purpose is revealed.

Paul encountered extreme transformation in Christ and spoke extensively of the inheritance through Jesus. Through Christ, Paul's purpose and ultimate identity are revealed. Paul often sets aside aspects of his minor identity in favor of his core identity, which can be seen to be his status as an apostle of Christ Jesus. Long before there were in-depth books and studies on the subject of identity, Paul understood that his main identity was that of an apostle of Christ, in relationship with Christ, and the whole of his core emanated from that. The man's former zeal executed as a Pharisee is only eclipsed by the zeal that he had for being an apostle of Christ. The knowledge, awareness, and correct understanding of his identity are what caused Paul to have one of the greatest methods of evangelism recorded in the Bible. He placed emphasis on what aspects of his minor identity were needed in the moment to reveal the Lord and allow others to enter into salvation, displaying that being an apostle and servant in relationship with Christ was the identity of utmost importance to him.

New Creation

Before launching into a discussion and exploration of 2nd Corinthians 5:17, it is pertinent to take a moment to address the controversy that surrounds the Greek phrase *kainē ktisis*, which is translated to “New Creation” in English. Strong writes that the word *ktisis* can mean creation, created thing, or creature.⁶³⁰ Brown writes that the phrase is “striking.”⁶³¹ Kruse makes the bold

⁶³⁰ James Strong et al., *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1566.

⁶³¹ Derek R Brown, Wendy Widder, and E Tod Twist, *Lexham Research Commentary: 2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), accessed October 30, 2023, app.logos.com.

claim that Paul is stating the “great significance of Christ’s work” when he pens this verse.⁶³²

However, the dialogue circulating around the phrase has nothing to do with the translated term and everything to do with who or what the translated term is referring to.

Dunn writes that the imagery of “new creation” is the most powerful imagery of all in relation to metaphors of salvation.⁶³³ Yet, what does this powerful imagery refer to, exactly? Scholars argue the objectivity or subjectivity of the new creation. A subjective understanding of the “new creation” would point towards Paul describing the Christian as a new creation in Christ.⁶³⁴ An objective understanding of the phrase indicates a reference to a new creation through Christ of which believers take part in.⁶³⁵ There is a belief among some that Paul’s thoughts point towards an eschatological “new creation,” that 2 Corinthians 5:17 is both subject and objective, or that the phrase is simply being overthought and refers merely to one accepting salvation.

In order to refrain from detracting from the present examination of Paul’s self-identity, a full explanation of the issues and various perspectives cannot be inserted here. Instead, the author will simply state the scholarly viewpoint that she has adopted in order to bring a fullness of understanding to the current research as it progresses. For Dunn, the phrase “new creation” is closely tied to Paul’s theology surrounding the phrase “in Christ,” which appear together in 2nd Corinthians 5:17. If the readers in the church of Corinth are “in Christ,” they are “a new creation”

⁶³² Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary, Logos* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, USA, 2017), accessed October 28, 2022, app.logos.com, 168.

⁶³³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2006), 331.

⁶³⁴ Derek R Brown, Wendy Widder, and E Tod Twist, *Lexham Research Commentary: 2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), accessed October 30, 2023, app.logos.com.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

(2 Cor 5:17). Dunn notes Paul's subjective use of "in Christ," writing that the apostle utilizes this phrase where he is encouraging his readers towards a particular attitude or action.⁶³⁶

Dunn also writes that Paul was very aware that believers are "in Adam" and continue "in Adam" as they have not yet passed.⁶³⁷ Yet, they also share "in Christ" and have begun the experience of what it means to live life with Christ, even if they have not yet shared in the full experience of Christ's resurrection through the resurrection of the believer's own bodies.⁶³⁸ Thus, while the "new creation" has begun, it yearns for completion, indicating an objective element to the phrase, as well. In relation to "new creation," Dunn also writes of a cosmic salvation process in which not only is the individual saved through the work of Christ on the cross, but the entirety of the out-of-joint creation, brought on by human sin, is bound up.⁶³⁹ New creation, indeed.

Wright backs this observance when he writes:

the crucifixion of the Messiah means that everything has been turned inside out, not simply his own self, not simply Israel, but the entire cosmos. 'The world is crucified to me, and I to the world.' He thereby locates himself on the larger map of the purposes of God, which always stretched out *through* Israel to the restoration of the whole creation: 'what matters is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision but new creation.' From here, there is a straight line both to 2 Corinthians 5 and, more especially, to Romans 8: Paul is not just speaking of the individual Christian as a new creation, though of course that is true as well, but of the entire renewal of the cosmos in which the Christian is invited to be a participant, in the sense of both beneficiary and of agent. (Wright 2009, 114)

In Paul's theology, the entirety of creation is plodding towards the ultimate restoration through the work of Christ, believers included. The biblical story, from Genesis to the end of time, can be described as a story of new creation.⁶⁴⁰ So, is Paul's theology on "new creation" in 2

⁶³⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 398.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 464.

⁶³⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 464.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 411-412.

⁶⁴⁰ Moyer V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought*, Kindle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51.

Corinthians 5:17 cosmological or anthropological? The apostle's nature is for his theological understandings to spiral around and build upon themselves. In the context of speaking to the church at Corinth and the circumstances he was addressing, this author believes that Paul's primary intent is subjective and anthropological. However, simply due to how the apostle gravitates towards relating theological subject matters around one another, it is this author's opinion that there are underlying objective and cosmological connotations. Since the overall intent of the verse is to draw attention to the new creation of the believer, with only slight cosmological underpinnings, it is the anthropological nature of the verse that will drive the continuing research.

Called Out of an Old Identity

In 2nd Corinthians 5:17, Paul pens a sentence utilized in Christian circles and Bible studies throughout the West to explain the change that occurs in a person's life when they accept salvation. In the ESV, it reads, "Therefore, if any is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). This metaphor is skillfully inserted by a master evangelist to demonstrate the inner change that occurs when one discovers the Messiah. Lim writes that Paul's metaphors were powerful tools that the apostle used to build up, instruct, and even encourage the gentile communities to which he wrote.⁶⁴¹ These metaphors often link together information already known by his readers and new biblical theology, giving readers a deeper understanding of his teachings.

⁶⁴¹ Kar Yong Lim, *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul's Letters to the Corinthians*, Kindle (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 18.

Lim writes that most interpreters approach Paul's use of metaphor as an outpouring of his theological framework rather than studying his use of metaphor on its own.⁶⁴² Yet, the apostle's use of metaphor is an attempt to build up a new community and aid that community in creating social identity formation in Christ.⁶⁴³ Although it is unlikely that Paul possessed a concept of "identity" in the form that it is currently being discussed, it seems that he still had a goal for the way that he wanted the Christians to understand themselves and how he wanted society to understand Christians. In other chapters it has been seen that Paul was concerned about the image that Christianity put forth to the world, and that included his own image. While he refused to negotiate on the truth of Jesus as the Messiah, the apostle seems to have had an awareness of how the various intermingling cultures in the 1st century viewed the budding church. The church ran counterculture to every other culture surrounding them at the time. With a worldview already considered odd, it would not do for the church to cause unnecessary unrest or bring a bad reputation upon themselves. They were also alternately called by Paul himself not to be "conformed to this world" but to be "transformed by the renewal" of their minds in Romans 12:1-2.

On the one hand, it may seem that Paul desired for the church body to walk a thin line between following the will of God and its distinctness that removed them from the culture and yet making the culture view the church as pleasantly as possible. These desires bring Paul to an important concept in this passage of his writings, as he turns his focus onto relationships. Brown writes that for Paul, God's new creation through Christ transforms all relationships.⁶⁴⁴ Indeed, for

⁶⁴² Kar Yong Lim, *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul's Letters to the Corinthians*, 20.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Derek R Brown, Wendy Widder, and E Tod Twist, *Lexham Research Commentary: 2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), accessed October 30, 2023, app.logos.com.

Paul, the "new creation" through Christ transformed everything and was continually transforming. In a similar fashion, Pratt writes that the overarching theme of 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2 is Paul's urgent desire that all would be reconciled, with no one being viewed from a worldly point of view.⁶⁴⁵

There were a variety of issues present in the Corinthian church, although Paul had planted it. Lim writes that the church was filled with conflicts and tensions that were both internal and external, ranging from difficulties between the church members themselves to problems between the church members and Paul, all of which had further difficulty due to external opposition parties who were against the apostle himself.⁶⁴⁶ Additionally, Lim writes that the nature of the problems that were occurring in Corinth was due to the impact of the social implications of Graeco-Roman social identity.⁶⁴⁷ These social identity problems primarily present themselves in 1st Corinthians, although some of the issues linger in the second book. In the 2nd book, Paul is still facing the threat of a party of false teachers present in the church, which he feels he must defend himself against.⁶⁴⁸

In short, the problems, arguments, and dissension among the Corinthians were behaviors that Paul felt unbecoming to the believers. Thus, what can be seen in this portion of Corinthians, albeit to a lesser degree than in 1st Corinthians, is Paul's attempt to remind the church body of who they are and to call them back to that identity and out of any lasting antagonism they are

⁶⁴⁵ Richard L. Pratt and Max E. Anders, *I & II Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2000), 357.

⁶⁴⁶ J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, Kindle (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 406.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 407.

⁶⁴⁸ William R. Baker et al., *Cornerstone Bible Commentary 1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), accessed November 6, 2023, app.logos.com, 270.

feeling towards one another or himself. Having spent considerable time confronting these problems and rejoicing at the response of the church, remaining issues may have had him concerned that they would continue to face divisive issues. A reminder that they were no longer the same people as before their salvation was necessary. His unique ability to do this can again be traced back to his own extreme transformation after meeting the person of Christ and the fact that he refrained from slipping back into the mindset and actions of his past as a Pharisee. Slippage was a concern for the Corinthians.

The instantaneous change that Paul had seen through his own encounter with Christ uniquely enabled him to understand and explain the change that the Corinthians should have also been experiencing as followers of Christ. Millar reminds us that personal change is a very complex process, with lasting success on personal change being difficult to accomplish.⁶⁴⁹ Millar lists eight reasons why change may fail to last, with several in particular that might apply to Corinth.⁶⁵⁰ These include beliefs that are dysfunctional, therefore inhibiting change, blaming others or circumstances instead of taking responsibility, having a lack of support from family or community, managing the change process badly, and demonstrating poor skills or preparations.⁶⁵¹ These seem to be the most likely inhibitors to change for the church in question, especially if false teachers and opponents of Paul were present to impede the process.

The Corinthians were not without a high degree of support for change. An ever-present Paul writes in the spirit of reconciliation and reminds them in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that they are not

⁶⁴⁹ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2021), 6.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2021), 6-7.

their old selves. The apostle prefaces this statement through verse 16, writing that since Christ died for all, “we regard no one according to the flesh.” Through Christ, Paul now sees others differently, refusing to appraise them from a human perspective.⁶⁵² The apostle had made such a mistake once, believing the Messiah to be fake, which he uses as an example in the remainder of the verse.

In verse 17, Paul begins by writing of those who are “in Christ.” The phrase “in Christ” provides a sense of being bound up with Christ through his death and resurrection, along with emphasizing an ongoing relationship with the Messiah.⁶⁵³ Dunn writes that being “in Christ” is not a mystical removal from the real world in which the believer must operate; instead, it is the starting point for a differently motivated and directed life.⁶⁵⁴ This is the launching point, the initial idea, for the phrase that follows: “he is a new creation” (v 17). Paul draws a line here between the behavior of the self who was without Christ and the behavior of the self who is in Christ. They are not one and the same. Previous behaviors are no longer acceptable, and Paul calls the Corinthians to a higher standard. Here, the apostle indicates that the beginning of an ongoing transformation in which the Christian is being and will be transformed into the very image of Christ.⁶⁵⁵

Paul is pointing to the radical change that takes place within a person, their desires, and goals when they genuinely encounter Christ.⁶⁵⁶ He was easily the foremost expert on such a

⁶⁵² Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago., IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1815.

⁶⁵³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 410.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁶⁵⁵ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 55.

⁶⁵⁶ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in Early House Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 84.

subject through his own radical encounter with the Lord. Dunn writes that Paul's encounter with Jesus was not simply a turning around on a continuous road; it was much more a transition to a different plane.⁶⁵⁷ His experience on that road changed him tremendously, and from then on, his life revolved around Christ. It is of little wonder that he calls the Corinthians to a life of being made new rather than wallowing in the old. The rupture with Paul's past was traumatic, and he uses somewhat violent language to describe it as such.⁶⁵⁸ This traumatic breaking from his previous beliefs and behaviors allows him the authority and knowledge to call the people of the Corinthian church to be better representatives of God.

In Galatians 6:15, Paul again demonstrates the importance of the concept of being a new creation when he writes, "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal 6:15). Linked with verse 14 in which Paul denounces prideful boasting and writes that "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14). As in 2nd Corinthians 5:17, it is possible that Paul has in mind here two different meanings. By speaking of putting away boasting and then referring to the "new creation," the apostle may again be drawing attention to the idea that once one has accepted Christ, one no longer falls prey to that which the world finds acceptable. The apostle's reference to circumcision may also demonstrate that he is offering a reminder that such things no longer are given credit under the new covenant, with the new covenant itself being part of the new creation that God is actively bringing forth in the world.

⁶⁵⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 179.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 180.

Peterman writes that pointing out that circumcision means nothing underscores Paul's reference to the only acceptable means for boasting—the cross.⁶⁵⁹ The cross of Christ brings about two things: a break from worldly perspectives, emphasized in the words "the world has been crucified to me", and a new spiritual life in which the words "new covenant" are emphasized (Gal 6:14-15).⁶⁶⁰ Again, Paul's theology on different subjects is so bound up together that a break from worldly perspectives is, indeed, part of the new spiritual life that one arrives in when one becomes that "new creation." The Judaizers were a major concern of this letter, and their attempt to retain and maintain the old way of things was not in agreement with the new, as Paul makes clear.⁶⁶¹

Paul was under the conviction that the epochal transition from first Adam to last Adam, from death to life, must be reflected in their lives and that the transition of Christ must also take place in the lives of individuals.⁶⁶² At the core of Paul's use of "new creation" is the power of Christ's transformative work, which extends to all created order. When that newness is correctly applied specifically to the lives of believers, it brings about a transformation that includes a new awareness of God (1 Cor 14:25), a complete reassessment of values and priorities (Phil 3:7-11), and a putting aside of immorality for the good, moral things of God.⁶⁶³ Paul had experienced this with frightening suddenness, and out of that experience, he gives encouragement to the churches that have already slipped back into immoral, old covenant behavior or are at risk of doing so.

⁶⁵⁹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1841.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ Roger Mohrlang, Gerald L. Borchert, and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Romans, Galatians, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2007), accessed November 13, 2023, app.logos.com, 333.

⁶⁶² James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 318.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 319.

The encouragement that the apostle gives is a reminder to them of the new nature that they possess as believers, a brand-new identity of being “in Christ” (Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:2). This understanding of being a new person when accepting the Lord is exemplified in Paul’s edict to the Ephesians to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life” and to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). Paul knows that there is a marked difference between the before-Christ identity and the after-Christ identity. In his bid to remind the 1st-century church body of the new identity that should be in place, we are given not only a glimpse of his perception of what is important but also a glimpse of the apostle's views on identity. Both of these pieces of information are important going forward.

All to All

In the preceding sections, it was demonstrated that Paul was sharply aware of the marked identity change that happens when one accepts Christ and comes into the body of believers. The apostle was acutely aware of this through his own violent transformation when accosted by Christ on the road to Damascus. However, he also provides evidence of the awareness of this identity change when he provides education to the churches regarding being a "new creation" as previously examined (1 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). Although it has been shown that Paul spoke of the identity change that takes place between the old and new self, in this portion of the research attention will shift to actual scenarios where Paul puts old, or simply more minor, portions of his identity aside in favor of his new identity.

The beginning point for this endeavor is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, in which Paul pens the interesting phrase, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."

What prompts Paul to pen such a thing to the Corinth church, along with examples of how he has accomplished this? Vanlaningham writes, “If there is a single all-encompassing problem exhibited by the members of the Corinthian church discernible in this letter, it might be unbridled and arrogant self-promotion.”⁶⁶⁴ Johnson adds that there was a spirit of self-satisfaction and boasting, a spirit of having arrived and not needing anything else.⁶⁶⁵ In order to correct their various errant behaviors and gross misunderstandings, Paul presents his own actions as an example to them, instructing them in several spots to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16-17, 11:1).

In the section that contains 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul is answering a question posed to him by the Corinthians regarding eating things sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1-3). As his answer to the question unfolds, he arrives at discussing the rights of the believers. Throughout the section, Paul is responding to those who felt it was appropriate to assert their own rights, even when it harmed others.⁶⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 is Paul's rebuttal to the church's practice, where the apostle makes it clear that he puts others ahead of himself and his rights. In verse 19, he writes that he "has made himself a servant to all, that I might win more of them." Paul enslaves himself to all so that he might make the greatest gains for the gospel.⁶⁶⁷ This theology, mindset, and practice is one of the outward examples of the apostle's ultimate self-identity.

This verse is followed by Paul providing examples of instances in which he did exactly as he said. He became a Jew to win the Jews (v 20), he became as one under the law (v 20), he

⁶⁶⁴ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1774.

⁶⁶⁵ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), accessed June 28, 2023, app.logos.com, 22.

⁶⁶⁶ Leon Morris, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Faithlife* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1985), accessed November 11, 2023, app.logos.com, 130-131.

⁶⁶⁷ Mark Taylor, *The New American Commentary 1 Corinthians, Faithlife*, vol. 28 (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), accessed November 11, 2023, app.logos.com, 218.

became as one outside the law (v 21), and he became weak to the win the ones who were weak (v 22). Vanlaningham writes that Paul practiced "contextualization" while never changing the content of the gospel message but adapting it to meet the needs and culture of his audience.⁶⁶⁸ Indeed, this is a method that even modern communicators use to properly convey information. However, in Paul's case, it represents more than a skilled method of communication, as will be seen when looked at in more detail.

After his list of examples, Paul finishes by stating, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). Paul is unwilling to live as he sees fit, according to his own context and preferences, instead adapting to the realities and ways of those of whom he seeks to minister.⁶⁶⁹ Taylor writes, "Paul's stewardship of the gospel embodied the essence of the gospel by entailing a complete inversion of the world's values whereby the slave occupies a position of considerable influence."⁶⁷⁰ What drives the apostle's motivation? The man himself answers that question in verse 22: "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." Paul's motivation for putting aside his personal preferences and making himself a slave to others is that he might bring them to the Lord. Taylor's notes on this are quite striking:

The fact that Paul, a self-described Hebrew of the Hebrews (2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:8), affirmed that he became *like* a Jew is quite astonishing. This, along with the parenthetical explanation "though I myself am not under the law," provides considerable insight into Paul's break from his religious past. Barrett comments that "Paul's Judaism was no longer of his very being." (Taylor 2014, 219)

An important note here is that Paul did not stoop to taking part in sin to win others to the gospel. However, in matters that he did not see as ethically or theologically essential, flexibility

⁶⁶⁸ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1788.

⁶⁶⁹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 47.

⁶⁷⁰ Mark Taylor, *The New American Commentary I Corinthians*, 218.

was employed on the part of the apostle.⁶⁷¹ Any minor markers of identity that Paul enjoyed about himself paled in comparison to his need to spread the gospel message. Even the opportunity to win “some” (1 Cor 9:22) to Christ was worth setting aside certain peripheral portions of his identity. In setting aside his own preferences for the sake of others, Paul truly embodied the actions of Christ, living up to his statement in 1 Corinthians 11:1 when he exhorts the church to “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

As we have established, Paul’s overarching self-identity leads him to adopt the cultural norms and attitudes of those he is attempting to reach for Christ, provided that he is not participating in sin. Paul’s missional strategy of “all things to all people” (v 22) comes at great personal cost to the apostle and testifies to his commitment to the task of preaching the gospel effectively.⁶⁷² As a Pharisee, Paul insisted that everyone do things in the manner that he required, but as a new creation through Christ, Paul gave himself up to do things everyone else's way. Although it may seem as if the apostle is simply seeking to give himself credit, other writers of Scripture detail Paul putting this missional practice into action. It is to those accounts that we now turn.

All Things to All People: In Practice

Enough of Paul's life and ministry has been recorded in Scripture that the instances where Paul practiced being “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22) can be seen. Due to the nature of his extremely varied background, Paul has the unique ability to relate to people of all kinds in the first-century culture. Much of what will be examined is in the book of Acts, although there are

⁶⁷¹ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, 148.

⁶⁷² Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 47.

examples outside of Luke's writings, as well. It is necessary that the apostle's willingness to set aside aspects of his identity be documented in order to find the self-identity that Paul ultimately claimed.

Acts 17:16-34

In this portion of Scripture, Paul witnesses in Athens. Luke records the events that lead to Paul addressing the Aeropagus (Acts 17:22) and what transpires after the address. The way in which Paul handles the situation is a major example of his missional method of relating to people culturally. Peterson notes that Luke purposely outlines the way Paul argued in this unusual context and to show the variety of ways in which people responded to his teaching.⁶⁷³

As Paul awaits Silas and Timothy at Athens, he is left to his own devices (Acts 17:15-16). During his wait, he notices the depravity of the city with its focus on idols (v 16). Polhill writes that Athens was known the world over for its detailed art and architecture, which naturally contained images of the Greek gods, and the most impressive buildings were temples to those same gods.⁶⁷⁴ Paul is "provoked" (v 16) over the idols, becoming irritated, and his spirit is stirred to preach the gospel. Verse 17 states that the apostle ends up spending his time waiting by talking "with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." Through the very act of walking around and speaking with whomever he sees about Jesus, he gains the attention of some interesting groups, and the Bible tells us that even the "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him" (v 18).

⁶⁷³ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Faithlife Logos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), accessed May 17, 2023, app.logos.com, 486.

⁶⁷⁴ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 366.

Paul ends up catching the attention of the groups of philosophers, and he is brought to the Aeropagus to provide them with deeper detail on the subject (v 19-20). Beginning in verse 22, Paul addresses the group, and it is here that his unusual missionary tactics can be seen. Paul opens by stating that he finds his listeners to be "very religious" (v 22). Davis writes that the KJV translates the verse to say that Paul calls his audience "too superstitious," which brings a confrontational note to Paul's preaching.⁶⁷⁵ However, if we are to take Paul's words about becoming "all things to all people" as truth, then it is understood that the apostle was out to relate to others rather than cause confrontation (1 Cor 9:22). Davis goes on to say that while "too superstitious" is not an impossible interpretation of the text, this is only preferable to the translations "reverent," "pious," or "religious" if one believes that Paul was taking the stance that only the Christians had the truth, and the philosophers were ignorant.⁶⁷⁶

However, while the philosophers may have believed that Paul was ignorant because they did not initially understand what he was saying, Paul knew that he was dealing with learned men. Therefore, the apostle begins his speech by paying his listeners a compliment and creating rapport between them so that his message will be well-received. It would not have earned Paul any favors, to begin with an insult or direct confrontation when he was already about to challenge their ideas with the truth of the gospel. Polhill writes that Paul's remark that he had observed the Athenians to be "very religious" has often been described as an effort to win the favor of his hearers.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁵ Mark D Davis, "Between Text & Sermon: Acts 17: 16-34," *Interpretation* 57, no. 1 (January 2003): 64–66, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/202747360/abstract/EC8E0380A2424090PQ/1?accountid=12085&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>, 64.

⁶⁷⁶ Mark D Davis, "Between Text & Sermon: Acts 17: 16-34," 64.

⁶⁷⁷ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 370.

With their attention caught, Paul continues to create a relationship with his hearers when, in verse 23, he speaks of an altar in Athens that he had observed dedicated “To the unknown god.” He utilizes this altar of some importance to the people of Athens to inform them that he knows something that they do not: the true God who made all things (v 24). In Paul's speech, there is an overall emphasis on the idea of not knowing, or ignorance, due to the Greeks' insistence on simply knowing and understanding things around them.⁶⁷⁸ From verse 24 forward, Paul ministers the gospel message to the learned philosophers of Athens, returning to the theme of ignorance again in verse thirty in order to continue to relate to his audience and keep their attention for the most vital part of his message. In verse thirty, Paul tells them that “the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (v 30). In this manner, he continues to appeal to the audience who wishes to avoid ignorance at all costs while providing them with the call to repent in verse thirty-one.

The result of this missional strategy is effective and immediate, as recorded by Luke in verses 32-34. Some of the men mocked him, others stated that they wanted to hear more on the subject, but there were yet others who “joined him and believed” (v 34). To the Athenians, Paul became like an Athenian. He treated them with respect, and he appealed to what he knew interested them. Knowledge and being free of ignorance might not be important to other members of society, but to this particular group, it was of foremost importance. Knowing this, Paul capitalizes on it, both sparking their interest and becoming relatable all at once. Once he has done this, he is able to refute their worldview more easily and be listened to, rather than his ideas being immediately shunned. The result is that there are those in the crowd who become believers, which indicates a strategy well-executed.

⁶⁷⁸ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 372.

Acts 18:1-4

In the very next chapter in Acts, we find another, more minor, example of Paul executing his missional strategy. At the beginning of the chapter, Paul leaves Athens and arrives in Corinth, where he meets a Jew named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla (Acts 18:1-2). Although the couple is mentioned as being Jewish, it is commonly believed among scholars that the two had already converted to Christianity. Trites observes that this is an interesting phenomenon because Aquila and Priscilla's conversion is not traceable to any of the missionary activity that is recorded in Acts.⁶⁷⁹ This calls into question why Luke would mention Aquila being a Jew, with Peterson surmising that the author's purpose in doing this was to stress that Paul's initial ministry in Corinth was among his own people (v 2).⁶⁸⁰

Once Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, he discovers that they are "of the same trade," so he stays with them and works at tentmaking (v 3). While the word "tentmaking," as Luke uses it, is highly disputed, the overarching point here is that Paul met fellow Jews and took up a form of work alongside them to create an income. This did not end his ministry, as it is written of Paul that "he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks" (v 4). Jewish tradition encouraged rabbis to support themselves with another occupation, yet the Greek culture found manual labor to be of a despicable nature.⁶⁸¹ However, Paul is no longer in Athens, primarily ministering to Greeks with a learned background. He is now in the synagogue speaking

⁶⁷⁹ Allison A. Trites, William J. Larkin, and Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts*, 551.

⁶⁸⁰ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 507.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 508.

to his own people and those Greeks in the synagogue who designated themselves as God-fearers.⁶⁸²

Suddenly positioning himself to earn an income when the opportunity presents itself certainly had reasoning behind it. Paul mentions having worked to support himself in his letters to the churches (1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Cor 11:7), and he also tells the Ephesians in Acts 20:33-34, "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me." This leads to an understanding that Paul, ministering among the Jews, sought to avoid any appearance of the desire for material goods. Furthermore, if Jewish culture expected that rabbis would work, it would make sense that Paul would, therefore, work in order to present himself as an upstanding Jewish citizen. Polhill reasons that the Corinthians may have had distrust for those who went about making a profit for their message, making Paul's work worthwhile for avoiding suspicion on the part of those he was ministering to.⁶⁸³

Within this very short section of Scripture, it can again be demonstrated that Paul was utilizing his missional strategy to relate to those he was ministering to and adhere to what they considered to be good behavior in order that he might open their ears to the gospel. Although this example may be minor in comparison to the apostle's actions in Athens, nothing would have been considered minor to Paul if it brought people to Christ. Here, he chooses to work for his own funds in order to gain favor in the sight of those around him. Once again, the apostle puts aside certain aspects of his identity in order to utilize what would gain him the most favor in the sight of people in order to lead them to God.

⁶⁸² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 509.

⁶⁸³ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 384.

Acts 16:1-3

Turning to Acts 16, this research will review one of the arguably more extreme examples of Paul becoming "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22). In this instance, not only is Paul involved, but Timothy is as well. Paul's travels to Lystra allowed him to meet Timothy, whom Luke calls a disciple, then describing him as "the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek" (Acts 16:1). Luke mentions that Paul "wanted Timothy to accompany him" probably due in no small part to the things that the "brothers" at Lystra and Iconium had said about him (v 2-3).

Luke's mention of Timothy's family background is crucial to understanding the following verses.⁶⁸⁴ Once Paul has decided that he wishes for Timothy to travel with him, he takes him to be circumcised "because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (v 4). Again, Paul is concerned that a good impression is made upon those to whom he is going to be ministering. This concern even spills over to those he is ministering with, extending to Timothy in this case. It seems that Timothy was already a well-known entity, as the Bible notes that the Jews were all familiar with who his father was, knowing that he was not of Jewish heritage (v 3). Marty concludes that by requiring Timothy to submit to circumcision, Paul simultaneously avoided offending the Jews and recognized the continuation of the Jewish covenant for the Jewish believers.⁶⁸⁵

Polhill notes that for Paul to have a member of his travel companions be of Jewish lineage and be uncircumcised would have hampered his message and effectiveness among the

⁶⁸⁴ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 342.

⁶⁸⁵ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1707.

Jews.⁶⁸⁶ This ends up being an extremely deft move on Paul's part, as Timothy becomes a vital part of his ministry endeavors. So serious is this relationship that Paul will end up referring to Timothy as "a son" in serving with Paul "in the gospel" (Phil 2:22). Paul would never compromise the gospel, but he did make changes in lifestyle issues for the sake of the gospel.⁶⁸⁷ While there may have been other reasons for Paul to have Timothy circumcised, especially for the representation of the Abrahamic covenant, his primary reason certainly appears to come from a missional mindset. The Jews that they were attending to were much less likely to hear the message of the gospel if they were too busy being caught up in and offended by the fact that one of the Jews was uncircumcised.

Acts 21:17-26

Paul arrives in Jerusalem and meets with James and the elders of the church, relating all that has been happening through his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 21:17-19). Peterson believes that the language "went in with us to" suggests a solemn and formal meeting.⁶⁸⁸ It may very well have been a formal debriefing of Paul's work among the Gentiles, but it wasn't altogether solemn as there was much glorifying of God when the council heard of what God had been doing through Paul (v 20). Marty refers to this as merely an opportunity for Paul to provide a report, which he does.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁶ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 343.

⁶⁸⁷ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1707.

⁶⁸⁸ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 584.

⁶⁸⁹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1726.

In turn, the Jewish elders have their own report for Paul. "Many thousands" of Jews had come to know Christ while Paul had been away, and they were "zealous for the law" (v 20). However, those same Jews were not as zealous for what Paul had been doing. Rumor had spread that Paul was teaching the Jews to forsake Moses by forgoing circumcision and telling them that they did not need to follow the typical Jewish customs (v 21). Trites summarizes this portion of Scripture well when she writes:

Specifically, the rumor said Paul was telling parents to ignore the main Jewish identity marker, circumcision, and the lifestyle according to "Jewish customs" (21:21). For Paul, since neither the circumcised condition nor the uncircumcised condition had any spiritual significance, it is highly unlikely that he would have taught the Jews this "apostasy from the law"; it would have been like teaching Gentiles the yoke of the law, something he opposed (see Rom 3:25-30; 1 Cor 7:18-19; Gal 5:6; 6:15). In fact, his circumcision of Timothy (16:3) and his respect for the weaker brother's conscience in matters of Jewish custom (Rom 14:1-15:7) demonstrate that he proclaimed his "law-free" gospel with a flexibility which aimed to violate no one's cultural identity. His "law-free" gospel, then, did not mean that Paul instructed persons in a "custom-free" life. (Trites 2006, 585-586)

Although the rumors were false, and the Jewish elders knew it, for they knew Paul, the rumors needed to be put to rest so the work of the ministry could continue. Polhill notes that the charges are serious, as the matter strikes the heart of the Jewish people and their self-identity.⁶⁹⁰ Paul has just arrived to a delicate situation. Paul's success with the Gentiles had created some difficulties with the Jewish Christians, and all of the leaders were aware that it had to be dealt with.⁶⁹¹ Paul had returned to a time of political unrest, with Jewish hatred for Rome at an all-time high, which naturally spread to anti-Gentile sentiments, making his mission to the Gentiles viewed extremely poorly by his own people.⁶⁹² Thus, in order for Paul and the elders to minister

⁶⁹⁰ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 447.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 447.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

to the Jews, he needs to find a way to reassure them that he isn't, in fact, instructing Jews to turn their back on the covenant.

James and the elders instruct Paul to purify himself along with "four men who are under a vow" and pay for them to shave their heads (v 23-24) in order to satisfy the Jews. By doing this, "all will know there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law (v 24). The vow in question is a Nazarite vow, of which the four men were nearing the end of the period of their vow.⁶⁹³ If Paul were to make payment for the cost of the men's required sacrifices, the elders felt as if the Jewish Christians would be appeased and put the rumors about Paul to rest. Due to the portion of verse twenty-four where the elders instruct Paul to "purify yourself along with them," Peterson speculates that Paul may have required a seven-day period of ritual purification before taking part in temple worship.⁶⁹⁴ This would have had Paul completing his own purification at the same time as the four men in question, and along with paying for their expenses, Paul would have been looked upon very favorably by the Jewish Christian community for these acts.⁶⁹⁵

However well-intentioned the elders and Paul were, when Paul is found in the temple by the Jews from Asia, a riot breaks out, and Paul is seized (v 27-30). Not all scholars believe that Paul willingly took part in this vow, or, alternatively, they believe that he should never have proceeded once it had been suggested. Such scholars believe that Luke's portrayal is historically inaccurate, instead postulating that what truly happened was the leadership's persuasion of Paul

⁶⁹³ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary-- Acts*, 448.

⁶⁹⁴ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 587.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

against his better judgment.⁶⁹⁶ Peterson shares that Paul may not have been optimistic about the effects that the action might have on calming his opponents.⁶⁹⁷ In his discussion on Paul's full observance to the Torah, Du Toit agrees with Peterson, stating that Paul likely did not express optimism about the effects of the vow.⁶⁹⁸

There is a difficulty here with making the assumption that Paul was dubious about this plan. It is possible that this conclusion is only reached due to modern readers' obvious ability to judge with hindsight. While Paul did not know at the time that things would go awry, current Bible readers have the privilege of seeing the outcome of the decision and can, therefore, insert emotions of disappointment and irritation in Paul where the text does not indicate them. Marty writes, "Though Paul has been criticized for participating in this vow, his actions were consistent with his philosophy of ministry," going on to say that Paul exhibited strength in this instance, not weakness or poor judgment.⁶⁹⁹

Indeed, although the outcome was not what was intended, there is no indication in Scripture that Paul was displeased with the elders in Jerusalem or had an issue with the plan that they presented. All parties were attempting to avoid offending the Jewish Christians for no reason in order to continue their ministry effectively. This aligns with what Paul has done on the other occasions that have been studied in this research, putting aside his own preferences or

⁶⁹⁶ Allison A. Trites, William J. Larkin, and Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts*, 584.

⁶⁹⁷ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 587

⁶⁹⁸ Philip La Du Toit, "Was Paul Fully Torah Observant According to Acts?," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 3 (August 8, 2016): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3396>, 5.

⁶⁹⁹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1727.

beliefs that he might continue to bring the message of the gospel to those who would hear and accept it.

Though these examples and exegesis presented here are not exhaustive, they give incredible insight into Paul and his self-identity. Throughout this chapter, it has been demonstrated that there are very few aspects of his self-identity that he was willing to cling to should they impede the message of the gospel. His incredible missional strategy to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22) indicates a willingness to put the comfort of others above his own. Rosner sums up Paul's viewpoint and method in the following way:

Many identity markers have to do with shared understandings, practices, and values that shape us. In other words, personal identity is in large part shaped by the cultural group, or groups, with which you identify. The Bible neither disputes nor opposes this. Paul's willingness to forgo behaving according to his own cultural background and to adapt his behavior to the culture of others was driven by a missional motivation—that is, in his own words, to "save some." (Rosner 2017, 47)

Both his views on being made new in Christ and the illustration that he is willing to set aside any aspect of his identity that gets in the way of the gospel combine to point to the critical way in which Paul viewed himself, in which he self-identified. It is to that self-identity that we now turn.

Servant and Apostle

Introductions are important. They reveal to others the most important thing that we would like them to know about ourselves, and they can create rapport. Recipients of the introduction immediately begin making assumptions and decisions about the trust they place in you or the value they place upon you. Consider Moses and God when the prophet encounters the burning bush, and the Lord takes it upon himself to give an introduction to Moses (Ex 3:6). Further on in this encounter, Moses inquires of the name of God, to which the Lord provides the answer, "I

AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:13-14). Zuber states that this is one of the most important expressions of God's self-revelation recorded in Scripture, dense with implications about the nature and being of God.⁷⁰⁰ God identifies himself to Moses, and the prophet receives reassurance by this introduction that this presence was the same God the Hebrew people had been worshipping for generations.⁷⁰¹ Through this divine introduction, God provides pertinent information about himself to his covenant people.

Cote and Levine emphasize that a widespread problem among people who face difficulties in identity formation is a lack of self-definition rooted in a community of others.⁷⁰² In a very definite sense, when one introduces themselves and gives their preferred designation to their identity, and it is accepted by the wider community, the self-identity that one has established is being confirmed by that community. The individual is a member of the community, but he is a particular part of the community with a particular heredity and position that distinguishes him from anybody else.⁷⁰³ When introducing oneself, the person puts forth that information that distinguishes him from everyone else, thereby proclaiming what they deem to be the predominant piece of their identity that they wish for the other party to take away with them and remember.

When writing on the book of Galatians, Esler takes special note of the various ways that Paul addresses the church, with many being collective designations that the apostle uses in an

⁷⁰⁰ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1727.

⁷⁰¹ Kathy Beach-Verhey, "Exodus 3:1–12," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 59, no. 2 (April 2005): 180–182, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430505900208>, 181.

⁷⁰² James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*, 2.

⁷⁰³ George Herbert Mead and Charles William Morris, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Kindle (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013), 224.

attempt to create relationships within the church.⁷⁰⁴ A few examples of this include "those seeking to be justified in Christ" (Gal 2:17), "seed of Abraham and promised heirs" (Gal 3:29), and "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).⁷⁰⁵ Paul's aim seems to be to direct the Galatian's attention back to their identity under the authority of Christ. Esler continues in some detail:

Whatever else they do, all of these designations, both the established ones like 'Galatians' and 'brothers' and the second type, which Paul argues are also applicable to his audience, supply answers to the question, 'Who are we?', which could be shared by his addressees. As such, they serve to highlight aspects of the *identity* of the members of the congregations since identity essentially refers to that which makes us distinctive human beings, in other words, our sense of who we are. The rich array of language and argument relating to identity, here presented in collective forms, is one of the most striking features of this letter, although this is a topic rarely taken up by commentators. (Es

Not only was Paul keenly aware of identity among his congregations, but he was also aware of identity within himself. This can be seen in the image that he wished to be presented when introducing himself in every letter. Consistently, the Pauline corpus demonstrates that Paul introduces himself in nearly the same fashion, with the same intent. The apostle to Christ intended to provide confirmation as to his authorship, establish rapport with churches he was both familiar and unfamiliar with, and establish his self-identity as an apostle and servant of Christ by declaring it to the wider church community and being accepted as such. These claims will now be examined more closely through the text.

Romans and Titus

In the letter to the Romans, Paul introduces himself as "a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1). This is the first thing that Paul wished for the church body to know about him. In addition, utilizing the term "servant" when as much as

⁷⁰⁴ Philip Francis Esler, *Galatians*, Kindle (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 12.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

60 percent of the population of Rome was slaves would have established immediate credibility with the congregation.⁷⁰⁶ This is a further example of Paul fulfilling his missional strategy, as previously discussed, as he attempts to relate to them as a slave himself. The Romans would have understood who Paul was, so the description that he provides functions more like a business card, spelling out the apostle's credentials.⁷⁰⁷ Yet these business credentials that Paul outlines are not the kind that the apostle sets aside when he returns home at night. Paul never leaves behind his call to be an apostle and never takes a break from it. Here, he is outlining his entire self-identity for the community.

This theme of being "a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle" is an identity that continues throughout the letter. One of the reasons that Paul cites for writing the letter to the Romans is his "eagerness to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome as well" (1:15). Paul's entire being is wrapped up in being an apostle of Christ. Dunn makes note of this same truth when he writes that "effective preaching of the gospel was always Paul's primary concern," citing 1 Corinthians 9:23.⁷⁰⁸ Paul's introductions are always far more complex than the traditional, simple introductions of the normal customs of a Greek letter.⁷⁰⁹ The reason is simple: Paul was trying to establish not only his credentials but his very identity.

The book of Titus is the only other Pauline letter where the author groups together both servant and apostle. The letter begins, "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ" (Ti

⁷⁰⁶ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1741.

⁷⁰⁷ Steven E. Runge, *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide*, 11.

⁷⁰⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 165.

⁷⁰⁹ Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), accessed June 2, 2023, app.logos.com, 28.

1:1). This is the only letter in which Paul refers to himself as a servant of God instead of a servant of Christ, with the word "servant" only being used in an introduction in Romans, Titus, and Philippians. Paul uses these designations about himself repeatedly because, in each new community that he corresponds with, his introduction lets the people know the most important thing about him: that he carries the authority of God, and it is his identity. It is very apparent that Paul lived to serve God and that his greetings reflect what makes life meaningful for him and what he values in the core of his self.⁷¹⁰

Letters to the Corinthians

Paul begins both letters to the Corinthians very similarly. "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus," graces 1st Corinthians 1:1, and "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God," is the beginning of 2nd Corinthians 1:1. Just as in the Romans introduction, Paul uses the word "called," indicating a summons or invitation that he received from God to his apostolic office.⁷¹¹ If Paul's ministry is based upon the will and call of God, it gives him unique authority.⁷¹² The term "servant" is another recurring portion of Paul's introduction, indicating his servanthood to Christ. Thus far, the combination of "servant" and "apostle" of Christ appears in the introduction of three letters, used by Paul to describe Paul.

While much of Paul's introduction follows normal cultural standards, his reference to his own apostolic authority is unusual.⁷¹³ Johnson attributes this to those in the church at Corinth

⁷¹⁰ Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), accessed November 20, 2023, app.logos.com.

⁷¹¹ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1775.

⁷¹² Ibid., 1809.

⁷¹³ William R. Baker et al., *1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), accessed June 28, 2023, app.logos.com, 238.

who challenged the apostle's calling (1 Cor 4:3; 9:3).⁷¹⁴ Paul, trying to refute their claims against him, once again attempts to establish his identity in the wider church community. In 2nd Corinthians, the situation is much the same, and Paul again defers to his apostolic authority. This display of authority is an attempt to regain his rightful identity within the view of the Corinthian believers. Paul's foremost concern is his apostolic standing in the Corinthian church, and it is very important to him that the believers see him as the apostle he identifies as.⁷¹⁵

Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians

Similar to 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians all contain a Pauline introduction that includes the reference to "apostle." To the Galatians, in particular, Paul writes, "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1:1). Here, Paul emphasizes that not only is his identity that of an apostle, but it is a God-given identity that he did not manifest himself. His apostleship did not have a human source; instead, it was commissioned to him via Christ himself and was not an invention of Paul's own imagination.⁷¹⁶ This extended introduction is yet another in which Paul seems to feel a need to defend his identity, along with establishing it.

Paul is attempting to merge his personal and social identities when that identity has been undermined by those opponents in the churches who doubt him. Personal identity is unique to the individual and may be based upon a relationship with another individual or upon a unique

⁷¹⁴ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians, Faithlife*, 35.

⁷¹⁵ Linda L. Belleville et al., *2 Corinthians, Faithlife* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), accessed November 19, 2023, app.logos.com.

⁷¹⁶ Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1829.

attribute of the individual.⁷¹⁷ In the case of Galatians, Paul makes it clear that the unique personal identity he has is based upon his relationship with God, given by God, and should therefore be accepted by the church as his social and authoritative identity, as well (Gal 1:1). Paul's sense of apostleship to the Gentiles was a distinctive feature of Paul's understanding of the gospel from the very beginning.⁷¹⁸ It was also an odd understanding, considering his background as a Pharisee, attempting to exclude the Gentiles at the outset of the gospel movement.

In Ephesians, Paul introduces himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (Eph 1:1), with the Colossians introduction mirroring this exactly. "Apostle" is what Paul most frequently refers to himself as, with the word meaning "one sent" and indicating a great and divine compulsion, of the commission laid upon him.⁷¹⁹ This claim of compulsion is valid. If Paul had not encountered Christ on his way to persecute the followers of The Way, he would have continued along the path of zealously putting the threat of the new sect away as a Pharisee. It was only through being intercepted by the Lord that the apostle abandoned his old identity and put on the "new creation" that he so enthusiastically speaks about in 2 Corinthians 5:17. Paul is ever aware that he cannot escape that identity which was given to him by Christ himself and seeks to have others know of his authority through his identity, as well.

⁷¹⁷ J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, 144.

⁷¹⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 178.

⁷¹⁹ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary, Faithlife* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), accessed November 20, 2023, app.logos.com, 51.

1st and 2nd Timothy

Emphasizing the previous section, in 1st Timothy, Paul's introduction includes a new, more forceful idea regarding his identity. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by *command* of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope" (1 Tim 1:1, emphasis mine). 2nd Timothy is similar, with the apostle writing, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 1:1). Both Jesus and God are included as proponents of Paul's apostolic identity in these letters. It was not one or the other that had designated Paul as an apostle, but both, and he was an apostle for Christ on their "command" and "the will of God" (1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1).

The apostle utilizing the term "will" indicates to his audience that he was in submission to God, doing as he had been instructed. The Christian will concentrate the most on the mystery of God's will when things seem to make little sense.⁷²⁰ Paul's call to apostleship and the Lord's reason for choosing him after the atrocities he had committed against the church body continually amazed and confused him (1 Cor 15:9). This is again a subtle way to let the readers of his letter know that he did not come to apostleship by his own authority or plan, but by the desire of the Lord. Paul has been appointed to the office of apostle by God's "command", a word used of royal directives to be obeyed without equivocation.⁷²¹ Paul's identity as an apostle would have carried less weight and authority had he assigned the identity to himself. Therefore, he seeks to reaffirm that it was God's "command" and "will" that he be an apostle (1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim

⁷²⁰ Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*.

⁷²¹ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *The New American Commentary / 1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Faithlife* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), accessed November 30, 2023, app.logos.com, 62.

1:1). It can be seen that Paul continually identifies himself as an authorized representative of Christ, and the apostle adds strength to that claim in these pastoral letters.⁷²²

Philippians and Philemon

The introductions in these two letters vary quite a bit from most of Paul's other addresses. In Philippians, Paul simply refers to himself and Timothy as "servants of Christ Jesus" without mentioning his apostolic authority or going into further detail (Phil 1:1). Fee writes that when Timothy's name is included in the greeting in Paul's other letters, it is separated from Paul's when the apostle mentions his apostolic authority.⁷²³ Fee goes on to mention that the matter of Paul's apostleship is likely not mentioned in this letter as he makes it clear that he is writing the letter in a spirit of friendship, in which status has no place.⁷²⁴ This does not mean Paul has ceased identifying as an apostle or that his life is still not consumed by this calling; it simply means that in these particular circumstances, it was inappropriate to draw attention to it. The designation of him and Timothy as "servants" is enough to remind the recipients that he remains obedient and under the authority of God.

In Philemon, a different introduction can be seen altogether. Paul refers to himself as "a prisoner for Christ Jesus," completely abandoning the use of either "servant" or "apostle" that is so pervasive in the majority of his other letters (Phile 1:1). As with the nature of the book of Philippians, most scholars agree that the personal nature of the letter is the reason for the absence

⁷²² Michael Rydelnik et al., *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1906.

⁷²³ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, 40.

⁷²⁴ Ibid.

of Paul's typical personal identifiers.⁷²⁵ Some commentators believe that the phrase "prisoner of Christ Jesus" functions in a manner similar to "apostle," referring to the authority of one who is suffering in jail for his apostolic identity.⁷²⁶ However, Moo contends that Paul has elected to refer to himself as a "prisoner" in this letter not because he has abandoned his apostolic authority or because he is attempting to assert authority in a different manner, but simply because he is seeking a particular request that he wishes to be looked upon with sympathy.⁷²⁷ The fact that he is imprisoned on behalf of Christ is a powerful reminder of his identity without additional reminders.

1st and 2nd Thessalonians

1st and 2nd Thessalonians stand alone as the only two Pauline letters in which the apostle does not give himself a designation or title, simply mentioning his name (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). Two reasons may exist for this, the first being that Paul and his calling was widely accepted and well-known in this community of believers.⁷²⁸ The second possibility is that Paul may not have developed his traditional greeting since these letters are believed to be among the earliest.⁷²⁹ Despite the lack of the typical address, these two letters remain important to the overall argument that Paul identified primarily as an apostle. If nothing else, having only two

⁷²⁵ Richard R. Melick, *The New American Commentary/ Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, Faithlife* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), accessed November 29, 2023, app.logos.com, 348.

⁷²⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, Faithlife* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2018), accessed November 28, 2023, app.logos.com, 380.

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians, Faithlife* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), accessed December 1, 2023, app.logos.com, 47.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 48.

letters out of the entirety of the Pauline corpus that lack some reference to his God-given authority is further proof that Paul's identity was primarily that of being an apostle of Christ.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been demonstrated that Paul not only greatly valued his apostolic authority but that his entire life was wrapped around this very identity. Through examining Paul's ministerial goals, missional strategy, and personal representation of himself, the conclusion can be reached that Paul viewed his self-identity as, first and foremost, an apostle and servant of Christ. All other, more minor identity markers were willing to be put aside by the apostle in order to reach as many as he could with the message of the gospel. It is only the truth of the gospel and his apostolic authority that he is not willing to set aside in order to “become all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22).

If the apostle stood in front of us today, presenting as Gentiles, he would be willing to put aside his Jewish identity, any minor portions of his personality, and any portion of his Roman identity in order to minister to us the gospel message. In other words, he would set everything aside save his identity as an apostle—a carrier of the message of God. In 1st Corinthians 10:32-33, Paul writes, "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved."

It would have been the apostle's preference, or "advantage," to put forth the aspects of the identity he preferred—most likely his Jewish identity. However, when called to be an apostle to the Gentiles, he sets aside an entire lifetime of a particular identity and obtains a new identity under the authority of God, thereby becoming a portion of the "new creation" that he so

exuberantly calls the Corinthians to be in 2nd Corinthians 5:17. “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”, Paul cries in 1 Corinthians 9:16. His top priority is the gospel, and more than any of Paul’s other key themes, this concern for the gospel remains constant throughout his ministry from his first letter (1st Thessalonians) to his final imprisonment (Philemon).⁷³⁰

Scriptural instances of Paul setting aside background in order to gain favor with those he is ministering to have been presented in this chapter, including instances of him putting aside the identity that many scholars most closely attribute to him—his Jewish identity. There can be no doubt that Paul highly valued his Jewishness, that it affected and influenced his theology and understanding of the gospel. Yet, when he is called to abandon even that highly important identity, Paul shows no hesitation in abandoning even this in order to bring people to salvation. Paul’s “all things to all people” strategy was a costly personal move and testifies to his commitment to the task of preaching the gospel effectively.⁷³¹

Finally, Paul had no ministry, no identity, without being an apostle and servant of Christ after encountering him on Damascus Road. Throughout the majority of his letters he works to establish his identity as an apostle. Clearly, he had adopted it as his personal identity, and he works to reinforce that identity among the wider church community while also working to establish identity within the church body and showing concern for the identity that the church presented to the surrounding culture. Although Paul may not have recognized "identity" in the form that we do now, he recognized the concept. He also recognized that his identity was forever changed after meeting Christ, and he could no longer function or identify as anything other than an apostle to Christ Jesus.

⁷³⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 165.

⁷³¹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 47.

CHAPTER EIGHT: RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

Research Findings

This research sought to study Paul and understand the apostle's self-identity through biblical exposition on the apostle's own written, recorded words in Scripture. In addition, the research examined examples in Scripture that gave credence to Paul's claims about himself. The goal was to determine if the apostle primarily self-identified as Jewish, Roman, Christian, or as some other identity. As stated in the thesis, Paul's self-identity is a conglomeration of Paul's sociological and religious experiences, leading to an entirely new person who utilizes his background to advance the kingdom of God. The new person that Paul became held fast to one facet of his identity, finding all others to be disposable if setting them aside meant that one would come to know Jesus Christ.

This research was interdisciplinary, making it quite challenging. Identity formation is far from a settled science, with research on the subject occurring on both the sociological and psychological fronts, and neither discipline necessarily agreeing with the other nor cooperating in order to form a consensus on what factors come together in forming an identity. As mentioned previously, when originally explaining the difficulties in the research, the terms "self" and "identity" are used extensively and interchangeably in the psychological and sociological literature with only very general definitions and concepts.⁷³² In all instances, the truth of Scripture overrode the information of man. This is important because the resources sought from sociologists and psychologists did not necessarily come from a Christian standpoint. Failing to have a background in sociology or psychology and weeding through the conflicting information

⁷³² James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*, 69.

regarding identity on both sides, combined with weaving the information into biblical information, made the research difficult at times.

The methodology employed for the biblical exegesis remained the same throughout the paper, as defined in the first chapter. A heavy emphasis was given to studying the historical-cultural context of the first-century world that Paul was a part of, which included a variety of cultural backgrounds. This was a necessary starting point due to the culture of Paul's time being so far removed from the modern-day Western cultural experience. The understanding of "identity" that current culture possesses is not something that the apostle Paul would have had an understanding of, yet it is clear from these studies that he did have some sense of desiring a certain persona to be put forth both by the church and himself. Additionally, "Christianity," as experienced by the modern culture, is not something that Paul would have been familiar with since Christianity did not become its own religion until the end of Paul's life or shortly thereafter. These issues made it necessary to have an understanding of the historical-culture context of the myriad of cultures and sub-cultures in Paul's world.

Additional methodologies employed include exploring the literary and theological contexts of the texts in which Paul was discussing, acting on, or acting against his possible identities in order to distinguish which portion of his identity Paul would not set aside for any reason. Paul's theology is complex, and many times, the apostle will wrap theological ideas around one another in a manner that links them together extremely closely, making the theological aspects of the exposition tedious. Lexical and contextual analysis was employed as needed to further understand Paul's words and phrases in his writings.

The first step in the research process was to develop a thorough knowledge and definition of identity. It would be impossible to determine Paul's identity without knowing what identity

actually is. However, with the social sciences being unsettled on this front, a definition had to be obtained that would adequately explain "identity" from a standpoint that it could be recognized in Paul. Rosner supposes that self-identity is simply the answer to the question, "Who am I?"⁷³³ Pouring through studies from various experts on identity caused the discovery that both inward and outward influences persuade identity formation. Psychology believes that identity is formed internally and solidified through natural processes as we advance toward adulthood, and sociology believes that identity is formed externally and, therefore, changes over time as society changes. There is little doubt that both internal and external processes and interactions play a part in the creation of a personal identity, although it is unknown to what degree.

The definition of identity that ultimately guided this study is as follows: self-identity is the knowledge of one's personal values and character traits that cause them to behave in particular ways in the world around them. Once a relationship with the Lord is entered into through the acceptance of Jesus, the goal is to be working towards becoming more and more like Christ (1 Jhn 2:6). This idea is somewhat alien to psychologists and sociologists, as studies have shown that humans are not easily changed. Cote and Levine write that humans are afflicted with a high degree of inertia when it comes to creating any form of personal, lasting change.⁷³⁴ Yet, change is something that is expected to be continual in the life of one who has accepted Christ, working towards being as close to the likeness of Christ as possible. Thus, if this is a biblical expectation, it must not be impossible. Through a relationship with the Lord, we discover the

⁷³³ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 23.

⁷³⁴ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*, 4.

character traits of God and the things that God values, and those traits and values are adopted by the believer. The things that do not match up with God's values and character are left behind.

From that definition of identity, the research set forth to discover the self-identity of Paul. It was not a question of who scholars see Paul as or where his theology originated from; the goal was simply to discover who Paul identified as. As the previously described methodology indicated, the task had to be tackled with a fair amount of historical-cultural context in place. The next task at hand was to explore Paul and the world he lived in as thoroughly as possible, from his childhood to the Greco-Roman world to his time spent as a Pharisee. As much as possible was studied, with more being discovered along the journey towards Paul's self-identity.

Once a knowledge of the aspects of Paul's culture had been given attention, the aim was to examine three of the more discussed aspects of Paul's background. These included his Jewish background, his Roman citizenry, and his "Christian" background, which included expositing the apostle's rapid life change when he encountered Christ. This path began with scrutinizing Paul's Jewish background, as it is always the foremost identity that scholars focus upon when studying Paul. There is a good reason for this focus. This study determined that at his core, Paul remained Jewish, even if it looked different at the end than it did before. It only makes sense that he continued to value his Jewishness; it was from this religion and nation that his beloved Savior had come to fulfill that which he had so zealously pursued. Yet, by the very nature of his God-given mission, Paul must speak both Jewishly and non-Jewishly.⁷³⁵ It is not necessary that Paul must be either fully Jewish or not Jewish at all. Ultimately, Paul greatly valued his Jewish heritage and remained Jewish throughout the entirety of his life, but there are recorded instances

⁷³⁵ Andrew S. Jacobs, "A Jew's Jew: Paul and the Early Christian Problem of Jewish Origins," *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006): 258–286, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499635>, 260.

in the Bible of the apostle purposely suppressing aspects of his Jewish heritage to favor his overarching personal identity.

Chapter five centered around evaluating Paul's Christianity, and the discovery was astounding. Fully expecting the research to point to Paul self-identifying as Christian, the discovery of the history of the timeline of the split between Judaism and Christianity was shocking. It was not possible for Paul to identify as "Christian" because, in the best scenario, Christianity experienced the full split from Judaism, transitioning from being a Jewish sect to its own separately recognized religion, at the very end of Paul's life, if not after he had already passed. Paul, therefore, could not have identified as Christian because Christianity as we know it was not in existence.

Furthermore, after these lengthy studies, the author is of the opinion that even if Judaism and Christianity had been as separate in the first century as they are in modern times, Paul still would have maintained his Jewish identity, likely relating most to the Messianic Jews. For Paul, everything that had to do with Christ emanated from his Jewish religion. For one's core values to align with something that is then part of their identity, that thing must exist in the first place. These discoveries also led to an understanding that Paul did not "convert" upon meeting Christ. Again, there was nothing to convert to, with Paul simply accepting the Savior that was promised to the Jewish people in Scripture, the Messiah they had been waiting for throughout their history as a people. Rather, the term that this author has come to prefer for Damascus Road is that Paul encountered and recognized Christ.

However, there was a marked contrast between the before-Christ Paul and the after-Christ Paul, marking a change of values in relation to the Savior. The conclusion reached by the evidence is that Paul remained Jewish and valued his Jewish heritage, seeing Jesus as the long-

awaited fulfillment of that heritage, even if the Messiah looked different than he had imagined. When Paul was blinded by Christ, followers of “The Way” were not yet even referred to as Christians, and when that designation was given, Paul was already preaching the gospel. As the separation between Judaism and Christianity began to take hold, Paul did not see a need to identify with one or the other. He was Christian and Jewish. A follower of Christ with a Jewish heritage.

The last aspect of Paul’s background that he might have possibly identified with was his Roman citizenry. The Hellenistic culture of Paul’s day had permeated much of the Eastern Mediterranean world and a good deal beyond.⁷³⁶ It would, therefore, be plausible if Paul, too, had been influenced by this culture. However, upon sifting through the research, Paul rarely refers to his citizenship status as a Roman and utilizes the status only when it aided him in spreading the gospel message. In fact, the idols that the culture so focused on bothered Paul in his spirit (Acts 17:16), and he regularly stood against the culture, turning the language of the culture around to employ it for biblical principles.

Wright states that at every point in Paul’s relations with Rome or in reference to the Roman authorities, the same response is found that is to be expected of the apostle: Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not.⁷³⁷ The same conclusion was reached by the author. At times, it can be seen that Paul does, indeed, use the Roman rights that are afforded to him through his citizenship. They were tools given to him through the authorities that were put into place by the Lord for him to utilize for the kingdom, which he did at the appropriate times. Tools they might have been, but an identity it was not. Paul placed no emphasis on the Roman citizen portion of his identity.

⁷³⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 4.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

With the three preceding options explored and out of the way, Paul's self-identity could truly be focused on. This began with looking at Paul's understanding of being a "new creation" and what that meant for him after meeting Christ. In Paul's theology, the entirety of creation is plodding towards the ultimate restoration through the work of Christ, believers included. Each believer is becoming more and more like Christ as they continue serving him and learning more about him throughout their life. The gospel of Christ both promises and demands change.⁷³⁸ Millar writes that for Paul, the forensic act of justification is accompanied by an act of cleansing so dramatic that it has altered not only the status of the 'unrighteous' but has reshaped the identity of those who were formerly drunkards, idolaters, and the rest.⁷³⁹

Paul was formerly a Christ-despising Pharisee. Yet, through his radical transformation and his change by grace through faith, he was given a new identity. That new identity, as meeting this research's definition of identity, changed his personal values and character traits, and we set forth to find the biblical evidence of Paul behaving in a manner that showed these values and traits. That biblical evidence was discovered in Paul's missional strategy to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22) and the situations that were recorded in the Bible where Paul puts portions of his identity aside in order to win sinners to Christ. This is the outward evidence needed to demonstrate Paul acting in accordance with the values of his identity, the identity given to him by Christ as an apostle. Apostle and servant of Christ is proven to be the only identity that Paul would not set to the side.

In his letters, Paul repeatedly introduces himself from the identity that he wishes to be known as apostle and servant of Christ. Although this introduction varies throughout his letters, it

⁷³⁸ J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, 8.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 14.

is clear that this is the self-identity that he possesses and that he wishes for the wider community of believers to accept. Not only does Paul speak of himself in this manner, but he acts in accordance with this identity, which matches the definition of identity that was given in chapter two. Paul not only greatly valued his apostolic authority but that his entire life was wrapped around this very identity. The idea that Paul's self-identity was that of an apostle before anything else has been proven through the definition of self-identity, his missional strategy, the recorded instances in which he set aside his Jewish background or gave very little thought to his Roman background, his own introductions to others and the way in which he desired to be viewed by the community, and the outward way in which he lived out his apostolic authority.

Implications

Paul is a powerful figure in the church body, even today. Thousands of years later, we still study his words, with the way we understand Christ and his saving power mostly being given definition by the apostle. Paul possessed an incredible missional strategy that could today be widely employed by the church to revamp missions and begin a fresh movement of ushering believers into the kingdom in the United States. Amid the deconstruction movement, Paul's strategy, deftly recorded in the pages of Scripture for us to follow, could be a part of the solution to declining church membership.

Poll after poll shows declining church membership throughout the U.S. In a Pew Research article from 2019, reports state that 65% of adults state that they are Christian when asked about their religion, which is down 12% over the previous decade.⁷⁴⁰ Additionally, Pew Research shows that their 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies continue to trend towards

⁷⁴⁰ "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center*, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

religious disaffiliation.⁷⁴¹ In a study published in 2020, a religious organization that was experiencing a substantial decline in membership was studied in order to determine the reason for the decline.⁷⁴² The researchers discovered that ineffective leadership and inconsistent behavior in leadership were major reasons for the church's decline.⁷⁴³ Many of the church members had simply failed to find integrity in the leadership and their behavior. On a positive note, the strength of the church was found to be the quality of its members and the strength of the relationships between the members.⁷⁴⁴

In March of 2020, Barna research reported that just 1 in 4 Americans was a practicing Christian.⁷⁴⁵ To be practicing, the article notes that the respondent must identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is very important in their lives, and have attended church in the past month.⁷⁴⁶ In 2000, Barna's research indicated that 45 percent of those sampled were practicing Christians, with a consistent decline over 19 years, ending with 25 percent of those sampled falling under the context of practicing Christians.⁷⁴⁷ This is a startling decline in those who are actively practicing their faith.

⁷⁴¹ "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center*, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

⁷⁴² David Fowler, Jon Musgrave, and Jill Musgrave, "A Traditional Protestant Church Experiencing Substantial Membership Decline: An Organizational Strength Analysis and Observations to Attend or Leave the Institution," *International Journal of Organization Theory & Behavior* 23, no. 3 (2020): 207–223, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijotb-02-2019-0012>, 207.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ "Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith," *Barna*, accessed December 8, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

In addition, the American culture is suffering from a crisis of identity. From gender to sexual orientation, the ways in which a person can “identify” are becoming innumerable. In a culture in which identity is at the forefront of everyone’s attention, the church seems to have lost the art of Paul’s missional strategy. The body of Christ no longer understands how to put their identity as the ambassadors of Christ first in order to minister to the wider community. Rosner writes that the overarching advice that is heard in modern American society is to “be true to yourself.”⁷⁴⁸ This mindset, however anti-biblical, has managed to sneak into the mindset of believers. The church has lost the missional art of “all things to all people” that Paul so carefully embedded in the pages of his letters in favor of seeking and firmly installing their own identity (1 Cor 9:22).

Rather than engaging first and foremost in the identity of being known by God and acting outwardly from that as the Lord's ambassador, the church has been busy engaging in the culture that seeks to identify themselves by outward markers such as jobs, family relationships, cultural heritage, political affiliation, race, ethnicity, and nationality, to name a few. As the research in this paper has shown, there is nothing wrong with having such things as portions of one's minor identity. However, the church has become unwilling to set these identity markers aside for the sake of the gospel. Political affiliation often overcomes kindness in an effort to reach those far from God. A person’s job becomes a stumbling block to sharing the gospel rather than an identity that can be set aside to reach an employee lower down the rung of the corporate ladder. We have failed to learn from Paul’s success that he so freely left for us to utilize.

⁷⁴⁸ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 24.

This failure to put aside our own desires and wants could easily be described as pride. Pride does serious damage to our relationships and is the death of the community.⁷⁴⁹ Pride also leads us to look down on others and insist upon our own superiority, although the Bible tells us that love lacks pride (1 Cor 13:4).⁷⁵⁰ Pride makes us feel like our own assumed important identities are of the utmost importance over the winning of another's soul.

Reminding the church body that all other portions of their identity take a back seat to their identity of being "in Christ" as representatives and ambassadors for the kingdom of God to win souls to Christ is paramount to reversing the decline that continues in the American churches at a startling rate (Eph 2:10; 1 Cor 5:17; Rom 6:11). The Bible judges the traditional identity markers to be frail foundations upon which to build and solidify an identity and warns about putting too much emphasis on them.⁷⁵¹ This research on the emphasis with which Paul places on his identity as an apostle and the degree to which he was willing to put aside other aspects of himself and put others before him can be beneficial to the church at large, encouraging them to get away from society's desire to define themselves by various items that are temporal.

Further Study

Much study has been done about Paul, but I believe that there are avenues within this research that could be further explored, especially on an interdisciplinary level. There is a current cultural focus on identity and trauma that Scripture could bring insight into as the Bible contains the ultimate answer to identity. Keeping up with any ongoing research from sociology and

⁷⁴⁹ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 208.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

psychology regarding identity formation in light of the current identity angst problems that are pervasive throughout society can shed new light on the issues as time goes on.

Cote and Levine write that one of the determining factors for personal change is that a crisis or shock produces the motivation for action.⁷⁵² This is certainly possible in Paul's case, as the shock that overcame him when he realized that he had initially missed his Messiah had to be overwhelming. It would be interesting to study trauma responses in relation to Paul's sudden change, as the Bible may provide answers on how to handle such responses.

The social identity of the church is something that Paul appears to have developed amongst the churches that he guided and offered advice to. The development of research on this subject could lead to implications for modern-day church relationships within the community. How do communities currently view churches? What can be done to develop their social identity to make it favorable without compromising the message of the gospel? In the *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, some of this research has already been approached, although, in some instances, it has been approached from a secular position.⁷⁵³ Many of the social identity issues that were present within the ranks of the early church body can also be studied in relation to the identity of the church body today.

Conclusion

Paul was Jewish. He was also Roman and Christian, in the manner that we understand Christianity today. Just like each and every one of us, Paul could have been identified by a

⁷⁵² James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture a Social Psychological Synthesis*, 6.

⁷⁵³ J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, 117.

variety of different things, many of which are likely not even mentioned in the Bible. Ultimately, once Paul encountered the risen Christ, his identity could be found in nothing other than Christ himself. The goodness of God had flowed out from the Jewish people to the Gentiles, and the God that Paul was so “zealous” in serving before he met Christ could now be zealously shared with those who had not previously had access to him (Phil 3:6; Gal 1:13-14).

In Galatians, 3:26-28 Paul writes that the Galatians are "all sons of God, through faith," that they have "put on Christ," and "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." He ends this encouraging section of Scripture with verse 29, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29). These verses are further proof that Paul cared little for background or the minor identities that are associated with living in this world. What Paul cared about was the identity that one obtained when one put one's faith in Jesus. As Rosner summarizes it, "As believers in Christ, we are children of God, loved by God, and given full rights of inheritance as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."⁷⁵⁴

This identity, given to every believer, was what Paul was seeking to provide to people. His own identity was born in either an instant flash of light on Damascus Road or in the days of literal blindness that followed before God returned his sight to him. What cannot be denied is that Paul was never quite the same again. Always an enthusiastic servant of the Lord, he was now an on-fire apostle for the Messiah his people had waited for over centuries. Knowing the fullness of the goodness of God, he went forth to share it with all who might listen.

⁷⁵⁴ Brian S. Rosner and Jonathan Lunde, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, 171.

What mattered besides Christ? For Paul, nothing. His apostleship and service to the Lord stands at the crux of every move he makes and every word he writes. Few scholars deny the way in which his identity as an apostle controlled his life. Everything and anything could be set aside if it meant that Christ would advance. In Philippians, he writes, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). Far more than anything else in life, Paul wanted Jesus. Paul knew the worth of giving up everything to know Christ.

Paul may have valued his Jewish identity, and within this research, it seems clear that he did, in fact, place quite a bit of value on his Jewish heritage and other aspects of his identity. However, when it came time to preach the gospel to someone, he ignored his own identity markers, instead becoming what the person needed at the moment in order for them to understand and accept Christ or to help society see Christianity in a favorable light. Over and over, we see this practiced in his life; those actions are a testament to that which he believed.

Now, at the end, we return to the original question that fueled this research. What did Paul believe about his own identity? Paul was a multi-faceted individual with many different backgrounds and experiences in life that shaped the person that he became. That person was greatly used by God, not only in his own lifetime but far beyond his life into our present day. Here in modern times, he still teaches us how to strategically bring souls to Christ.

In short, Paul knew that his identity was that of an apostle of Christ. He was sent to spread the message of the gospel. This identity repeatedly emerges throughout Scripture as his primary focus and the way that he refers to himself. The research shows that Paul's entire identity circled around Christ and the apostleship that the Lord had bestowed upon him. It flowed

outward through his values, character traits, and actions, the defining markers of identity. The main and only fitting designation for this man who has shaped the church for centuries is Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus—the very way in which he referred to himself.

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