

# A Complicated Apostle

*Who was St. Paul?*

BY JOHN J. KILGALLEN

**F**EW WOULD QUESTION the lasting value of St. Paul's contribution to the content of our faith. But when one reads or hears what Paul wrote, one often meets a personality that can seem unpleasant or even antagonizing. In short, Paul can put people off by who he seems to be. Though we say that he is promoting a doctrine, not himself, he can still leave unfriendly impressions upon his readers, appearing pompous, cantankerous, superior, harsh and even a misunderstanding son of the presumptions of his culture. Unlike storytelling (as in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles) where little of the author is revealed, letter-writing brings the personality of the writer very close to the surface. Paul's personality cannot be avoided. Worse, it can stand in the way of appreciation of what the Spirit says through him. It is best, then, to try to understand the man. Perhaps we still will not like him much, but, once understood, his contribution to faith will be appreciated more than ever.

So who was Paul?

## The Person of Paul

*St. Paul was a genius.* This is a common and ancient assessment of Paul from specialists of every (or no) persuasion who have extensively studied his writings. His writings were so profound that they were used by defenders of the faith who were themselves recognized as brilliant thinkers. And

as with most geniuses, Paul often expressed himself in leaps we do not follow easily. This type of realization has left us the understatement in 2 Pt 3:16 that in Paul's letters "there

are some things hard to understand." If you know a genius, you know Paul. Quick, deeply perceptive, highly intellectual, impatient or unaware that others could not keep up with him—Paul had many of the attributes we associate with genius.

*St. Paul was emotional.* Though it is important to avoid caricatures, it seems safe to say that the Psalms portray the Jewish people as emotional—highly, visibly so. They wear their heart on their sleeve, as Shakespeare says. They are very expressive, rarely hiding their feelings, whether this public expression is pleasing to others or not. There is no "stiff upper lip" for them;

you have to make room for this often intense expression of this personality type if you deal at length with a person like Paul.

*St. Paul had an education far beyond the normal.* Paul's education was lengthy and profound, a measure for his genius; it was also exceptionally broad. On the one hand, Paul sat in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, the greatest Jewish teacher of the first-century A.D. From this man Paul would have learned the most abstruse meanings of Jewish tradition and the varied and complicated methods of Jewish interpretation of their Scriptures. He would have become very adept at arguing over the significance of scriptural texts. On the other hand, Tarsus, his hometown, was a retirement locale for certain philosophers after their teaching careers in Rome. Tarsus was loosely akin to a university town. As such,



"THE APOSTLE PAUL IN MEDITATION," REMBRANDT HARMENSZ VAN RIJN, PHOTO: REUNION DES MUSEES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY

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it afforded the young Paul access to some of the profound philosophies of his time, attendant with methods and argumentation practiced in the philosophical schools and circles. It is within this twofold education—both Jewish and Gentile—that Paul’s genius developed and flourished throughout his life.

*St. Paul was a Pharisee.* Paul was an adult convert. Widely educated, he had made the choice to be a member of the “strictest form of the Pharisees.” In doing this, he was a radical. The Pharisees (“Separated Ones”) emerged from the Jewish struggles nearly 200 years before Paul, after the long-lasting and successful revolt of the Maccabees to free Israel and, later, the lapse of the Jewish ruling authority (once free from foreign domination) into secularism. In each historical situation, fierce loyalists or zealots arose to defeat the foreigners and challenge the secularism of new Jewish governments. Over their history, the Pharisees had many martyrs, as they single-mindedly defended the tradition of Yahweh against threats from without and within Israel.

Pharisees never made up a large percentage of Israelites. They were highly respected by most people for their unswerving dedication to Yahweh and his Law; yet they were often impatient with those who, as they saw it, did not give first place in their lives to the Law of Yahweh. Common to this relatively small group of fiery people was a fierce dedication to the Law, obedience to which assured one of salvation. It is not too much to say that the personality profile of a Pharisee was capped by total commitment, an unbending interest only in the Law and its traditions.

Paul never had any doubt about what he wanted to be or do. Not everyone likes a person so intense and fixed on goals, but such was the character of the strictest of the Pharisees. Given this life orientation, in Paul’s adult conversion we see that powerful drive (like water from a fire hose) turned from dedication to Judaism to dedication to Christ. Only the object of intensity and devotion changed, not the psychology or characteristics that Paul already possessed. Readying oneself to read Paul means readying oneself to stand in the presence of utter devotion—first as a Pharisee, then as a follower of Christ. It is hard to imagine a Pharisee to be other than stubborn, ready to make great sacrifices, able to “go it alone” if necessary. Such was Paul.

*St. Paul was a founder of churches.* While we rightly speak of him as apostle to the Gentiles (though his letters readily show him an apostle to the Jews, too), Paul founded a number of Christian communities. Among the New Testament writings are eight letters written to communities Paul founded (he did not found the church at Rome). He founded churches in Galatia as well as the towns of Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus and Colossae. It is worth noting that Paul was also a mentor and guide to Titus and

Timothy; to them, too, he sent three letters.

We can anticipate how Paul would relate to these various Christians. On the one hand, he had a love for them that only a founder could have, and a desperate fear of losing people whom he considered to be his children. Protective of his fledgling churches, encouraging, correcting, making decisions for them, guiding them and rejoicing with them—all of this in Paul’s letters flows from his status as a founder of what he refused to lose. It is important to remember that when we meet these church communities in his letters, they are only between five and 10 years old. Most of these Christians were adult converts, who inevitably entered Christianity with the baggage of years of false worship and immorality. Paul called these Christians “the saints,” but he struggled mightily to make them so. One has to appreciate the tension that Paul allowed himself to live with throughout his missionary life, as he tried to preserve and help to grow what he rightly knew was good and of God and should not die. He spoke of himself as the mother, the father, the brother of these communities. Much of his writing must be understood as flowing from such love and respect, wanting only the people’s good in all circumstances.

### **Paul’s World**

*St. Paul lived in his own particular circumstances.* The entry of the divine into Paul’s life was most extraordinary. It is hard for us today to understand fully the impact that moment had forever in his life and psychology. We can only acknowledge it and live with it. Further, Paul’s letters (except possibly Romans) were written to deal with particular historical situations. To understand these letters well, one must understand the circumstances that led Paul to compose them, for this will help to appreciate their tone. If these circumstances were threatening to the communities affected, we must realize that there was no other way for Paul to communicate with them than letter-writing, a form of communication that took a long time to reach its readers. Moreover, to what extent can one solve a problem by letter? Many of Paul’s decisions were framed so as to bring to an immediate halt whatever was eroding the communities; the tone of his letters seems to have been secondary to him. Actually, the letters in many instances were only a stop-gap; Paul implicitly hoped to meet his communities again, at which time he would try to handle problems with greater polish and study, and with a charitable, frank exchange of opinions.

Paul’s letters occasionally communicated decisions that do not touch the essence of Paul’s witness to the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. When left to himself to decide matters, especially from a long distance, Paul often fell back on his Jewish, Pharisaic training. What else could

he be expected to do? He, too, was limited by his own religious understanding of God's will, and he used that as his best tool to stop problems and create at least temporary harmony and peace. Again, would we, in his position, do things differently?

*Paul had a unique sense of Christian apostleship.* "To me life is Christ... I long to be with Christ" (Phil 1:21). Paul reached this psychological unity in himself by the end of his life, if not earlier. But he could still write, "God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus...you, my brothers and sisters whom I love and long for" (Phil 1:8). Paul, like so many of us, could say, "I have not attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it" (Phil 3:12). Paul at the end was single-minded, whether in serving God or loving his neighbor. He learned and then taught; undeterred by persecution, he defended and offered Christ to anyone who would listen. He assured those baptized and intent on living in Christ that he could serve as their model, but never asked anyone to reach God in precisely the way he did. His hope? "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things, and keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me" (Phil 4:8-9).

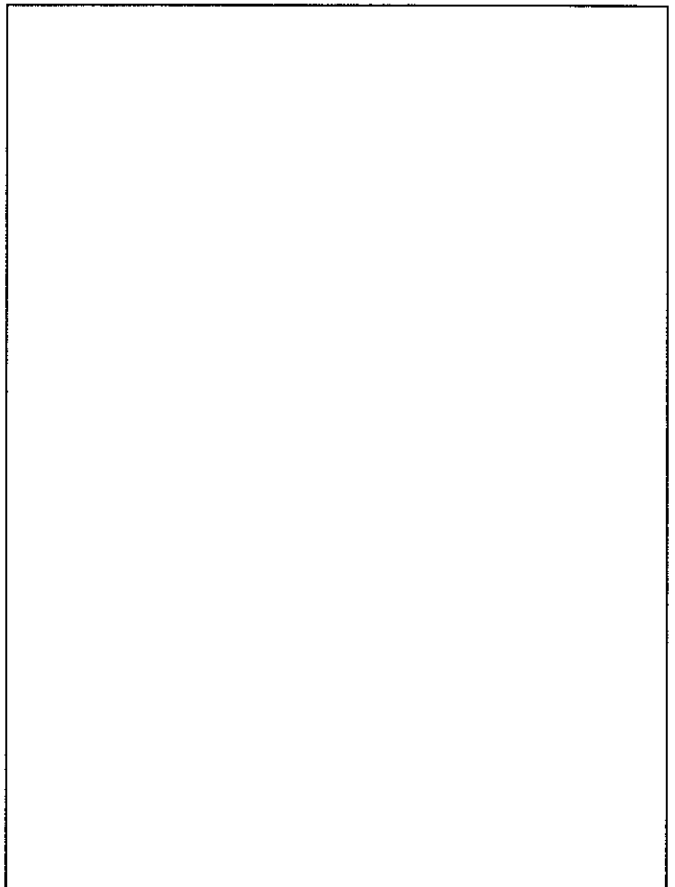
### **A Chosen Vessel**

Paul withstood frightening opposition from man and nature. He knew fear and joy. Occasionally Paul corrected authorities when he thought it necessary. He preferred not to be a "loner apostle" but instead to work together with other preachers and teachers; he enjoyed the company of friends. Often other teachers misrepresented Christianity or castigated Paul's person. Though chancing the appearance of vanity, at such times he could only recount his "credentials" that made him trustworthy.

Paul was a small man, not handsome and not a great orator. But then, it was not himself he was selling. He was convinced he had the right understanding of life's essentials and wanted everyone else to have it too. He, like us, was an "earthen vessel" holding a treasure. The Spirit of Christ made use of him, not least to give us 13 of our 27 New Testament documents, the charter of Christianity. Paul was a chosen vessel, a willing vessel, who tried tirelessly to give to others, to anyone, what God had given him and who ultimately, like every human being, longed "to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection, to be conformed to his death if somehow I may attain to unending life" (Phil 3:10). **A**



Jim McDermott, S.J., puts St. Paul on the couch, at [americamagazine.org/video](http://americamagazine.org/video).



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