
The Religious Genius of Saint Paul

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by Dean Sam Candler

As I write and teach, one of the ongoing projects I have assigned myself is to redeem the popular image of Saint Paul the Apostle! Some people claim he distorted that original message of Jesus when he set up communities of faith across the ancient Mediterranean. Other critics claim that he was a prisoner to his cultural context, too, unable to grant women, for instance, their proper place in a progressive world.

Well, of course he was bound to the particular culture of his time, like every one of us is. No matter our positive contributions to the world, we also carry old baggage with us, baggage that might not be discarded in our culture until generations and centuries after us. Still, when Saint Paul appointed the leader of the first Christian church in what is now Europe, that person was a woman! She was Lydia, the first person in Europe to host a Christian church community in her home, in Philippi. St. Paul deserves credit for advancing women, not blame! (“There is no longer male and female,” he would say at Galatians 3:28, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”)

I believe Paul was actually a religious genius. What Paul taught about psychology, and especially religious psychology, was nothing short of genius. Despite the simple story of his being thrown from his horse on his way to Damascus, and being blinded for three days until he recognized Christ, I believe his effectual conversion took years to mature. It was just like the maturity of each of us, no matter what our original and overwhelming encounter with God was.

Over those years, the conversion of Saint Paul taught him that the human soul longs to be set free. The human soul longs to be released from the bondage and luggage of our lives. That bondage and luggage is what Paul came to recognize as “law.” That was his own Jewish concept, to be sure, but the concept can be translated into any human culture or religion.

All of humankind, no matter what religion we are, no matter whether we even believe in God or not, carry inside ourselves some notion of “law.” Our communities of faith develop customs and behaviors that are good for us, so good that they become “law.” But then, somehow, the letter of the law turns against freedom, and the law turns ultimately against love.

In his genius, Paul realized that we are saved not by works which try to scrupulously satisfy the law, but we are saved by Christ. Christ, we might say, is faith itself—the power of believing only the ultimate goodness and freeing love of God. Paul was set free from law when he encountered the true and living and loving Christ.

That is the freedom Paul teaches us to celebrate in Christ—the freedom of the human soul. It is the very principle of salvation. Saint Paul’s genius was the realization that Jesus Christ came to set us free—free from any principle or law or expectation that keeps us in bondage. “For freedom,” Paul said, “for freedom, Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1).

Finally, many critics would claim that Paul’s authoritarian zeal and moral admonition stand in contrast to the “more spiritual” works of the New Testament—say, the Gospel of John, for instance. I must point out, however (as I have begun my weekly Bible studies this year and devoted them to the Gospel of John) the similarities between John’s spirituality and that of Saint Paul. It is after Paul speaks of Christ setting us free that John the gospel writer says, “the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). It is a message, then, for any Christian—and even for non-Christians: The spirit of Christ—Love!—sets us free from whatever the Law is in our lives.

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