

What would Christianity be without Paul?



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A reader sent me a note in response to my suggestion the Christian Story would be quite different without the theological interpretations of the Apostle Paul. The reader said: "I'm wondering if Christianity would have been a better (however you want to define that) religion without Paul and his writings? For all the thought and study I've put into both New and Old Testament "stuff" over the years I can't believe I haven't thought of this before...you really got me pondering." It's satisfying to know some of my scribbles are "bouncing the braincells" toward more critical thinking, especially concerning matters of religion.

Here's something to ponder, and once you think about it, it seems quite obvious: without one book, a whole religion would not exist. No book=no religion, no tradition, no faith. Actually, most religions would not exist were it not for their one special book. That's a basic fact of the history of religion. Belief is bound to a book, maybe in a book (makes belief "binding"). This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but worth publishing.

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The question raised by my reader stands: Would one faith, Christianity, have been better somehow without one man's additions to the narrative we know as the "The Jesus Story"? Would we even know the story at all if someone named Paul had not propagated his version of it all over the known world of his day?

Many Christians would quickly push back and say: "But most of the New Testament was written by Paul so why speculate what would have happened? If God chose Paul to write His message about Christ, those writings are God's Word and can't be torn out of the text!" I understand that as the traditional Christian viewpoint, though it may also be true that believers often choose which parts of the text are most treasured, memorized, emphasized or sermonized. Look at any person's Bible and you will no doubt see highlighted passages, underlines, bookmarks or notes showing the most meaningful sentences. Which of course begs the question: how can one sentence spoken by God be more important than any other? The most essential question might be: Why is the later part of the story (the "New" part) more important than the "Old" part? Some say it's about "progressive revelation," that everything in the "Old" — to be accurate, the Hebrew Bible — was leading up to the Main

Event: the Jesus Story, redemption, salvation, judgment. Essentially the Gospel According to Paul.

A student in one of my Reuter Center classes told me she was raised a Protestant and never heard that Paul's writings were "scripture." For a majority of the Christian world, whatever is bound as "The Holy Bible" is scripture — The Word of God — but it's an intriguing thought: leave Paul out and see what happens to faith. (A legitimate question here might be: "But what about the writings of Peter, James, the writers of Acts, Hebrews and Revelation? There are other writings, not just by Paul." Correct. Yet, keep in mind, no one is certain exactly who wrote any of these (or any of the Gospels, for that matter) and there are no existing originals of any of these ancient texts. All we can say is that the early community of believers passed around letters by other believers to encourage believing. The fundamental point: Jesus never wrote a word — there is no autobiography — only very selective and biased biography).

Christianity without Paul would be based primarily on the Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — and center on the life and teachings of Jesus, rather than esoteric theology. There is certainly theology in the Gospels, yet the focus is on the walking, talking, teaching human being: Jesus of Nazareth. His message of lovingkindness, peacemaking,

justice and very this-worldly inclusion of outcasts, may not be as dramatic and emotional as the supernatural story of the Exalted Christ perpetuated by institutional Christianity, but it could hint at a "better" Christian faith. Without Paul (and some other early Christian writings) Jesus would not appear as a powerful Morality Policeman wielding a big nightstick to punish nonbelievers, or merely a Good Shepherd with a crooked staff tending and defending his well-fenced flock, but perhaps more the Agitating Teacher who was most agitated by the oppressive theologies and strict moralities of the self-righteous. The self-appointed apostle Paul (who never met Jesus) turned the Wandering Palestinian Jewish Teacher into the Divine King of Christianity. What this meant for the evolution of the Jesus Story is evident. History shows the result of a Paul-proclaimed Savior with a Sword as opposed to an Ethical Teacher reaching out with a hand of healing and compassion.

Which religion makes the most sense for our day: Christianity, Paulianity, or an improved update?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).