



# Dear Fr. Kerper

## Who is St. Paul?

► **Dear Father Kerper:** I just heard that Pope Benedict created a year for St. Paul. I've also heard that St. Paul wasn't even a real apostle, and that he changed the gospel of Jesus by adding a lot of his own ideas and opinions. Why all this attention on St. Paul?

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail [editor@parablemag.com](mailto:editor@parablemag.com).

**Y**our question touches upon three different – but interconnected – areas: the factual, interpretative, and practical. Let's take one step at a time.

First, we need to clarify St. Paul's status as an apostle. Clearly, he was not one of the Twelve Apostles. However, from ancient times, the Church has always referred to him as an apostle. In the liturgy, for example, his principal feast day (June 29) is linked with St. Peter's, and both are called apostles. This, of course, leads many to believe that St. Paul, like St. Peter, was one of the Twelve. Since he wasn't, why does the Church call St. Paul an apostle?

In the New Testament, the term apostle is applied to those who knew Jesus face-to-face before his death and resurrection, who were called by Jesus from the wider group of disciples, and who were commissioned by him to act and speak on his behalf. The word "apostle" comes from the Greek word meaning "ambassador." Just as an ambassador embodies the nation he or she represents, so does an apostle serve as an authorized agent of Christ.

St. Paul probably never saw the "historical" Jesus. His claim to apostleship rested, rather, on his direct personal encounter with the Risen Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke gives a detailed account of this face-to-face meeting on the road to Damascus. St. Paul himself refers to it in some of his letters. (ref. Acts 9:1-11)

However, St. Paul did not rely only on this personal encounter. He deliberately sought out those who had seen the "historical" Jesus, specifically St. Peter. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul notes that after his conversion he spent 15 days with St. Peter (called "Cephas"). He wanted to verify that the "historical" Jesus known by St. Peter and the other apostles was indeed the same Christ he had encountered. As such, St. Paul's personal "witnessing" of the Lord was as authentic as theirs and sufficient to qualify him as a true apostle.

The idea that St. Paul "changed the gospel" and advanced his own personal opinions in its place has been around for a long time. In fact, some scholars have asserted that St. Paul — not Jesus — is the real founder of Christianity and that Jesus would never have recognized the gospel as preached by St. Paul. Neither claim is true.

St. Paul did not "invent" Christianity. Instead, he reflected deeply on the mission and person of Christ as he and "eye witnesses" like St. Peter experienced him. He then drew upon his extensive knowledge of Judaism and contemporary Greek philosophy to "flesh out" the gospel. In effect, he used his powerful intellectual resources to make the gospel understandable to non-Jewish people of a different mindset.

St. Paul drew attention to several key ideas implicit in the gospel but not formulated by Jesus himself. These include the indispensability of God's grace; "original sin" and humanity's need for salvation; the unbreakable connection between Israel, Christ, and the Church; the link between faith and works; the Christian understanding of the state; the multiplicity of ministries within the Church; and the nature of the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ. In every case, St. Paul did not "invent" doctrines. Rather, he developed terms and concepts to enable a clearer, deeper, and more cohesive understanding of the essential gospel truths.

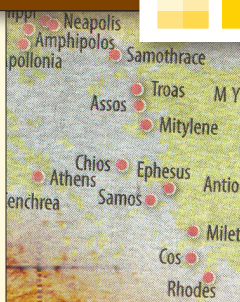
Why did Pope Benedict XVI declare a "year of St. Paul"? Throughout history, popes have dedicated specific years to

Mary, the Eucharist, the Redemption, and so forth to focus the universal Church on a particular aspect of our Catholic faith. In this case, Pope Benedict designated the period between June 29, 2008 and June 29, 2009 as a "Pauline Year" to reawaken people to the richness of St. Paul's theology and spirituality, which so beautifully enhance our understanding of the simple yet profound gospel of Christ.

We would all do well to accept the Holy Father's invitation to have a deeper encounter with the Risen Christ by using the very profound, creative, and inspired reflections of St. Paul.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth

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YEAR OF  
**Saint Paul**

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2008-2009  
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