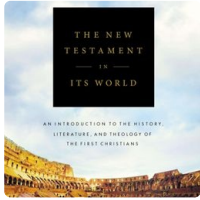


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Why was Paul so controversial?

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Delving Into The New Testament In Its World - Eternity News

Welcome to the third in a six-part series delving into the benchmark book *The New Testament In Its World*.

Co-author Michael Bird takes us through the text he wrote with N.T. Wright, this episode examining the historical figure of the Apostle Paul, a figure who has come to represent the most hard-line aspects of the Christian faith.

On the chopping block are important questions like,

- * What was Paul's significance to the early church?
- * Where does the controversy emerge in his work?
- * How does Paul's work lead us to rethink God?

You can buy a copy of *The New Testament In Its World* [here](#).

If you're following along with *The New Testament In Its World*, this episode covers key issues in Part V: Paul and the Faithfulness of God:

1. The Story of Paul's Life and Ministry
2. A Primer on Pauline Theology

Transcript

The New Testament In Its World With Mike Bird If you had to take Paul as a census, if you said, "What's your gender identity? What's your career? What's your identification? Paul would say baptize." You know, that is who I am. Welcome to *The New Testament In Its World* - a super series based on the brilliant book by the same name. My name's Mark Hadley and I'll be leading us through the brain of one of the authors, Dr. Michael Bird, lecturer in theology at Australia's Ridley College.

Now along with Tom Wright, Mike has written *The New Testament In Its World*. He's also the author of 30 books over biblical studies, well worth digging into his name in some catalogue somewhere. But first before we get into what he knows about today's topic, what sort of tea we're drinking this morning, Mike? Well, I've returned to the Melbourne breakfast once more because it just has that bit of morning snobbery that helps me deal with Sydney's side as such as so.

Now don't get me wrong, Sydney is a lovely city. It's got that wonderful kind of hunger games vibe to it. But I just enjoy my Melbourne breakfast, particularly when you're talking to people based in Sydney.

Now like I reject the sort of vanity that you've just described to us, I myself am drinking Japanese cuisine with brown rice. Let's move on to the topic at hand. Why was Paul so controversial? Well look, let's begin, Mike.

What was Paul's significance to the early church? Well, in a number of ways. First of all, Paul had turned from being a persecutor of the Christian faith to becoming one of its leading adherents. So Paul was initially a zealous Pharisee.

When I say zeal, I don't mean that he had bucket loads of enthusiasm. I mean he had a motivation to use what he would probably call holy violence to keep Israel, the people of the Jews, wholly pure from what was in his mind a rogue messianic cult. He believed that they were tarnishing Israel's worship.

They were an affront to God's honour because they were worshipping. They were venerating a false prophet, a pseudo messiah who'd been crucified and therefore cursed. And they were treating him as if he was the appointed agent of deliverance in whom God was especially present.

And Paul utilizing his full knowledge of Scripture, all of his resources and energy went on a very enthusiastic campaign like a religious extremist trying to shut down what he regarded as an apostate or threatening sect. And yet because of his own conversion experience, what happened on that famous and fateful day on the road to Damascus, where he was confronted by the risen Jesus. And everything that he believed at that point was turned upside down.

It meant Jesus was not a false messiah. He was the messiah. He was even the Lord of glory.

God in his glory is what Paul saw on the road to Damascus. And the faith that he was trying to stop was in fact, was in fact the truth, was in fact that the way was the life. And then Paul's, you know, his whole world changed and he ended up becoming a proclaimer of this very faith he wants to try to destroy.

That's that's the first aspect that is Paul that is significant. The second thing is that Paul

had a unique calling to be an apostle of the messiah with a specific mission to the Gentile world. That's to the non-Jewish world.

And he believed he was going to proclaim Jesus's law, the forgiveness of sins, the giving of the spirit and the inclusion of these Gentiles into the family of the messiah. But importantly, he wasn't doing it by the normal way of proselytism. You know, there were Gentiles who joined Judaism.

They were called proselytes. And there was a particular way of going about that. Normally, for males at least, you would get circumcised.

You know, that was the sign of entering into the covenant. And then you would, you know, adopt all of the laws, you know, for the most part and join a Jewish community. But Paul was saying, no, Gentiles can come to faith in Christ in God without having to first convert to Judaism.

In other words, God saves Gentiles as Gentiles. And it's this unity of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, what he was really trying to work for. So we've got not just a sort of Spanish Inquisition member, but we've got somebody who's also a particular James Bond-like mission given in the New Testament world.

Is that a fair summary? All right. Don't know about the James Bond part, but yeah, so the idea of having a mission, you know, and Paul talks about his mission. And he does it in quite amazing points.

He says, you know, look, he does this at Romans 15. He says, yeah, look, my job is to go to the Gentiles. Now, I mean, Gentiles, you could, if you think about them in stereotypical terms, you've got your kind of idle worshiping, pork sandwich eating, probably sexually deviant, you know, this person who is completely affronting to everything that a Jewish person regards as pure and holy, the antithesis to godliness.

And Gentiles are full of ignorance, idolatry, immorality, and impurity. And God says, sorry, Paul says, God's sending me to them, to bring them to the obedience of faith, to sanctify them and make them holy in the Messiah. In other words, I'm not just preaching Judaism light with a few less commands.

I believe God is calling me in the Messiah through the Spirit to bring these Gentiles to holiness. And in fact, they are being so holy, many of them, they're putting the covenant people to shame. Wow.

That that was Paul's big message. That was his big mission. I mean, a lot of people look at Galatians 1, but I say, look at Romans 15.

And that's where you get a real, a real image into what Paul's mission and ministry to the Gentiles was all about. Well, you've raised Romans 15. What does Paul contribute in the

way of theology to the New Testament world? Oh, a number of things, a number of things.

Paul, you could argue, is the first great evangelical theologian. I mean, he's his great letter Romans. It opens up with this wonderful statement of the gospel.

You find the gospel prevalent at many points in Paul's letters. He believes that the good news of Christ really is good news. It's good news for Jews.

It's good news for Greeks. It's good news for Romans, barbarians, and we translate to Roman terms, we could say Arabs, Americans, New Zealanders, and all sorts of things. But Paul is also someone who's reading his scripture.

And he believes, he says, look, you know, Moses is good, but we have to look further back than that, that God's real purpose is to fulfill that promise made to Abraham, that in you, all the nations will be blessed. And Paul believes that big promise of one God worshipping Abrahamic family really comes to fruition through the Messiah. So it's Israel's Messiah is the one through whom this promise comes.

And this is why Paul believes that a transformed Israel will transform the world. So Christ has died on the cross. He's born the sins of the covenant people and indeed the whole world on the cross.

And so that the time is now right for renewal, because when Israel gets renewed, the sequel was always going to be that the Gentiles would join in. I mean, this is the theme you find in Isaiah chapter two in Zechariah eight in Michael four. I mean, this is the big thing when Israel experiences its new exodus, the sequel is that the Gentiles will next be included and incorporate.

And Paul believes he's now one of those agents for helping that work out and come to fruition. He's a little bit like a prophetic figure you might find in Isaiah. He's the divine emissary sent to bring the nations to worship Israel's God through the Messiah.

So it sounds like the way you're describing it there that he's actually just providing an extension of everything that he's so well informed about in the Old Testament. But does Paul bring any new theology? Maybe something that we don't find in the Old Testament? Is there anything particular that is, I guess, Pauline? Oh, I mean, we can talk about a number of Pauline themes. Paul does tend to use this language very commonly of justification.

Now, I mean, that's a very loaded free. I mean, all the words that end in shun as Colin Buchanan tells us are very, very important. And justification is one of those words.

So he talks a lot about this. Now, normally when we talk about justification, we think as if it's just another synonym for forgiveness. But I would say justification is slightly a bit

broader.

Justification answers the question, not just what must I do to be saved, which is, you know, believe and you'll be justified, but it also answers the question, who are God's people and how do you tell? So justification, I would say, is God's act whereby he creates a new people with a new status, with a new covenant, as a foretaste of the new age. So it's a declaration that you are part of God's forgiven family. Okay.

So Paul is, when he speaks of justification or being just before God, he's not just talking about like, you know, I'm now righteous before God. I mean, that's part of it because you're in Christ and Christ is righteous, but he also means and your identity, your place in the people of God is fully established. Okay.

Because you are in the Messiah. Okay. So it's got what you might call a vertical aspect that you're in the right with God.

You have a right relationship with God, but it's also a horizontal aspect, which means you're part of God's covenant family. And I think that's one of Paul's most lasting contributions to Christian thought. And something that is own way has popped up and been popular and prevalent in church history, you know, particularly when you get to something like the Reformation, where you see something of a recovery of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith.

Where does Paul's controversy come in in regard to his teaching? Is it just his attitude to women to homosexuality? Or is there something more than that? Oh, well, I mean, some of his big controversies was the idea that God accepts Gentiles as Gentiles. Okay. So, you know, Gentiles, that's non-Jews.

In other words, they don't have to they don't have to become Jews in order to be Christians. They don't have to convert to Judaism. God accepts Gentiles as Gentiles.

So that's that's that's the number one way of pointing it. But he can also engage in a polemic against his opponents, particularly his Jewish Christian opponents that you get say somewhere like Galatia. If you read Galatians, Paul is arguing against some intruders who seem to have come to Galatia who who seem to be very slim to other people.

He's had a few yelling matches with another places as well, like, like Antioch and the like. And Paul can really, really throw down, you know, when when Paul goes kind of full on polemical. I mean, he's a bit like, you know, those remember, you know, Paul Keating and Parliament.

You mean, when when when when Keating brings out his kind of book of insults, he does not hold back. And Paul can say things like, or in Philipians, you know, those dogs, those mutilators of the flesh or in Galatians, you can say, I wish they would go the formontae and castrate themselves. That type of thing.

Say he does, he does have some very very sharp language that he was he would use. Sometimes he can play off the the new covenant against the old covenant in very sharp ways. Not because he's saying, look, you know, the old covenant with Moses was a bad thing that's been done away with him in Paul believes it's a good thing that's come fulfilled.

But he certainly does sharpen the contrast between the two. And that was very likely to cause the ire or the suspicion of some of his fellow Jewish Christians as well. And so Paul could argue in very black and white terms, he didn't like the compromise solution.

And he didn't like any he refused to accept anything that would lead to a compromise of the status of Gentile converts. And you see that particularly in Galatians 2, 11 to 14, the incident Antioch where Peter at the behest of certain men from James wants to withdraw from table fellowship with Gentiles, you know, most likely I suspect because, you know, people are saying, you know, hey, Pete, it's easy for you to kind of sit down with Gentiles. But, you know, your reputation is getting us in trouble in Jerusalem.

And we're kind of like, you know, we're getting beaten up and in prison. So how about just to keep the peace you just, you know, withdraw from Gentiles, unless the Gentiles are circumcised, then it's okay. So they wanted a kind of an equal but separate type of arrangement to appease some extremists, I think, back in Judea.

And Paul says you are choosing purity over unity. Okay, this is cowardly. And Paul says you are not walking towards the truth of the gospel.

And, you know, and that leads to a bit of a, you know, a parting within the ways, if you like, for a time between Paul and Peter. Now, Peter, I think would have said, look, this is this is not ideal, but this is a survival mechanism. Yeah, this is this is how we negotiate our kind of complex environment.

And Paul would say, no, you're soft. You know, you're you're betraying what we agreed on. You know, that's what Galatians too.

You know, we all agreed that Gentiles don't have to be circumcised, but by our actions, you're saying that they have to as a basis for table fellowship. So you'll ripen us off Peter, you'll ripen us off and I won't stand for it. So Paul could deal with things in very kind of black and white ways.

He didn't have time for the via media, which means maybe Paul would be a bad, bad Anglican. He didn't like the kind of halfway. Let's try to keep everyone happy.

Paul stuck to his guns. And whether it created enemies or not, he was never going to compromise. He's definitely sounding a bit southern Baptist there.

Look, let's deal with those controversies, though, regards women regards homosexuality.

They are controversies in our day. How controversial were they in Paul's day? In Paul's own day, nothing I think you said on women would have been, actually, let me back up on that a bit.

Some of the things that we think that Paul would be controversial for would not have been controversial. Okay, so when it's attributed to Paul, he said, you know, I do not permit a woman to teach. The ancient world had a lot of patriarchy going on.

Okay, so that itself was not new. What I think when Paul says that step under not permitted women to teach, I think he's talking about a local situation in Ephesus. And I mean, I've written a whole little booklet on that called Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives and Bobby haircuts where I talk about women in the New Testament and that type of stuff.

So I think it's driven by local circumstances. But Paul does do some things which are controversial, like in Galatians 3:20, a very famous verse, he says, in Christ, there's neither, you know, Jew or Greek, slave, nor free, neither male and female. Okay.

And there he's creating a very, very clear egalitarian principle that in the body of Christ, those distinctions that we have cannot be used as a means for superior status and power over others. So you can't say, Hey, I'm Jewish. I'm a little bit closer to the throne of God.

Or hey, I'm male and male means I have inherently more authority than a female. Or you can't say, Hey, you know, I'm a slave owner, you're a slave. Therefore, in the social stakes, I'm better than you.

Paul gets rid of that. Now he doesn't say that being male doesn't exist, or slaves don't exist. Those things still exist.

But they are no longer to be a means of superiority and status that can be traded in within the church. And he adopts an equality, element of the gospel. If you asked, if you asked Paul, what's the one thing that defines him? It would not be being male, being heterosexual, or being Greek or being Jewish.

He would say, I am baptized. So you're here to take Paul as a census. If you said, said, what's your gender identity? What's your, what's your career? What's your identification? Paul would say, baptized.

You know, that is who I am. So in that sense, I think Paul was very radical. And as numerous philosophers have pointed out, that statement in Galatians 3:28 has huge implications for Western civilization.

That is really that the seed roots so much of our individualism, our notion of human rights, our notion of equality and feminism, you could argue a lot of it goes back to that little verse, Galatians 3:28. And that's not just me saying it. It's historians, like Larry, I'm side and top. It's people like Tom Holland and many of others who have traced human

rights and individualism all the way back to the Apostle Paul.

So on that sense, I think Paul was radical. The sexuality stuff is a bit harder and that's a little bit more sensitive. But this is what you have to note.

In the ancient world was characterized by what I would call an aggressive bisexuality. Okay. So men were not expected to be heterosexual.

It was quite normal to seek sexual gratification in either sexes. Okay. So, you know, out of the first century Roman emperors, the only one who was probably 100% heterosexual was probably Claudius.

All the others in various degrees were known to have wide ranging sexual interests and attractions. And people like slaves were particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation at the hands of their masters, whether male or female or anything like that. And in that context, and with a kind of Jewish background that is naturally averse to what you might call homoerotic acts, Paul does voice some prohibitions.

Okay. So that's clearly going on there. The debate that we have is to what extent is that translatable into kind of, you know, what we call homosexuality today, because, you know, homosexuality is a fairly modern word.

And people raise debates about, you know, or how similar the two, how different. Some people say, well, look, Paul was a homophobic bigot. So he cares what he thinks.

Some people want to see that kind of sexual practice and antiquity is just kind of the same thing as we have today. And others want to go from maybe more of a mediating view. Okay.

Paul does prohibit some sex sexual acts, but he's not inherently against people with a, with a, with a gay sexual orientation, because you know, that, that didn't occur to him. I mean, and that's, you know, being responsible for many of the debates we're having today. So you're giving us a view of how Paul's work leads us to rethink God's people.

How does Paul's work lead us to rethink God? Well, I think the, the most important thing is that Paul says, if you want to think about God, now you've got to think about him in light of Jesus. Okay. And you see something like that, something very particular in one Corinthians chapter, eight verse six, where Paul takes the Shema from Deuteronomy six, four, you know, that's basically the, the, the main creed and confession of Judaism.

You know, here is rather Lord our God. The Lord is one. Okay.

That is the, the number one confession of faith. And he takes that, but he then divides it between God the Father and the Lord Jesus, you know, so there's many gods and lords, but for us, there is one God the Father from whom all things come. And there is one Lord

Jesus Christ through whom all things were made.

So he takes that basic Christological, I'm sorry, that monotheistic formula and gives it a Christological pike heart twist. So God, God is now known to us principally in and through the Lord Jesus Christ out. I think Paul would add onto the end of that, also in the experience and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the most famous passage where Paul redefines Israel's God, placing Jesus in the middle of the picture is Philippians chapter two, verses six to 11. Most scholars recognize that this poem expresses a very early, very Jewish and very high Christology in which Paul identifies the human being Jesus with one who from all eternity was equal with Israel's Lord and who gave fresh expression to what that equality meant by incarnation, humiliating suffering, death and exaltation. The therefore of verse nine is crucial.

Jesus is now elevated to the position of supreme honor, sharing the glory that the one God will not share with another because he has done what only the one God can do. So if there's one thing you hope people would take away from your book about Paul, what's the thumbnail sketch? What's the key word you'd like them to take away? Okay, the number one thing to take away is Paul is not just there to sponsor all of your pet projects. Okay, now irrespective of what that is, Paul is not there just to provide some Bible verses to what you know, your awesome capital to your main ideas.

Okay, Paul is God's apostle to the Gentiles believing that God is fulfilling his purposes for Israel. It's time for the Gentiles to come in and he is bringing them in for the purpose of making them wholly unto God and in such a way that he hopes it'll make the covenant people jealous and they themselves will want to come to salvation in Christ. That I think is the number one takeaway with Paul and Paul does, you know, because Paul is trying to negotiate Greco-Roman culture, like how do you be a faithful Christian in light of a Jewish heritage? How do you be a faithful Christian under this idolatrous Roman government? How do you be a faithful Christian in a Hellenistic culture? Okay, Paul can give Christian some really good resources about how to negotiate your faith in a volatile complex and sometimes adversarial location.

That's number one thing I would take away from Paul. Well, that is why was Paul so controversial from Michael Bird based on his book, *The New Testament in its world*. And if you'd like some more information about Paul and his controversy and how that links in with the book, you can find that in the show notes.

Next time we're going to be back with where did the Gospels come from? That's a little easy one. We should be able to nut that out in a couple of minutes. Mike, thanks very much for your time today and we'll see you next time.

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