



Year of the Word

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The Year of the Word 2007

## Paul: One smart spiritual 'consultant'

*By Beth Balsam*

Saul, a well-educated zealous young Jew, strongly opposed Christianity when it became prominent in Jerusalem. Despite being an active persecutor of the early Christians, Saul eventually became an enthusiastic disciple. Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus is well recognized. Now known as Paul, his radical change of heart led him to become the leader of extensive missions in the regions around the eastern Mediterranean.

The New Testament contains 21 letters, or epistles, of which 13 are attributed to Paul. As Christianity expanded, maintaining contact with widespread churches became critical. Paul used letters to instruct and offer advice to the new churches when he could not be present with them. Paul usually wrote for the church community rather than individuals and expected his letters to be read publicly and authoritatively.

He wrote in the Greek style, consisting of a greeting, the body of the letter, and the formal closing or "farewell." Paul and other New Testament letter writers Christianized the secular letter form in order to use every opportunity to enrich the reader's spiritual knowledge. Often, the letter greeting took the form of a blessing and the traditional closing concluded with benediction or doxology.

Paul's first letters were probably written in 50 A.D. to the church in Thessalonica. The first canonical gospel, Mark, was not written until at least 65, and maybe as late as 75 A.D. In a largely oral culture, Paul's letters are the first formally written documents of the New Testament.

Imagine for a moment that you have joined a group of people in a new business venture. You are excited about the possibilities but also nervous about doing things right so that the endeavor is successful. A smart business group knows the importance of consulting with someone who has experience, knowledge and enthusiasm for the task. Paul's young churches are in a similar situation. They believe in Jesus but need guidance to fully understand and live the Christian call. Paul is like a business consultant. The best way for him to communicate with them, since he could not send e-mail memos or have conference calls at lunch, is by letter. As an educated and evangelized disciple of Jesus, Paul is uniquely qualified for this important work. Obviously, the analogy is limited, because the church is not a business venture but a path toward salvation. But even the business world can offer us wisdom. Business personnel consult all the time. Isn't it also enormously important for us to consult with those in authority who know what is essential for salvation?

Paul deeply understood the importance of community and the rich meaning of church as a "household of God" (Ephesians 2:19) and "household of faith." (Galatians 6:10) He was not a "lone ranger" in his ministry on behalf of the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul traveled and preached with his companions Timothy, Barnabas, Silas and Titus. He consulted with Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem. He depended on the house churches of Cornelius, Nympha, Philemon, and Priscilla and Aquila. He salutes numerous households who "labor much in the Lord" and support his missionary activity. (Romans 16:1-27)

Paul regularly met with the early followers of Jesus in homes to share common meals and for teaching from scripture. A dynamic speaker, Paul was as comfortable preaching in the local Jewish synagogue as he was in a private home. Paul's abiding affection for the people of God is evident in every farewell at the end of all his letters, "Greet one another with a holy kiss. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen." (2 Corinthians 13:12-13)

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