Reading Packet for
"How to Choose a Textbook, or, Why I Wrote My Own"
Presented by Dr. Dale Walker
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Contents:


Paul Wrote First

The very earliest Christian writings that still exist are those composed by the persecutor-turned-missionary, Paul of Tarsus. We may wish that Jesus wrote, but like Socrates, he did not. Even worse, none of Jesus’ students wrote, whereas Socrates had Plato and Xenophon. It seems odd that people who knew Jesus and spent time with him did not bother to record anything he said or did, but such is the case. It fell to an outsider to write about Christian faith and to do so largely without writing about Jesus.

This simple fact has profound consequences for understanding early Christianity. As much as one might wish to place Jesus alone at the center of Christian history, Paul stands with him. Through the apostle Paul, one sees how quickly conflict arose in the early church and how much creativity was exercised in explaining what it meant to believe in Christ. Because Paul wrote first, the exploration of Christian origins must account for the surprises this brings and the complexity it introduces.

The Accidental Author

Paul came to his role as the first Christian author accidentally. (To be more precise, he is the first Christian author of whom we are aware.) He did not aspire to be a writer; nor did he envision generations of people reading his work, as is evident in the incidental, occasional nature of what he wrote—namely, letters, real letters, not sermons masquerading as letters. For example, in First Corinthians Paul responds directly to questions raised by Christians in Corinth.
and problems present among the congregations there. Later, Paul wrote letters to the Corinthians to discuss a collection of money for needy Christians in Palestine and to defend the legitimacy of his ministry. Paul had to write to the Galatians in reaction to other Christian missionaries who came after him and undermined his teaching, forcing Paul to persuade the Galatians to return to his view of the gospel. Likewise, specific circumstances appear to motivate all of his letters.

To be sure, letters can rise above their circumstances, such as the letter Martin Luther King Jr. penned from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. Paul's letter to the Romans approaches this most closely, as it arises for specific, transitory reasons but contains an expansiveness of thought, making it much more than a letter of self-introduction and solicitation of support. Still, these practical reasons motivated Paul to write so that even Romans reflects a specific, concrete situation.

To put Paul into perspective, he was first and foremost an evangelist and founder of communities. He came to writing secondarily, as an activity to supplement his preaching or, more precisely, to compensate for his inability to visit face-to-face. Becoming an author was not Paul's pursuit but a useful means to achieve his goals.

Perhaps other Christians were writing at the same time as Paul. Letters of introduction and recommendation likely circulated from Christians to other Christians. Paul's rivals probably used letters to extend their influence and compete with him. Some Christians may already have been writing snippets of the things Jesus taught or did. If so, none of these texts survived, nor did the names of their authors. From today's perspective, Paul was the first to write, and the only Christian author one can identify, with certainty, within sixty years of Jesus' death.

The Pauline Letters

The New Testament contains thirteen letters that appear to be written by Paul. As described in chapter 1, Paul's letters divide neatly into two sections. The first is written to churches, the second to individuals. Within each section the letters are arranged in order
of length, so their arrangement provides no evidence of chronology. The collection is organized as follows:

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After Philemon, the contemporary New Testament presents Hebrews, which many wrongly thought to be a letter by Paul. This misunderstanding may account for why Hebrews made it into the canon of scripture. In fact, ancient scribes typically placed Hebrews among the Pauline letters, most often after 2 Thessalonians. If Hebrews is counted as a Pauline letter, the entire collection of Paul’s letters numbers fourteen, as I was taught in Sunday school.

Four problems now arise. First, we have to account for letters Paul wrote that no longer survive. For example, 1 Corinthians refers to an earlier letter that no longer exists. How many others Paul might have written cannot be known. This uncertainty adds an asterisk to whatever number is used for the final tally of Paul’s letters.

Second, there is no claim within Hebrews that it was written by Paul. If compared carefully to Paul’s letters, it becomes easy for the reader of Greek to see that the elegant style of Hebrews does not resemble Paul’s letters. The way Hebrews argues, repeatedly turning to Jewish scripture for ideas and arguments, goes beyond Paul’s normal modes of argumentation and elaboration. The author of Hebrews differentiates him or herself from and acknowledges a debt to the original witnesses to Christ, a point of view Paul would not
have shared. The concern about repentance within Hebrews reflects questions that arose fifty years after Paul. And Hebrews looks much less like a real letter than do Paul’s letters, which, as already stated, are actual letters. The consensus that Paul did not write Hebrews must stand so that the corpus of his letters in the New Testament cannot be counted as fourteen.

Thirteen is not correct either, though. A third and much larger problem is that some of the letters in the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul were not, which is to say that they are pseudonymous and, therefore, inauthentic. Second Thessalonians, for example, mimics the unusual structure of 1 Thessalonians and provides a different and conflicting view of the end times, suggesting that someone wrote a letter in the name of Paul and in imitation of Paul but with a message updated to address a new crisis within the church some years later. Ephesians and Colossians offer views about Christ, the cosmos, and the church that are significantly more elaborate than those found in Paul. The ethical component to these two letters is more conventional than that of Paul, who thinks his way creatively and experimentally through difficult questions and infrequently finds himself ready with canned answers.

The so-called Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) are even more conventional in their ideas and language. They also present a view of authority in the church that goes beyond what appears in the other Pauline letters. To read them in Greek is to encounter a writer who is decidedly not Paul. Second Timothy, in particular, appears to imitate the Jewish testamentary genre, in which a great figure from history talks about his impending death and makes predictions about what will happen afterward. This genre pretends to record the actual words of a soon-to-die historical figure; yet this genre is consistently fiction.

Once Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus are removed from the letters genuinely written by Paul, the list of his writings totals seven. It is, therefore, customary for scholars to refer to the seven authentic letters of the apostle Paul.

Having considered authenticity, a fourth and perhaps the most complex problem remains, that of integrity. This issue addresses the relationship between the version of Paul’s writings one reads today and what Paul actually wrote. What degree of editing took place
between the time Paul wrote his letters and the time they circulated throughout the early church? Some sentences were added here and there, so how broadly might the influence of editors and copyists have extended? Were entire chapters added or separate letters interwoven? Some scholars have divided Paul’s letters into different, perhaps multiple, original letters; their proposals address real incongruities and discontinuities in Paul’s writings. Should Paul’s letters be partitioned then or their integrity taken at face value?

Second Corinthians is the clearest example of secondary editing. The tone and content of 2 Cor 10–13 are so different from the warm, conciliatory language of the preceding nine chapters, especially chapters 1, 2, and 7, that for more than a hundred years these last four chapters have been regarded as having been written at a different time than the first nine. As analysis of 2 Corinthians continued, some scholars saw it as an anthology of many letters that, at some point, a creative editor wove into a single letter. No single view has won the day, but the following suggestion sees within 2 Corinthians five distinct letters from Paul, all written in uncertain order:

2 Cor 1:1–2:13 + 7:5–16 + 13:11–13
2 Cor 2:14–6:13 + 7:2–4
2 Cor 8
2 Cor 9
2 Cor 10:1–13:10
(2 Cor 6:14–7:1 was not written by Paul.)

Similarly, some scholars have argued that Philippians is a composite of three different letters written by Paul. Romans 16, distinct from the previous fifteen chapters, has also been identified as a separate piece of correspondence from Paul. There are doubters on all these matters of partition. The strongest rebuttals come in response to Philippians and Romans. Partition theories have also been put forward for 1 Corinthians, though much less frequently and with the least traction. What is more commonly identified in the case of 1 Corinthians is the addition of non-Pauline sentences or even the first half of chapter 11.

In the end, investigations into the integrity of Paul’s letters reveal that, among the seven authentic Pauline letters, more are hiding, as are the fingerprints of authors other than Paul. The seven preserve
portions of at least eight letters that Paul wrote, probably more and perhaps fourteen. Fourteen? By complete accident, it would appear that my Sunday school teacher might have been right—with an asterisk, of course.

When saying that Paul wrote first, it is to the seven authentic letters that scholars refer. One must turn to these seven to hear the earliest Christian voice and gain a sense of the early church. Peter is voiceless. Jesus actually has to wait to be heard in texts. The next four sections reflect further on these consequences, as we consider the early impact of Paul’s letters, and assess his biography, religion, and legacy.

**Letters Influenced by Paul**

The fact that Paul wrote letters set in motion a practice among other early Christians to do the same. Some imitated Paul in writing letters that arose from concrete circumstances, using the author’s own name and addressing specific people. From the late first-century or early second-century, there is a letter written by Clement of Rome to Corinth and an entire corpus by Ignatius of Antioch to churches in Asia. Both knew of Paul; Clement referred explicitly to 1 Corinthians, and Ignatius held up Paul’s martyrdom as an example for his own.

Both before and after Clement’s and Ignatius’ letters, unknown Christians wrote letters in the name of Paul. Second Thessalonians and Colossians are examples, addressing actual circumstances and imitating real letters by Paul, the former imitating 1 Thessalonians, the latter Philemon. Ephesians seems more general in its content and less tied to real events. Its author appears to have taken Colossians as his inspiration. The so-called Pastoral Epistles appear to have been written much later out of a concern to use the legacy of Paul to shore up church structure and authority. Still later, the non-canonical 3 Corinthians and the correspondence between Paul and Seneca were written. The Letter to Laodicea used Philippians as a model and source for content.

The pseudonymous Pauline letters suggest that a collection of (some of) Paul’s letters was made in the first century. This collection set a precedent for the appropriate way the apostolic voice should
communicate to Christian congregations at a distance. As previously mentioned, a handful of early Christians, some still in the first century, who wanted to address other Christians took up Paul's precedent, sometimes writing in Paul's name and, on other occasions, their own.

Paul's example also influenced people who wrote letters in the names of still other early Christians. Thus, there are 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude. This process climaxed with 2 Peter, which refers explicitly to a previous letter by Peter, borrows much of Jude, and refers to Paul's letters. Lastly, Hebrews, which is anonymous, appears to emulate Paul in its last chapter.

This activity of letter writing was not random but reflected the habit of educated people imitating literary worthies, as discussed in chapter 3. At a general level, many pseudonymous letters were written in the names of philosophers, figures such as Plato and Diogenes. Among Christians, Paul launched the fashion of letters, so the broader Hellenistic tradition of letter writing, both authentic and pseudonymous, became part of Christian literary activity.

Therefore, a consequence of saying that Paul wrote first is that he set an example of appropriate Christian literature. In imitation of Paul, writing letters became an important component of early Christian literary activity. In many cases, the mere presence and example of Paul's letters made a deeper impression than did their content. Paul as a letter-writer was as important, or more important, as what his letters actually said.

Paul Anchors Early Christian History

Because Paul wrote first, his letters are the starting point for the investigation of early Christian history. This subverts traditional views of Christian history and Pauline biography, which depend on the second-century Acts of the Apostles and the fourth-century history by Eusebius. An easy but unsatisfactory approach to the first century is to open the New Testament and read Acts, then supplement it with information from Paul's letters. This allows for a nice narrative to guide understanding of the earliest Christians and provides slots in which one can position Paul's letters. But this is backward and results not in the discovery of Paul but in the reaffirmation of how Acts presents Paul.
Paul versus Acts

Scholars now approach Paul’s letters independently of Acts to discover what they say for themselves. For example, in Acts it appears that when Paul traveled to a new city, he preached first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles but only after the Jews rejected him. No one would construct this picture of events if relying only on Paul’s letters. In Galatians, Paul describes himself as the apostle to the Gentiles and thereby differentiates himself from Peter, whom he describes as the apostle to the Jews. This division of duties does not come from someone who, as Acts alleges, seeks to preach first to Jews.

The identity of Paul’s opponents presents another problem. The rivals to whom Paul refers in his letters are consistently other Christian preachers, not the jealous Jews of Acts. To be sure, Paul did have run-ins with Jews, even suffering whippings at the hands of these, his kinsmen, but the apostle’s biggest headaches came from other Christians. The silence in Acts about the competition among Christian preachers misses one of the major realities of Paul’s ministry.

In Acts, it also appears that disagreements were resolved easily and amiably. For example, a group of disciples of John the Baptist convert quickly to Christ when Paul preaches. Even the controversy surrounding whether or not to preach the gospel to Gentiles finds smooth resolution: God intervenes to send Peter to preach to Gentiles, and later, a single meeting in Jerusalem clears the air and opens the door to Paul’s continued activity. In Paul’s letters, however, it is clear this issue dogs him throughout his ministry. Peter is sympathetic to Paul’s position but cannot bring himself to emulate it. James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, is probably even less agreeable.

In Acts, Christianity spreads in a controlled, orderly fashion. The gospel moves out of Jerusalem, remains connected to it, and arrives ultimately and triumphantly in Rome. To accomplish this in Acts, Paul makes repeated visits to Jerusalem and confers with the church’s leaders there. This tidy picture exaggerates Paul’s cooperation with the church in Jerusalem, however. In his own letters, Paul emphatically rejects any influence or control that Jerusalem might exert over him. When he talks about James and Peter, he calls them only “so-called pillars” of the church, recognizing their visibility and
influence, but refusing to bow to it. Paul was not an emissary or partner with the church in Jerusalem.

Acts runs into a big problem with respect to Rome. The author of Acts wants his story to climax with the gospel's arrival in the imperial capitol. Despite knowing that the gospel reached Rome before Paul did, Acts uses Paul to introduce the gospel formally to Rome, and then uses the presence of Christians there to stage a public welcome for Paul, having them stream out of the city to meet him in an honorific gesture. More problematically, Acts presents Rome as Paul's longed-for and divinely appointed destination, whereas Paul told the Romans that he planned to travel to Spain. For Paul, Rome was but a stopover en route to reaching the Iberian Peninsula. What Paul wanted from Rome was help getting to Spain. Acts explicitly contradicts this by having the apostle claim that Rome is his objective.

The most conspicuous difference between Acts and Paul is the absence of Paul's letters. On the one hand, this can be excused, because Acts has aims that make any reference unnecessary. On the other hand, given the impact of Paul's letters on subsequent Christian authors, as described previously in the section “Letters Influenced by Paul,” beginning on p. 198, the move from epistolary imitation of Paul to a narrative about Paul that is silent about his letters represents a significant change in the use of Paul’s legacy. Paul is no longer the letter-writing pastor but a heroic apostle on his way to becoming a saint.

To be clear, the letters give a portrait of Paul at odds with Acts, which presents Paul as a hero of early Christian witness who exercises superior power in competition with others. God protects him and guides him along the way. Paul's own testimony, however, shows a relentless evangelist whom others feel free to mock and disparage, whose powers of the spirit fall short of other people’s, whose apostolic office is disputed, and whose teachings are questioned. Moreover, he suffers dangers, deprivations, and violence. Wear and tear show on his body. Paul incorporates these difficulties into his self-description, presenting himself as an apostle and an example to Christians because of his endurance. Like Christ, Paul suffers yet continues steadfastly, proof of his apostleship. Paul's depth of suffering contrasts starkly with his spectacular powers displayed in Acts. Both portraits are heroic but in fundamentally different ways.
Paul and History

Without Acts to guide the way, the reconstruction of Paul’s life becomes more difficult, with many unsolvable details. In general, his activity as a Christian missionary can be located from before the year 48 CE until his death around the year 65 CE. First Thessalonians can be identified as an early letter and Romans as late, with the Corinthian correspondence between the two. Galatians was written some time in advance of Romans, and Philippians and Philemon were in the middle to late part of Paul’s career. With these general guidelines, scholars can attempt to identify how the apostle’s ideas and rhetoric differed over time. In fact, doing so brings the apostle’s own changes into greater focus, as shall be seen in the section “Paul’s Religion,” beginning on page 203.

Views of Paul shift not only in his letters, the pseudonymous letters, and Acts—but also over time. We know from where we stand, nearly two millennia later, that much was yet to come. For today’s readers, Paul is not a last-minute warning about judgment but a founding figure for a global religion. He is both an actor in history and an ingredient in reconstructions of it, passing through pseudonymous letters, hagiography, iconography, Reformers, and more. Paul’s legacy rests on an unexpected twist: He labored nonstop to make his mark on the soon-to-end world through his service to Christ and succeeded precisely because of the centuries that have passed. Time allowed Paul to gain a prominent place in Christian history and exceed even his own lofty ambitions.

Not only does approaching Paul’s letters without reference to Acts help one see the man behind the legends, but also it clouds the picture of the mid-first century church. The development of Christianity cannot be reduced to a few key people who trace a smooth storyline. While Paul bucked the authority of key leaders such as James and Peter, his letters reveal a broad range of players in the early church who had influential roles in the growth of Christianity. Two otherwise unknown apostles, Andronicus and Junia, are encountered, as well as Apollos and the households of Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Chloe. The patroness Phoebe, who preached, supported Christians, and presided over a church is met. Unnamed preachers who rivaled Paul for influence over the churches he founded are discovered.
Paul was not unique in his practice of traveling and preaching to win converts and instruct them, neither was he uniquely gifted and successful. His letters also show that his converts were not passive receptacles for his wisdom but could be bold thinkers who ran ahead of the apostle. Other preachers contradicted Paul, argued with him, and slandered him, just as Paul did not hesitate to attack them.

In short, because Paul wrote first, the approach to early Christian history changes. Though intuitively one may want to focus on Jesus, one is forced to look at Paul. Next, one must resist the temptation to fall back on Acts and, instead, look at the evidence of the apostle’s own writings. Doing so reflects a different story than the one in Acts, one that greatly complicates understanding of the development of the early church. As other early Christian writings have suggested, the ideas and people in the early church spanned a greater range than traditionally thought. Sometimes there was harmony, sometimes conflict. Never do things appear to stand still. As concerns Paul’s contribution to this dynamic, one has to examine his letters to take measure of the man, as we will do in the remainder of this essay.

**Paul’s Religion**

Since Paul wrote first, he provides the earliest look at Christian faith and practice. Whether the reader is Catholic or Pentecostal, it is easy enough to see a familiar religion in Paul’s letters, but the familiarity is superficial. Upon closer examination, most Christians would find the religion Paul practiced puzzling.

With respect to Christian teaching, Paul’s letters show how little established doctrine existed. He had his own favorite taglines, a baptismal confession, and a hymn or two. He had the beginnings of a confession in Christ’s death, burial, and Resurrection and favorite proof-texts from Jewish scriptures. Here and there, he refers to shared or common material and references other people’s words or ideas. At the same time, his letters show the early church had no articulated body of theology, received from the Twelve, that was being carefully taught and passed along. It would take a century of creative thinking to produce the New Testament and centuries more to produce the creeds that the church today can take for granted.
Paul and Jesus

A strange feature of Paul’s letters is how little he refers to Jesus. While the name Jesus does appear often, it usually pairs with Christ. More substantially, Paul simply does not talk about the ministry of Jesus. For Paul, Christ is an immortal, heavenly being who rescues his people from God’s impending judgment and shares immortality with them. These present and future dimensions dominate Paul’s thinking.

Some have argued that, in fact, Paul does reference Jesus, if one scratches beneath the surface. These scholars have provided long lists of examples. Such maximalists have persuaded few. Their long lists only look desperate and actually work to undermine their position.

Here are a few considerations that make Paul’s silence about Jesus strange. First is to compare how Paul uses scripture with possible references to Jesus. Paul certainly can be subtle in alluding to Jewish scriptures, but he is also repeatedly and frequently explicit. Since Paul is obviously comfortable referring explicitly to Jewish scriptures, why is he any less clear about referencing Jesus? Second, in his different letters, Paul generates principles of Christian conduct in a variety of ways. In this enterprise, he does not use Jesus as a fundamental strategy—rarely drawing ethical teaching from what Jesus said and did and never rooting them there. When Paul does draw on Jesus, it is through isolated examples that only underscore how inadequate traditions about Jesus were when it came to addressing the questions Paul encountered in his Gentile churches. Third, Paul draws more profound consequences for Christian conduct when he applies Christological ideas rather than instances of the historical Jesus. The example of Christ presented so beautifully in Philippians 2 coheres with its larger context, yet one sees a profoundly mythic example, not a simple reference to Jesus. Even Paul’s reference to Christ’s gentleness or more precisely, leniency, is a Christological insight and not a reference to Jesus’ personality.

One place where Paul’s silence is particularly strange is his argument about resurrection in 1 Cor 15, in which he debates with people in Corinth. His opponents see no need for a physical body to be involved in resurrection, whereas Paul argues that a body is part of resurrection. Here is the perfect place for Paul to introduce
information about Jesus’ condition in resurrection and thereby silence others, but he says nothing. A few years after Paul died, the Gospel of Mark was written. It, too, lacks any stories of resurrection, though the story of Jesus’ transfiguration provides a clue. I infer that the well-known stories from the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John were unknown to Paul and the author of Mark’s Gospel. Having no knowledge of these stories would provide a perfectly sound explanation for Paul’s silence. The apostle said little about Jesus not because he simply did not get around to it, but because he had little to say.

To be sure, the cross does play a pivotal role in Paul’s thinking. “Christ crucified” is a tagline he likes to repeat. “Christ died, Christ buried, Christ raised” is Paul’s basic summary of the gospel. But these shorthand statements point to interpretations about God’s chosen and anointed one, not simple memories about Jesus. Moreover, these shorthand expressions ignore anything that happened prior to the crucifixion, as does the apostle’s essential confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” which points to Christ risen, not Jesus’ ministry.

The resurrection is key for Paul. It brought Jesus to his current state of heavenly existence. This immortal, spirit-existence was what Christians encountered in life and worship. Moreover, resurrection was seen as an event of the end time, Christ’s Resurrection being but the first step in a sequence of events leading to the similar transformation of Christ’s followers, which Paul believed would happen at any time. Motivated by this imminent change of reality, Paul had every reason to look forward, not backward. So he looked to Christ and did not go digging for Jesus.

In light of this, was Jesus relevant to Paul’s Christianity? If one thinks about a church service in which a Gospel reading is a privileged part of the liturgy, wherein the assembled might hear a story about Jesus healing someone, casting out a demon, teaching, or being born, the answer is no. If the Lord’s Prayer, parables, or the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount come to mind, the answer remains a resounding no. Even when it comes to living like a Christian, Paul infrequently references the teachings of Jesus. For the institution of the Eucharist, aka “communion,” and advice about divorce, Paul does look to Jesus, but such examples are rare. Apart from death and resurrection, the life of Jesus plays an insignificant role in Paul’s religion.
The surprising fact is that the earliest records of Christian faith, Paul’s letters, do not show a thinker seeking insights into life and religion based on Jesus’ teachings or deeds. One searches in vain for a religion that looks to the ministry of Jesus for its direction and meaning.

Paul and the Divine Spirit

In Paul’s letters, one encounters a religion that focuses on the experience of the risen Christ through his spirit. Another way of characterizing this is to say that spirit possession is the hallmark and fundamental experience of faith in Christ for Paul.

The importance of spirit possession emerges in Paul’s own description of his call to serve Christ. Echoing the words of ancient Hebrew prophets, Paul recalls God’s decision to reveal God’s son in Paul (Gal 1:16). English Bibles typically translate Paul’s words as God’s decision to reveal Christ to Paul, mistakenly trying to make Paul’s testimony sound like the three stories in Acts that describe his conversion on the road to Damascus. In Acts, Christ appears to Paul and rebukes his efforts to arrest Christians. Translators have consistently read this revelation into Paul’s account in Galatians and made Paul’s words there conform to it, changing the obvious “revealed in me” to “revealed to me.”

This evasive translation arises from a fundamental misunderstanding of Paul’s religion. Paul understands Christ as a living, divine being whose spirit is sufficiently expansive to dwell among the communities of people loyal to Christ and inside individual members. Because of this, Christ’s people can speak angelic languages, utter prophetic sayings, heal the sick, and experience Christ’s power in other ways. This indwelling spirit also transforms the people it inhabits, energizing them, and making their very bodies more and more like their Lord’s. The ultimate destiny of those loyal to Christ is full transformation from mortal flesh into immortal spirit-beings, whose bodies are just like those of Christ.

As an apostle, it was crucial to Paul that he model this experience of the divine spirit. If he could not serve as an example, he could not be an apostle. Participating in Christ’s spirit qualified him to be an apostle and gave him the substance of his message. Thus, the letter to the Galatians claims that God revealed his son in Paul.
The experience of Christ’s spirit made the final judgment seem very close, and Paul anticipated Christ’s imminent return. As the years went by, Paul found himself addressing questions that the delay posed. What happens if a Christian dies? What if the possession of Christ’s spirit is already the second coming? Paul even reached the point at which he wondered whether he would remain alive to witness Christ’s return.

Paul also had to reconsider the implications of Christ’s spirit in competition with other Christian teachers. Whereas one might expect that a religion of spirit possession would place a premium on superhuman deeds, Paul found himself lagging behind the abilities of others and needing to reposition his experiences of Christ’s spirit. He embraced his hardships as evidence of his moral virtue but, even more importantly, as the imitation of Christ. Through suffering, Paul grew more like Christ and experienced, even more powerfully, Christ’s spirit filling him with resurrected life. In his weaknesses, he saw proof of how profoundly the experience of Christ’s spirit was transforming him into an immortal, Christ-like person. This complete experience of Christ’s life being repeated in Paul filled him with confidence that his claims trumped those of any rival. Not all onlookers were persuaded.

Paul and Judaism

Christianity emerged among Jews. Over time, its membership became increasingly non-Jewish. By the middle of the second century, the demographics of Christianity were overwhelmingly Gentile and some were trying to diminish links to Christianity’s Jewish roots. The first steps in this transition took place in Paul’s lifetime and during his ministry within a larger debate about how Gentiles could follow Christ.

Paul was a leading agitator in this problem. As a Jew, he had been a conscientious, happy, and successful practitioner of Jewish customs, more so than most. Christians often denigrate Jewish practices as legalistic and empty, but this leads to a misunderstanding of Paul, Jews, and Judaism. When Paul turned to Christ, he viewed himself not as leaving his Jewish identity but as preaching Christ to all people.
Paul’s religion encountered a problem in how it articulated what loyalty to Christ resembled. For many early Christians, living according to the Law of Moses provided a crucial ingredient for their devotion to God. Even in Matthew’s Gospel, two decades after Paul, Jewish practices remained important for followers of Jesus. This Gospel defines righteousness with an eye to Jewish traditions—e.g., prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and especially mercy—and affirms the abiding relevance of the Law of Moses.

Paul took a different view, and this brought him into conflict with Peter and James, not just in a polite “we-agree-to-disagree” manner but also in vocal and theatrical confrontation. In one of the peculiarities of history, circumcision became a focal point in the debate. (Really, I wouldn’t make this up.) Does a man have to be circumcised to follow Christ? To those who said, “Yes,” Paul offered one of his most colorful remarks: “I hope the knife slips” (Gal 5:12; my paraphrase).

As he debated this issue, Paul learned. Many of the arguments he made early on in Galatians were easily refuted, so it is not surprising that most were not repeated. The negative tone expressed toward Jewish practices in Galatians is also softened when Paul returns to the topic in Romans. But the facts on the ground, that is, the successful evangelization of Gentiles, kept Paul resolute.

For Paul, loyalty to Christ brings righteousness, and circumcision was an unnecessary test of that loyalty. Those who proved themselves loyal to Christ would escape judgment before God, benefiting from Christ’s advocacy: God would see Christ representing them and agree that they are righteous. Paul came to this conclusion because this was how he saw the divine spirit working among people who confessed Jesus as Lord. They fell into line with God’s great display of power and acted out their loyalty in groups of worshippers. Evidence of God’s spirit indicated God’s approval and the generosity of God’s loyalty in return. The spirit’s presence proved that the Eschaton, “the end,” had arrived; any and all whom the spirit filled would escape judgment. Thus, as Paul writes in Galatians, in Christ, “there is no longer Jew or Greek.”

All of this has to be framed by the larger consideration that Paul did not convert out of Judaism and into Christianity. The latter simply did not yet exist, not even the word Christian. Faith in Christ
remained one of many ways of practicing the religion of Jews. Paul regarded the change in his life as a call to serve as a prophet: Reevaluating his ancestral traditions in light of Christ, Paul extended the blessings of Israel to non-Jews, but he remained a Jew. Or as Pamela Eisenbaum sums it up in the title of her book, *Paul Was Not a Christian.*

**Paul and Historical Thinking**

For Paul, history was at its end. The course of human events was about to reach its conclusion and, literally, the end was near. Oddly, anticipating the end of history caused Paul to construct a view of it that combined the Jewish past with Christ and the apostle's personal experience.

On the surface, Paul's belief that the end was near makes him sound like Jesus, who announced the approaching kingdom of God. But Jesus anticipated God's appearance, whereas Paul anticipated Jesus' return. Jesus announced the end with prophetic authority, while Paul's view rested on Christian teachings mixed with his experience of the spirit and reflection.

There existed, in Paul's mind, a narrative that placed Jesus in a series of events leading to salvation. Resurrection was a single event with two stages: first Christ, then Christ's followers. Since stage one had happened, stage two was necessary and imminent. God was about to rescue Christ's people and judge the world. This story reflects a mixture of theological and historical thinking that is common in the Jewish scriptural tradition. Though this kind of “history” would not pass muster with modern historians, it was unremarkable for Paul.

As his theological reflections continued, Paul constructed a history that led up to Jesus and then Paul's own position poised at the end. This background story was Jewish history that involved, particularly, the promises God made to Abraham. Moreover, this history was truncated, not lengthy and detailed, but jumping from Adam to focus on Abraham and passing by Moses with occasional sideways looks at the prophets to glean useful examples and proof texts.

History plays its greatest role in Paul's final and most lengthy letter, Romans. Years of debating the Gentile mission brought Paul
to address the question of God’s loyalty. The relationships of Jews and Gentiles among God’s people had to be described in a way that did not undermine God’s earlier promises to Jews. In Romans, Paul addresses the question that had dogged his work: What about Israel? Drawing liberally on the words and ideas of Jewish scriptures, Paul defends the integrity of God’s promises to Israel while, at the same time, inserting the present Gentile mission into that history, famously using the analogy of a limb grafted onto another tree. This was the history of God’s saving action as it existed for Paul. From today’s perspective, it could also be called Paul’s history of Christianity.

For Paul, there was no such thing as church history, a claim that underscores how different Christian religion looks today. Not only was the end at hand for Paul, but also he rejected any of the constructions that might allow for incipient church history. The progression from Jesus to the Twelve, to other witnesses, to bishops, and to all was a sequence that could not exist until the Twelve, and all who knew them, were dead. But even the first handoff from Jesus to the Twelve was one Paul disputed. He gave no ground to the Twelve. The neat expansion outlined in Acts, starting with Jerusalem and circulating through Judea, then north to Samaria before spreading to the entire world, was a smooth storyline created by the author of Acts long after Paul was dead. It makes some sense geographically but still does not reflect what really happened, as the gospel spread quickly through spirit possession and social networks in a way that defied any logical progression based on centralized authority or geography. The idea that Peter and Paul played foundational roles in the church at Rome arose after both were dead and became linked into developing ideas about bishops and martyrs. Paul certainly never conceived of it. Paul’s claims that God chose him and sent him, together with the opposition he encountered from other Christians, disrupt any attempt to construct a smooth progression of events in the early church.

Comparing Paul to other early Christian writers exposes where he lacks the sense of church history that was soon to emerge. In the opening words of Luke’s Gospel, there is a sense of history predicated on literary research and guided by the voice of witnesses. The author of Hebrews shares a similar perspective in referring to
witnesses whose testimonies guided the writer's preaching. One of the people who helped compose John's Gospel also looked retrospectively to witnesses who provided the testimony on which the Fourth Gospel rests. Elsewhere, a simple statement that the church was built on the foundation of apostles and prophets was made by someone who wrote the letter of Ephesians in Paul's name. This introduces a historical perspective that postdates Paul. In 1 Clement, readers encounter a growing sequence: God sent Christ, who sent the apostles, who appointed bishops and deacons. All these backward glances differ from the point of view seen in Paul's letters. Jesus' death lies behind Paul, but the action of apostolic witness is present and urgent. Paul, who wrote first, is involved in the game in an immediate, creative way that differs dramatically from other early Christian authors.

As the first Christian author, Paul wrote with one eye on Christ's imminent return, which colored everything Paul thought and did. As people who look back at him from almost two thousand years later, we have a perspective he never considered possible. A great deal of history followed him and can be traced through him. This requires readers to qualify what is read in his letters with one very large insight: He was wrong about one of his most fundamental beliefs. History was coming, not Christ.

Paul and the Church

The church first encountered in Paul's letters is still a teenager. What is seen of it at that age would surprise most people. For example, Paul practiced baptism but did not emphasize it. He makes no mention of infant baptism and alludes to the mysterious practice of baptism for the dead. In Paul's churches, baptism had grown beyond symbolic washing of sin and also represented the reception of the divine spirit.

The nondiscriminatory bestowal of the spirit on all believers led to important consequences for Paul. With it, he justified his evangelization of Gentiles and out of it grew the broad participation of women in Christian congregations. In Paul's congregations, women served as apostles, preachers, prophetesses, and patrons. Later Christians objected to this and redirected Christianity for centuries to come. But at Paul's time, this was not so. Women prayed, prophesied,
preached, and evangelized. They helped lead the effort to spread the
gospel.

How Christians in Paul’s churches worshiped would strike many modern Christians as odd. Their services lacked a standard order of proceedings and their options for reading from scripture were limited. They engaged in ecstatic speech, which today is called speaking in tongues. Various individuals offered prophetic speech as moved by the spirit. No one stood behind a pulpit and read a speech written beforehand. More than one person might speak at once, though Paul frowned on this extent of hurly-burly. There was no hymnal, prayer book, or Bible, no choir or bulletin. Most disturbing to a modern person would have been the absence of a clock and the correlated ambiguity about when services would start and end.

Food was part of life within Paul’s congregations. It was not provided during an extra social hour but as part of the worship. This made the Lord’s Supper, aka “Eucharist,” a regular and natural part of their observances not a separate feature or monthly addition. The presence of food seems normal when one remembers that church services took place in people’s homes, as church buildings did not exist. This limited how large Paul’s congregations could be and influenced how services were conducted. When they gathered, Christians struggled with the normal influence of social stratification, which meant food might not be shared equally and without discrimination. Imagine the person across from you eating a big cut of meat and fanciful pastries while you get a plate of boiled potatoes. This violated Paul’s ideals but was completely normal to people at that time.

The modern person would also grow confused trying to figure out who was in charge. No clerical order existed in Paul’s churches. Leadership arose in various ways. The first to convert might lead by virtue of precedence, or the homeowner might lead because of wealth and hospitality. Others led because of the personal initiative they took to provide service to believers. Those who best channeled the divine spirit enjoyed particularly high status. In the absence of seminary training and ordination, Christians saw speaking in tongues, healing, eloquence, and prophesying as credentials for eminence. While Paul’s references to “deacons” seem to suggest the presence of church office in his churches, these passages actually refer to people who preached. Similarly, “apostles” were people preaching the
gospel not holding down a job in a specific congregation. Other ad hoc roles included handling money and delivering messages.

Because Paul wrote first, he provides a window into a church whose practices were unlike those known to most Christians throughout the centuries. At the same time, he provides ways of practicing Christian worship that have provided options to dissenters and reformers.

Paul the Innovator

As the first known author, Paul is de facto an innovator, as his letters appear on the Christian stage as something new. Scholars have debated how extensive his innovations were. Given how different his religion is than that practiced by most Christians through the centuries, it is clear that many changes subsequently have taken place in Christianity. But what changes can be laid at Paul’s doorstep?

Paul the Inventor

A century ago, in his important book, *Paul*, Wilhelm Wrede called Paul “the second founder of Christianity,” spawning much debate about Paul’s role in the creation of the Christian religion. To whom, then, is owed the religion known today as Christianity? While it seems natural to credit Jesus, not Paul, as the person responsible, important observations stand in the way of the obvious. As Wrede says, Jesus’ “emphasis falls on individual piety, and its connection with future judgment. But in Paul . . . religion is nothing else but an appropriated and experienced redemption.”

Wrede rests his idea that Paul invented Christianity on the simple statement that Christianity is “the religion of redemption,” a summary that could not be drawn from the teachings of Jesus. One can find occasional remarks in the Synoptic Gospels that point to redemption, but they are unusual and in no way summarize the bulk of what Jesus teaches. John's Gospel offers more evidence, but Wrede thinks these examples illustrate early Christians working them into Jesus' sayings. For Wrede, the religion of redemption comes from Paul, who was “the first theologian” and whose theology
“decisively transformed the incipient religion.” As a theologian, Paul constructed a system of ideas based on Jesus' Incarnation, death, and Resurrection, which the apostle viewed as saving acts of God. Is Paul to be credited (or blamed) for the Christian religion?

Four problems stand in the way of giving Paul the credit. First, there is little information about the theology Paul learned from others. It seems likely, though, that what Paul had opposed is what he came to preach. What he learned about faith in Christ from those he persecuted was further supplemented in the churches he frequented after conversion. What Wrede calls Paul's religion of redemption may not have been Paul's creation but, rather, what he learned from other Christians.

Second, labeling Paul the inventor of Christianity exaggerates his role in the early church. Many people contributed to the amalgamation of ideas and practices that became Christianity. Even in the pages of the New Testament, there is ample evidence of competing ideas that should warn readers about overstating Paul's contribution and influence. With specific reference to Christ's sacrificial death, Paul's statements do not look like his own creations but, rather, ideas circulating among Christians and providing common ground with his readers.

Third, this label overemphasizes Paul the theologian as opposed to Paul the traveling preacher, founder of churches, writer of letters, and martyr. For many early Christians, the example of Paul eclipsed what he taught. Even when one reads early Christian writers talking explicitly about Paul, it is not clear how carefully they read Paul's letters. What mattered to Ignatius was the opportunity to imitate Paul in dying for Christ not quoting Paul. The author of 1 Clement waxed eloquent about Paul the martyr but hardly used Paul's letters, which is strange given how relevant Paul's letters were to the issue of church unity that Clement addressed. In the Acts of the Apostles, its author devotes significant space to Paul, yet presents a picture of Paul's activities and words that do not square easily with his letters. The letters written in Paul's name by other people further illustrate how they used him only as window-dressing and did not slavishly follow his ideas.

Fourth, the claim that Paul invented Christianity over-simplifies the definition of Christianity. Christianity in the first century was
no clearer than it is today. It took decades simply to invent the word *Christian*, let alone the religion, and centuries to articulate what today are considered the fundamental elements of Christian theology. The varieties of practices and ideas in the first century further complicate identifying an essential system of beliefs and practices that can be categorized as Christian and variations of which can be judged as non-Christian. For example, was Christianity a type of Judaism? What role did the Law of Moses play in the lives of those earliest followers? Did the temple in Jerusalem have any role? How was faith defined and loyalty practiced? What did Jesus have to say to the church? While change was certainly afoot among the followers of Christ, too many options were taken up to credit any one person with responsibility for how history played out. “Paul the inventor” would be an exaggeration.

**Paul the Outlier**

While refusing to credit Paul with inventing Christianity, one certainly can appreciate his role as an innovator of lasting significance on a par with the author of Mark’s Gospel. Both are innovators. Each bequeathed to Christianity a literary form that successors imitated. Paul wrote letters and inspired many others to write letters, at least eight other authors and probably more. Mark created a narrative about Jesus’ life and thereby spawned imitators. The letters of Paul and the Gospel of Mark were important first steps in the creation of Christian literature, providing examples for others to follow.

These two innovators share an important trait: Both were outliers. Neither was part of Jesus’ band of followers. Each found his place in the congregations of Gentile Christians apart from the Jews who formed the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples.

Paul is explicit about this. He was not one of the pillars. He was not a member in one of the Jerusalem congregations. He possessed no authority delegated to him by the truly important disciples or by virtue of personal association with Jesus. This was one of the problems he faced in his ministry, as Paul tried to assert his ideas in competition with other Christian teachers with superior pedigrees and connections. Paul’s authority rested on his personal experience of the risen Christ and the evidence of Christ’s spirit at work through him.
Paul could offer only himself as proof of his legitimacy, not references. Paul stood outside the inner circle; he was an outlier.

An outlier likewise wrote the Gospel of Mark. Despite the erroneous tradition that links Peter to Mark, the author seems to have no personal connections to the earliest disciples. The stories Mark tells about those earliest followers undercut any claims to authority those disciples might assert. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus calls his disciples to follow; instead they flee. Jesus challenges them to stay awake; they fall asleep. They crave honor; Jesus offers humiliation. Jesus predicts suffering; Peter rebukes him. Most tragically, Peter denies Jesus—and does so three times. It is left to women to visit the tomb and discover it empty. The giants of the church are not in Mark's Gospel. Mark grounds authority for authentic Christianity not in the first disciples but in loyal imitation of the Teacher. Like Paul, one sees Mark's Gospel standing outside the inner circle, its author an outlier.

In viewing the outliers, Paul and the author of Mark's Gospel, as innovators, the degree of their accomplishments is considered next. Did they innovate incrementally or dramatically? Throughout the New Testament, one can read authors giving a new slant to baptism or the Eucharist. For example, in Rom 6, Paul discusses baptism in a new way that goes beyond the obvious metaphor of “washing” away one's sins, adding that it also signifies an identification between the believer and Christ in his death and Resurrection. In doing this, he implicitly affirms the common experience of baptism, while adding to it one more interpretation. This illustrates incremental innovation.

Paul's letters and Mark's Gospel do more than add new features to what already existed. They reframe fundamental perspectives. Paul argues that loyalty to Christ is open to people who are not Jewish and do not live like Jews. In taking this position, he tells readers he debated other Christians and even came into conflict with Peter about this matter. Paul answers an important question differently from many other early Christians and, as a result, presents a way of following Christ that creates something dramatically different from what Christians in Jerusalem imagined to be correct. While Paul joined a movement that already included Gentiles, it fell to him to explain and defend their legitimacy. Criticism for his leadership in this dramatic innovation dogged Paul.
The Gospel of Mark, likewise, reframes faith in Christ. Like Paul, the Gospel of Mark offers a way for Gentiles to follow Christ but does so by arguing for an experience that imitates Jesus. This view requires reporting the teachings and deeds of Jesus, so that one knows what to imitate. Mark, therefore, gave the church the first narrative about the life of Jesus. It was not enough to know what Jesus said; the follower needed to know what Jesus did and what action this required. In saying that lists of what Jesus taught were not enough, the author of Mark boldly reframed the way early Christians wrote about Jesus. In fact, he changed forever how the church would talk about its master.

Without the literary innovations of these two outliers—Paul and the author of Mark—early Christian literature would look vastly different, as would early Christianity. The church, today, also would differ fundamentally. But these claims are not as sweeping as saying that Christianity rests on Paul or Mark. Both were crucial innovators, and in saying this, neither can be credited as the sole agent of change, as the inventor.

Paul the Iterator

In the twentieth century, scholars began, in earnest, examining Paul’s letters to learn how his ideas changed over time. Sometimes, statements that seem contradictory, such as Paul’s negative ones about Jewish law in Galatians and positive ones in Romans, have demanded this, which leads to observations about how Paul’s thinking developed or evolved.

But Paul also talks about topics in ways that are not necessarily contradictory, simply different. In Galatians, Paul’s discussion about the divine spirit drives how he formulates comments about Christian moral life. This line of reasoning is not pursued with such focus in his other letters. In Philippians, the apostle draws on a Stoic line of moral guidance when he advises readers to discern the things that really matter and pursue them. An intellectual turn reappears in Romans with more elaboration.

In some cases, it is clear that circumstances have forced Paul to see something in a new light and answer a new or follow-up question. His Corinthian correspondence reflects this, because
Paul had to respond to the ideas of other people who clearly were thinking about issues of the time. Was it acceptable to eat meat from an animal slaughtered in a sacrifice to a pagan god? The Corinthians figured that since Christ was more powerful than the other gods, they were immune to any danger attached to the meat. This opinion offended Paul’s scruples, and he labored to formulate an answer that refuted the Corinthians’ view. As already noted, the Corinthians also thought about the nature of resurrection, compelling Paul to respond with a counter argument about the physical nature of it. Yes, there is a resurrection body, Paul responded, albeit a spiritual one.

In these cases, one sees Paul thinking and trying to invent answers. This is where it is helpful to remember that Paul wrote first. In his letters, we find ourselves in a place at which Christian thinking is still being created. Although the invention has never ceased, with Paul we are close to the beginning, where very little was in place that is now taken for granted, e.g., the doctrine of the virgin birth or the Trinity. Thus, in regard to eating meat sacrificed to an idol, Paul thinks aloud as he tries to invent arguments, which is utterly unlike how Rev 2:14 and 20 address the issue, making no effort to explain or defend but simply decreeing that such behavior is evil.

As for Paul himself, he had a handful of fundamental, nonnegotiable beliefs. For example, he believed that God was one; Christ was crucified, buried, and raised; Jesus Christ was Lord; and the Lord was a spirit. Figuring out what these mean day to day was a work in progress, carried out in conversations and fights with pagans and Jews, converts and church leaders.

In describing Paul as an innovator whose work is exploratory and probing, another label can be used to show how he went about his work: iteration. To say Paul’s thinking is iterative is to say that it moves from prototype to prototype, each version, or iteration, bringing further insight and leading to new problems and questions. Like a good inventor, Paul moves from one experimental version to the next, to an initial product offering and improved versions. Sometimes earlier ideas are rejected, sometimes improved. At other times, new possibilities emerge. Iterations bring dead ends and surprises, improvements and do-overs. Sometimes, these can be charted as developments, at other times as fresh paths.
Often hard to recognize is which stage anything Paul says represents. Are his arguments about the resurrection body in 1 Cor 15 the prototype, in which he addresses the issue of the physical body in resurrection for the first time? Or are his comments practiced? If he were able to address the question again, how differently might he approach it? To me, Paul’s comments appear to develop previous conversations about resurrection. They are iterations and look like neither a preliminary mock-up nor a final, polished product. Regardless, as the first Christian author, Paul presented the rhetorical prototype for many topics. His subsequent iterations sometimes led to confusion, which is precisely what proves he is thinking and makes him interesting.

Conclusion
Paul wrote first, and this innovation had a crucial legacy for Christianity. In establishing the example of letter writing, he set in motion the creation of some of the most influential documents in the Christian church, both his own letters and those by his imitators. His limited status relative to many other early preachers gave rise to much of his writing, which tells one to look for alternative views, of which there are many. Knowing of this competition and Paul’s status as the first to write cautions readers that his ideas are experimental and indicates they should anticipate change and expansion. We do, indeed, discover these iterations. His preliminary and contingent ideas required subsequent writers to update Paul and align him with mainstream thinking, as happened in the early church. With these things in mind, one can evaluate further Paul’s success and failure.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul diverged from the views of the church’s first leaders by preaching salvation to Gentiles apart from Jewish identity and practices. From this point of view, Paul won, as church membership quickly became overwhelmingly Gentile. He proved to be on the right side of this question.

Paul also built communities of believers and linked them together. These steps helped build a social organization that could transcend localities, thereby laying a foundation for the church’s survival and success. Whether others imitated him consciously,
the process of building socially networked communities provided a blueprint for the church’s growth. Paul should receive credit for the church becoming a global enterprise, not simply because he won converts but because of the method by which he did so.

The apostle’s ledger has a negative side as well. In his failure to root his preaching in the life and teaching of Jesus, Paul lost, as the church chose to focus on Jesus and root itself in the Gospels. In this sense, the documents that focused only on Jesus’ teachings, e.g., Q and the Gospel of Thomas, also lost, though they were closer to victory than Paul.

The even larger matter Paul missed was how long Jesus would take to return. Had he anticipated the millennia to come, his views on many things—including Jesus—might have been different. Paul can hardly be faulted for this, as he lived out the implications of resurrection and Christ’s spirit.

Paul’s focus on the powerful activity of the divine spirit in the lives of Christ’s followers is another crucial part of his legacy. Here, again, he lost out. In the developing church, the role of the spirit evolved as it merged with clerical authority and liturgy. The free-for-all of spiritual activity in Paul’s congregations gave way to clerical office and liturgical order.

For centuries, religious practices typical of Paul’s converts disappeared. Evidence of them remained in Paul’s letters, a latent potential for reform to be exploited by restless Christians wanting to kindle faith. Paul’s influence on the Reformation goes without saying, but he played an equal role in dispensationalism, charismatic renewal, and fundamentalism, which are influential on college campuses today. The mainstream church may have tamed Paul, but the apostle to the Gentiles remains a voice for change to those looking for something different—just as he was in his lifetime.

Questions

1. Among the letters attributed to Plato that survive today, Plato wrote some and not others. The same is true of letters written by the early Christian Ignatius of Antioch. Would you expect the letters of Paul to be any different in this regard? Why?
2. What motives might explain why people would write using Paul’s name?

3. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of Paul having written letters instead of other genres, say a philosophical essay, biography, or history? Why do you think Paul wrote only letters?

4. Paul tells us little about Jesus. Do you think this affects the quality of his views about Christian faith?

5. If Paul was not simply trying to relay and elaborate on Jesus’ teachings, then what do you think his agenda was?

6. The New Testament refers to Christians as “filled with the Holy Spirit.” We refer to people controlled by evil spirits as “demon possessed.” In this essay, I refer to Paul’s religion as one of “spirit possession.” What do these three expressions convey to you? What do you think are the pros and cons of using the phrase “spirit possession”?

7. Should the nature of Christian experience as described by Paul be normative for all Christians? Or do you consider it just one alternative? Why?

8. Paul wasn’t as good a preacher as his contemporaries. He didn’t perform as many miracles. He didn’t even know Jesus. He claimed that God appointed him to be an apostle. He claimed that his success in starting churches provided evidence of his apostleship. He claimed that his sufferings identified him with Christ and furnished evidence that God called him to be an apostle. Do you think that Paul’s credentials are adequate to his claim to be an apostle? Does he deserve his place as one of Christianity’s pillars? How relevant are his ideas about himself to his place in history?

9. What value do you place on innovation? Do you consider it a positive or negative thing that the outliers Paul and the author of Mark exerted such fundamental influence on the development of Christian literature and, therefore, ideas?

10. Paul’s ideas evolved, even changed. How do you react to that?

11. Paul thought that Christ would bring God’s judgment to earth any day. If a person claims that the world is about to end, are
you more inclined to lend belief or suspicion? As things turned out, of course, Paul was wrong. How does that affect your opinion of Paul?

Further Reading

WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN’T

Some study techniques accelerate learning, whereas others are just a waste of time—but which ones are which? An unprecedented review maps out the best pathways to knowledge

BY JOHN DUNLOSKY, KATHERINE A. RAWSON, ELIZABETH J. MARSH, MITCHELL J. NATHAN AND DANIEL T. WILLINGHAM

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CELIA JOHNSON
Cognitive and educational psychologists have developed and evaluated numerous techniques, ranging from rereading to summarizing to self-testing, for more than 100 years. Some common strategies markedly improve student achievement, whereas others are time-consuming and ineffective. Yet this information is not making its way into the classroom. Teachers today are not being told which learning techniques are supported by experimental evidence, and students are not being taught how to use the ones that work well. One of them may even undermine success.

One potential reason is that the huge amount of research is overwhelming, making it difficult for educators and students to identify the most practical and advantageous ways to study. To meet this challenge, we reviewed more than 700 scientific articles on 10 commonly used learning techniques. We focused on strategies that seem to be easy to use and broadly effective. We also took a closer look at a couple of methods that are very popular with students.

To receive our recommendation, a technique must be useful in a range of learning conditions, such as whether a student works alone or in a group. It must assist learners of various ages, abilities and levels of prior knowledge—and it must have been tested in a classroom or other real-world situation. Learners should be able to use the method to master a variety of subjects, and their performance should benefit no matter what kind of test is used to measure it. The best approaches also result in long-lasting improvements in knowledge and comprehension.

Using these criteria, we identified two clear winners. They produced robust, durable results and were relevant in many situations. Three more are recommended with reservations, and five—including two popular learning aids—are not advised, either because they are useful only in limited circumstances or because not enough evidence supports a higher rating. We encourage researchers to further explore some of the untested techniques, but students and teachers should be cautious about relying on them.

**Rating the Best Ways to Study**

1. Some study methods work in many different situations and across topics, boosting test performance and long-term retention. Learning how to learn can have lifelong benefits.

2. Self-testing and spreading out study sessions—so-called distributed practice—are excellent ways to improve learning. They are efficient, easy to use and effective.

3. Underlining and rereading, two methods that many students use, are ineffective and can be time-consuming.

4. Other learning techniques need further testing and evaluation. In the meantime, students and teachers can put proved study methods to use in classrooms and at home.
1. SELF-TESTING  Quizzing Yourself Gets High Marks

**HOW IT WORKS:** Unlike a test that evaluates knowledge, practice tests are done by students on their own, outside of class. Methods might include using flash cards (physical or digital) to test recall or answering the sample questions at the end of a textbook chapter. Although most students prefer to take as few tests as possible, hundreds of experiments show that self-testing improves learning and retention.

In one study, undergraduates were asked to memorize word pairs, half of which were then included on a recall test. One week later the students remembered 35 percent of the word pairs they had been tested on, compared with only 4 percent of those they had not. In another demonstration, undergraduates were presented with Swahili-English word pairs, followed by either practice testing or review. Recall for items they had been repeatedly tested on was 80 percent, compared with only 36 percent for items they had restudied. One theory is that practice testing triggers a mental search of long-term memory that activates related information, forming multiple memory pathways that make the information easier to access.

**WHEN DOES IT WORK?** Anyone from preschoolers to fourth-year medical students to middle-age adults can benefit from practice testing. It can be used for all kinds of factual information, including learning words in foreign languages, making spelling lists and memorizing the parts of flowers. It even improves retention for people with Alzheimer’s disease. Short, frequent exams are most effective, especially when test takers receive feedback on the correct answers.

Practice testing works even when its format is different from that of the real test. The beneficial effects may last for months to years—great news, given that durable learning is so important.

**IS IT PRACTICAL?** Yes. It requires modest amounts of time and little to no training.

**HOW CAN I DO IT?** Students can self-test with flash cards or by using the Cornell system: during in-class note taking, make a column on one edge of the page where you enter key terms or questions. You can test yourself later by covering the notes and answering the questions (or explaining the keywords) on the other side.

**RATING:** High utility. Practice testing works across an impressive range of formats, content, learner ages and retention intervals.

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2. DISTRIBUTED PRACTICE  For Best Results, Spread Your Study over Time

**HOW IT WORKS:** Students often “mass” their study—in other words, they cram. But distributing learning over time is much more effective. In one classic experiment, students learned the English equivalents of Spanish words, then reviewed the material in six sessions. One group did the review sessions back to back, another had them one day apart and a third did the reviews 30 days apart. The students in the 30-day group remembered the translations the best. In an analysis of 254
studies involving more than 14,000 participants, students recalled more after spaced study (scoring 47 percent overall) than after massed study (37 percent).

**WHEN DOES IT WORK?** Children as young as age three benefit, as do undergraduates and older adults. Distributed practice is effective for learning foreign vocabulary, word definitions, and even skills such as mathematics, music and surgery.

**IS IT PRACTICAL?** Yes. Although textbooks usually group problems together by topic, you can intersperse them on your own. You will have to plan ahead and overcome the common student tendency to procrastinate.

**HOW CAN I DO IT?** Longer intervals are generally more effective. In one study, 30-day delays improved performance more than lags of just one day. In an Internet-based study of trivia learning, peak performance came when sessions were spaced at about 10 to 20 percent of the retention interval. To remember something for one week, learning episodes should be 12 to 24 hours apart; to remember something for five years, they should be spaced six to 12 months apart. Although it may not seem like it, you actually do retain information even during these long intervals, and you quickly re-learn what you have forgotten. Long delays between study periods are ideal to retain fundamental concepts that form the basis for advanced knowledge.

**RATING:** High utility. Distributed practice is effective for learners of different ages studying a wide variety of materials and over long delays. It is easy to do and has been used successfully in a number of real-world classroom studies.

**THE RUNNERS-UP**

Despite their promise, the following learning techniques fall short, in many cases because not enough evidence has been amassed to support their use. Some techniques, such as elaborative interrogation and self-explanation, have not been evaluated sufficiently in real-world educational contexts. Another emerging method called interleaved practice has just begun to be systematically explored. Nevertheless, these techniques show enough potential for us to recommend their use in the situations described briefly here.

### 3. ELABORATIVE INTERROGATION

**Channel Your Inner Four-Year-Old**

**HOW IT WORKS:** Inquisitive by nature, we are always looking for explanations for the world around us. A sizable body of evidence suggests that prompting students to answer “Why?” questions also facilitates learning.

With this technique, called elaborative interrogation, learners produce explanations for facts, such as “Why does it make sense that…?” or “Why is this true?” In one experiment, for example, students read sentences such as “the hungry man got into the car.” Participants in an elaborative interrogation group were asked to explain why, whereas others were provided with an explanation, such as “the hungry man got into the car to go to the restaurant.” A third group simply read each sentence. When asked to recall which man performed what action (“Who got in the car?”), the elaborative-interrogation group answered about 72 percent correctly, compared with about 37 percent for the others.

**WHEN SHOULD I USE IT?** When you are learning factual information—particularly if you already know something about the subject. Its power increases with prior knowledge; German students benefited from elaborative interrogation more when they were learning about German states than about Canadian provinces, for example. It may be that prior knowledge permits students to generate more appropriate explanations for why a fact is true.

**PROMPTING STUDENTS TO ANSWER “WHY?” QUESTIONS, CALLED ELABORATIVE INTERROGATION, ALSO FACILITATES LEARNING.**
The effects of this technique appear to be robust across ages, from fourth graders through undergraduates. Elaborative interrogation clearly improves memory for facts, but whether it also might enhance comprehension is less certain, and there is no conclusive information about how long the gains in learning persist.

**IS IT PRACTICAL?** Yes. It requires minimal training and makes reasonable time demands. In one study, an elaborative-interrogation group required 32 minutes to do a task that took 28 minutes for a reading-only group.

**RATING:** Moderate utility. The technique works for a broad range of topics but may not be useful for material more complex than a factual list. Benefits for learners without prior knowledge may be limited. More research will be needed to establish whether elaborative interrogation generalizes to various situations and different types of information.

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**4. SELF-EXPLANATION | How Do I Know?**

**HOW IT WORKS:** Students generate explanations of what they learn, reviewing their mental processing with questions such as “What new information does the sentence provide for you?” and “How does it relate to what you already know?” Similar to elaborative interrogation, self-explanation may help integrate new information with prior knowledge.

**WHEN SHOULD I USE IT?** It benefits kindergartners to college students and helps in solving math problems and logical reasoning puzzles, learning from narrative texts and even mastering endgame strategies in chess. In younger children, self-explanation can help with basic ideas such as learning numbers or patterns. The technique improves memory, comprehension and problem solving—an impressive range of outcomes. Most studies, however, have measured effects within only a few minutes, and it is not known whether the technique is more lasting in people of high or low knowledge.

**IS IT PRACTICAL?** Unclear. On the one hand, most students need minimal instruction and little to no practice, although one test of ninth graders showed that students without training tended to paraphrase rather than generate explanations. On the other, a few studies report that this technique is time-consuming, increasing time demands by 30 to 100 percent.

**RATING:** Moderate utility. Self-explanation works across different subjects and an impressive age range. Further research must establish whether these effects are durable and whether the time demands make it worthwhile.

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**5. INTERLEAVED PRACTICE | Mixing Apples and Oranges**

**HOW IT WORKS:** Students tend to study in blocks, finishing one topic or type of problem before moving on to the next. But recent research has shown benefits for interleaved practice, in which students alternate a variety of types of information or problems. In one study, for example, college students learned to compute the volumes of four different geometric shapes. In a so-called blocked-practice condition, they finished all the problems for one shape before moving on to the next. In interleaved practice, the problems were intermixed. When tested one week later, the interleaved
What Doesn’t Work

These techniques were rated as low utility because they are inefficient, ineffective or beneficial only for certain types of learning and for short periods of retention. Most students report rereading and highlighting, yet these techniques do not consistently boost performance, and they distract students from more productive strategies. Other methods mentioned below are just too time-consuming.

HIGHLIGHTING
Students commonly report underlining, highlighting or otherwise marking material. It is simple and quick—but it does little to improve performance. In controlled studies, highlighting has failed to help U.S. Air Force basic trainees, children and remedial students, as well as typical undergraduates. Underlining was ineffective regardless of text length and topic, whether it was aerodynamics, ancient Greek schools or Tanzania.

In fact, it may actually hurt performance on some higher-level tasks. One study of education majors found that underlining reduced their ability to draw inferences from a history textbook. It may be that underlining draws attention to individual items rather than to connections across items.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO INSTEAD: Highlighting or underlining can be useful if it is the beginning of a journey—if the marked information is then turned into flash cards or self-tests. Given that students are very likely to continue to use this popular technique, future research should be aimed at teaching students how to highlight more effectively—which likely means doing it more judiciously (most undergraduates overmark texts) and putting that information to work with a more useful learning technique.

REREADING
In one survey of undergraduates at an elite university, 84 percent said they reread textbooks or notes during study. It requires no training, makes modest demands on time, and has shown some benefits on recall and fill-in-the-blank-style tests.

Yet the evidence is muddy that rereading strengthens comprehension, and whether its effects depend on knowledge level or ability is also woefully underexplored. Most of the benefit of rereading appears to accrue from the second reading, with diminishing returns from additional repetitions. No experimental research has assessed it using materials from actual courses—ironic, given that this strategy is the one most commonly reported by students.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO INSTEAD: Don’t waste your time—in head-to-head comparisons, rereading fares poorly against more active strategies such as elaborative interrogation, self-explanation and practice testing.

Three less commonly used study techniques also fared poorly in our assessment. “Imagery for text learning” needs more evidence before it can be recommended, whereas “summarization” and “keyword mnemonic” appear to be ineffective and time-consuming.

In summarization, students identify a text’s main points, excluding unimportant material. Whether it works is difficult to answer, as it has been implemented in many different ways. It is unknown whether summarizing small pieces of a text or large chunks of it works better or whether the length, readability or organization of the material matters.

With keyword mnemonics, imagery is used to enhance memory; for example, a student learning the French word la dent (“tooth”) might use the similar-sounding English word “dentist” to form a mental image of a dentist holding a large molar. Mnemonics do seem to help with foreign-language vocabulary, word definitions and medical terminology, but the effects have not been shown to endure, and in the end the effort involved in generating keywords may not be an efficient use of time.

Another technique that uses mental pictures is imagery for text learning, in which students are told to create images for every paragraph they read. Research has revealed a patchwork of inconsistent results that have not been shown to last over the long term. Teachers may consider instructing students to attempt using this technique with image-friendly texts, but further demonstrations of its usefulness are necessary.

See the Psychological Science in the Public Interest article “Improving Students’ Learning with Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions from Cognitive and Educational Psychology,” on which this story for Scientific American Mind is based, at the Association for Psychological Science’s Web site: www.psychologicalscience.org
STUDENTS ARE NOT BEING TAUGHT THE BEST STRATEGIES, PERHAPS BECAUSE TEACHERS THEMSELVES ARE NOT SCHOoled IN THEM.

WHEN SHOULD I USE IT? When the types of problems are similar, perhaps because juxtaposing them makes it easier to see what is different about them. Blocked practice—doing all the items from one category in a row—may be more effective when the examples are not very much alike because it highlights what they have in common.

It is possible that interleaved practice benefits only those who are already reasonably competent. Outcomes are also mixed for different types of content. It improves performance on algebra problems and was effective in a study that trained medical students to interpret electrical recordings to diagnose cardiac disorders. Yet two studies of foreign-vocabulary learning showed no effect for interleaved practice. Nevertheless, given how much difficulty many students have in mathematics, it may still be a worthwhile strategy for that subject.

IS IT PRACTICAL? It seems to be. A motivated student could easily use interleaving without any instruction. Teachers could also use the technique in the classroom: After one kind of problem (or topic) is introduced, practice first focuses on that problem. Once the next kind of problem is introduced, it is mixed in with examples of earlier subjects. It may take a little more time than blocking practice, but such slowing most likely is worthwhile, reflecting cognitive processes that boost performance.

RATING: Moderate utility. Interleaved practice improves learning and retention of mathematical knowledge and boosts other cognitive skills. The literature on interleaved practice is small, however, and includes enough negative results to raise concern. It may be that the technique does not consistently work well, or perhaps it is not always used appropriately—topics for future research.

What We Have Learned

Why don’t students use more effective study techniques? It seems they are not being taught the best strategies, perhaps because teachers themselves are not schooled in them. In our survey of six educational-psychology textbooks, only one technique—“keyword mnemonics”—was covered in every book. None offered much guidance on the use, effectiveness or limitations of different ways of studying.

A second problem may be that in the educational system, the emphasis is on teaching students critical-thinking skills and content. Less time is spent on teaching them how to learn. The result can be that students who do well in their early years, when learning is closely supervised, may struggle once they are expected to regulate their own learning in high school or college.

Some questions, such as the best age for students to start using a technique and how often they will need to be retrained or reminded, still require further research. But even now teachers can incorporate the most successful approaches into lesson plans so that students could adopt them on their own. For instance, when moving to a new section, a teacher can start by asking students to do a practice test that covers important ideas from the previous section and providing immediate feedback. Students can interleave new problems with related ones from preceding units. Teachers can harness distributed practice by reintroducing major concepts during the course of several classes. They can engage students in explanatory questioning by prompting them to consider how the information is new to them or why it might be true.

These learning techniques are no panacea. They benefit only those who are motivated and capable of using them. Nevertheless, we expect that students will make meaningful gains in classroom performance, on achievement tests and during their lifetime.

(Further Reading)