

Paul on a Page

Teaching Tips for Catholic Teachers and Homilists in the Use of Pauline Texts

Essential reading

- *Re-Reading Paul. A Fresh Look at his Attitude to Torah and Judaism. Further Guidelines for Christian Clergy and Teachers.* Council of Christians and Jews Victoria, 1995.

Further reading

- Magnus Zetterhom. *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- E.P. Sanders. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism.* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
- Brendan Byrne. *Romans.* Collegeville, Minnesota: Glazier, 1996.

Teaching Tips

This one-page resource provides a quick orientation and 'teacher alert' to an important issue affecting how biblical texts are discussed in the classroom, especially in the light of contemporary directives of the official Jewish-Catholic dialogue which point out that:

The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf: Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40). Vatican CRRJ, "Guidelines", 1974.

The letters of St Paul, while rich and inspiring, are complex in their treatment of the status of the Jewish Law and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Common misconceptions that continue to abound in pulpits and classrooms include the view that:

- St Paul 'converted' from Judaism to Christianity;
- St Paul rejected Judaism and urged other followers of Jesus to do the same;
- Judaism was a "works-righteousness" religion that prioritised legalism over faith and grace.

As a corrective, the following points can be reinforced in the classroom or pulpit:

- Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee and a proud member of the tribe of Benjamin. Whilst Paul was convinced that Jesus was the messiah whose presence and message fulfilled the Mosaic Law, he did not reject Judaism and never renounced his Jewish identity.
- What, then, are we to make of so many Pauline statements that appear to depict the Jewish Law in a negative light? This negative reading became pronounced in the late medieval period where Paul's writings were misused to convey the idea that Judaism was pathologically obsessed with adherence to particular laws (a religion of "works-righteousness") in contrast to Christ who offered love and grace and came to free us from a legalism that impedes our way to God. This false dichotomy, largely fuelled by Martin Luther and the reforming groups of the Protestant Reformation, has been powerfully influential over the centuries into modern times, infecting generations of European Scripture scholars in the tradition of Martin Luther and taking root in Roman Catholic expression as well.
- Only since the 1960s have scholars begun to turn the tide and re-examine the Pauline letters with the aid of historical critical tools and a better understanding of Rabbinic literature. Today Paul is understood to be a Jew who grappled with particular issues affecting both

Jews and Gentiles of his day. An area of scholarship known as the ‘new perspective’ on Paul calls for a more careful reading that examines the pastoral needs to which the letters are directed, and views these writings in the context of the overall Pauline corpus and other contemporaneous Jewish texts. Within these frames of reference, a very different kind of Paul emerges, even if scholars continue to debate specific issues.

- For example, in 1977 a major work of E.P. Sanders broke new ground in which he concluded that for the Judaism of Paul’s time obedience to Torah was not a means to acquire status but a response of fidelity to the covenant. Seen in this light, Judaism is as much concerned with covenant and grace as is Christianity. Paul directed strong words at Judaism not because it was legalistic but because, for Paul, Christ’s saving presence so filled his worldview and because he feared that Gentile disciples would be seen as second-class citizens should the Law of Moses be seen as ‘competing’ with the saving role of Jesus Christ.
- One of Paul’s overarching concerns was that Gentiles find inclusion and acceptance within the one people of God. While he opposed the full imposition of the Mosaic law on Gentile followers of Christ, it seems that he still expected the Mosaic law to be held by *Jewish* followers of Christ. This Jew-Gentile distinction is an important key to understanding certain Pauline statements without reading into them a rejection of Judaism.
- To suggest that Paul understood the Jewish Law to be obsolete and the Church to have replaced Israel is to read Paul through a lens that imports church controversies of later centuries. The ‘teaching of contempt’ was repudiated by the Second Vatican Council. In its place, the Council reached back into the writings of St Paul to teach that the Jews remain the beloved of God who never goes back on divine promises (Romans 11:28-29). Later ecclesial statements, especially those of John Paul II, have developed this teaching to more clearly affirm that God’s covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked.

In a Nutshell

1. Reinforce Paul’s Jewish identity.
2. Observe his colourful personality - passionate, argumentative, impatient, zealous, abrasive.
3. Point out the intensity of his messianic expectations: Paul believed that the events of the Endtime—including the nations turning to the God of Israel—were occurring in his lifetime. Paul also saw himself as an Apostle who was divinely called and sent to the Gentiles.
4. Point out that not all the letters that bear Paul’s name are considered to be written by Paul; however, scholars agree that Galatians and Romans are Paul’s words.
5. Correct the idea that Paul saw Judaism as an obsolete religion, now replaced by the Church.
6. Counter the suggestion that Paul regarded the Jewish Law to be an oppressive burden or that Jews are legalistic.
7. Provide historical context to illuminate a particular issue or argument addressed by Paul.
8. Acknowledge the very real difficulties in reading Paul.
9. Reinforce Paul’s respect for the Torah and his Jewish kin, and his desire to see Jews and Gentiles united within the one community of faith, while respecting certain differences.
10. Emphasise that to view Christ as the one who ‘fulfills’ the Law is not to negate God’s covenant with the Jewish people, much less deny them God’s everlasting love and fidelity.
11. Observe Paul’s anguish over the tensions between followers of Jesus and the mainstream Jewish community, and his willingness to entrust unresolved tensions to divine mystery.
12. Remind students of current Church teaching which is respectful of Jews and Judaism, celebrates the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish roots of the Church, acknowledges the continuing vitality of Jewish covenantal life, and rejects antisemitism.