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Paul and His Letters

"Letters to young churches"

THERE ARE twenty-seven documents—"books", we commonly call them—in the New Testament. Twenty-one of these are letters, written occasionally to individuals but more often to churches or Christian communities. Of these twenty-one letters, thirteen bear the name of Paul as their writer. Of these thirteen, nine fall into the category of what J. B. Phillips called "Letters to young churches"; they were addressed, that is to say, to newly-founded churches whose members were quite recent and inexperienced converts to Christianity. Most of those churches had been founded by Paul himself; their members had been converted to Christianity through his powerful presentation of the gospel. When he writes to them he is like a father addressing his children. He cannot conceal the strength and warmth of his affection for them, he commends everything that is praiseworthy in them (where others might have found little enough to commend), he

scolds them for their shortcomings, he warns them that if they do not mend their ways he will take a big stick with him next time he comes to see them, he encourages them for all he is worth, and makes no secret of his consuming desire that they should grow up to be hundred-per-cent Christians, worthy of the honourable name which they bear.

Paul's world significance

Paul is one of the most significant figures in the history of civilization. To him, far more than to any other person, is due the direction which Christianity took in the first generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is interesting at times (if not very fruitful) to speculate on the might-have-beens of history. What might have been the course of Christianity had Paul never become a Christian? Would it have remained one among several movements within the frontiers of Judaism? Would it have remained a predominantly Asian religion, like other great movements which originated in the same continent? So we might go on, asking questions whose only value is to emphasize the significance of the life and work of Paul.

Today, over wide areas of the earth, Christianity is regarded as primarily a European religion (for this purpose, "European" includes "American"). Whereas that may once have been looked upon as an advantage, nowadays it is a handicap to be overcome. But if it be asked how a faith which arose in Asia should have come to be so universally associated with European civiliza-

tion, the answer to the question must be sought in the life and activity of Paul. In the providence of God, the leading herald of the Christian message during the first three decades of the apostolic age was a Roman citizen, who saw how the strategic centres and communications of the Roman Empire could be exploited in the interests of the kingdom of Christ, and planted the faith in those centres and along those lines of communication. By launching the gospel within the principal provinces of the Roman Empire, Paul ensured that it would continue to advance more and more widely over the empire. At last the Roman Empire, with its rich heritage of Greek culture and Roman law and organization, was won for Christianity, and Christianity has been a dominant element in this heritage ever since. For European civilization has never ceased to be in essence the civilization bequeathed by the christianized Roman Empire.

Or we might ask another interesting historical question. Since Christianity began as a movement within the commonwealth of Israel, how is it that, less than a century after its inception, it presented the appearance of a mainly Gentile faith? The answer to this question too lies in the effectiveness of the ministry of Paul as the divinely chosen apostle to the Gentiles. Some Gentiles indeed had been converted to Christianity before Paul was fairly launched upon his apostolic career, but it was he above all others who carried the gospel throughout the Gentile lands. He regarded his apostleship as a priestly service, in which the conversion of the Gentiles was the acceptable sacrifice which he desired to present to God. It gave him

no joy to see the Jews so reluctant to accept the gospel, while Gentiles flocked to enjoy its blessings; he hoped indeed that the spectacle of the inexhaustible gospel blessings enjoyed by Gentiles would one day incite the Jews to emulate them and claim their own ancestral share in those blessings. But since his personal task was the evangelization of Gentiles, he devoted himself to it, with results that are plain for all to read.

The gospel and the Gentiles

When the gospel was presented to Jewish hearers, or to Gentiles who already had an attachment to the Jewish religion and way of life, the preacher could take it for granted that his hearers believed in one God, the creator of the world, a righteous and merciful God, who desired his people to be righteous and merciful too, and had given them his law for the guidance of their lives. But in the course of his ministry to Gentiles, Paul often found himself confronted by hearers whose religious and ethical background was quite different from that. They were idolaters, worshipping many gods who in fact were no gods. While they acknowledged standards of right and wrong, many of them would have confessed that this acknowledgement was largely a matter of lip service; and in some departments of life, notably in relations between the sexes, even the standards which they acknowledged were far laxer than those which the Jewish law and the Christian gospel alike maintained.

To such pagan audiences Paul had to speak first of

all about the true God, who had made heaven and earth and everything in them, who gave them all good things—life and food and everything else—for their rich enjoyment. This God, he said, had never left himself without a witness in the world, but now he had acted decisively for men's salvation by sending his Son Jesus Christ into the world. The coming of Christ was not unforeseen, for the prophets of Israel in earlier days had foretold it. They also foretold that he would give up his life as an offering to God for the sins of men, and that he would be raised from the dead. This had actually taken place, for Christ was crucified, and on the third day thereafter he rose from the grave and was seen by many witnesses. To their testimony Paul could add his own; he too, long after the others, had seen the risen Christ for himself. And through this Christ, crucified and risen, God was now offering his great salvation to all who placed their faith in him. The word "salvation" at least was not strange to these Gentiles; it spoke of that release from the burden of guilt and the fear of death which many of them were seeking fruitlessly in those days.

Paul was a bold man to offer them a *crucified* Saviour. For crucifixion was not only an unspeakably agonizing form of death; it was also utterly shameful. To die on a cross was to plumb the lowest depths of disgrace. Could self-respecting and intelligent people really be expected to trust in a *crucified* Saviour? Paul knew that his gospel of Christ crucified seemed folly to the Greeks, but he persisted in placing Christ crucified in the forefront of his preaching. And the event proved him

right, for great numbers of his hearers did place their faith in this crucified Saviour, and found new life and new power in doing so. They exulted in their conscious deliverance from spiritual bondage and oppression. That the Spirit of God had taken possession of their lives was to them no mere verbiage; it was a real experience.

A new way of life

But what were these people to be told about the way of life which they ought to live from now on? And how could they be expected to overcome their former habits and resist the pull of their immoral and idolatrous environments? Paul reminds his converts at Corinth that some of them were formerly "immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers" (1 Corinthians 6:9f.). What was the best way to teach such people the rudiments of sound morality?

Most of the Christians back home in Jerusalem would have said there was only one way; these people must be taught the law of Moses and told that unless they keep that law in addition to believing in Christ there is no salvation for them. But Paul could not do this. He had learned in his own experience that all the law-keeping in the world could never bring assurance of salvation and peace with God—and he knew more about law-keeping than most of his critics did. But the moment he surrendered his life to Christ he knew that he had found the true way of salvation and peace. And

he contended that when a man yielded himself to the living Christ and the power of his Spirit, his inward being was so changed that, from that time forth, he delighted to produce spontaneously "the fruit of the Spirit", those graces which were to be seen in their harmonious perfection in the life of Christ.

Many Christians thought that Paul was being impossibly optimistic. This conception, they said, might work all right with people who already had a stable moral foundation, but how could it work with a crowd of immoral pagans such as had been swept into some of Paul's Gentile churches? Could it work in Philippi and Thessalonica? Above all, could it work in Corinth? The very name of Corinth was a byword for immorality throughout a pagan world that was none too particular. Paul maintained that it could work, even among people whose background and environment were so unpromising: and in the long run Paul's way was vindicated. But at the time many of his friends (not to speak of his opponents) seriously thought that he was lowering the ethical standards of the gospel through his laxity. And in justification of their criticism they could point to some sad lapses among Paul's converts.

Paul deplored these lapses as much as his critics did—more so, in fact. For he knew that his apostolic reputation was bound up with his converts' behaviour—his apostolic reputation not so much in the eyes of men as in the sight of God. Repeatedly he tells his converts that he can look forward with confidence to the day when he must give an account of his steward-

ship before the tribunal of Christ only if they stand firm in their faith and prove the genuineness of their Christianity by the quality of their lives. But he treats them as mature sons of God; instead of imposing a code of rules on them he sets before them the perfect standard of Christ—Christ not merely as an external example but Christ being reproduced within them by the power of the Spirit.

This is a higher standard than the best-devised of law codes. He calls it "the law of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21), but it is a law written in men's hearts and not on stone or parchment. It is a law which forbids Christians to live irregular lives, to quarrel with one another, to interfere in other people's business, to live at other people's expense when they are perfectly able to earn their own living. But it is not in essence a negative law, telling people what not to do (as most of the Ten Commandments did); it is the positive law of Christian love. Jesus had summed up the Old Testament law in two great commandments: "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18). But he had done more than that: his whole life had embodied this law of love and provided his followers with a standard for their own emulation. When Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, sings his hymn in praise of heavenly love, he celebrates love very largely in personal terms; it has often been pointed out that one might replace the word "love" in that chapter by the name of Christ and have a faithful portrait of his character. And if the power of the indwelling Spirit of

God reproduced this character of Christ in the lives of his people, then they would spontaneously follow the law of love. This was Paul's ambition for his converts.

It was no easy way that he chose, but it was incomparably the noblest way, and he never doubted that it was the only right way for men and women who had come of age spiritually through faith in Christ. It was a way that brought him disappointment time and again, as his converts failed to rise to "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). But it never brought him disillusionment; his many disappointments were more than matched by the readiness with which other converts of his—some of them newly liberated from idolatry—embraced his teaching and exhibited the Christ-likeness in their lives, shining like bright lights in an environment of spiritual and ethical darkness. Converts like these confirmed him in his conviction that his high ideal was the proper ideal to set before them, and he encouraged them untiringly to go on as they had begun.

Fighting on two fronts

It is this note of encouragement that we can hear above all others in his letters to the churches of Thessalonica, Corinth and Philippi. The situation in the Corinthian church was a specially delicate one for him to tackle, as he found it necessary to fight simultaneously on two fronts. There were not only those members of the church who thought that the gospel released them from all ethical convention; there were others who

(partly, no doubt, by way of reaction to these) went to the opposite extreme and tried, in the name of Christianity, to set up various taboos. Some of them thought that the married state was unfit for Christians; some wished to ban certain kinds of food, and so forth. So, while Paul was doing all he could, on the one hand, to restrain those who misinterpreted Christian liberty to mean licence to do anything they chose, he was obliged to deal firmly, on the other hand, with those who wanted to introduce a new set of prohibitions which would have banished Christian liberty altogether.

We have to bear all this in mind if we are to understand the arguments he employs now on this side and now on that. He tried to go as far as he could with both sides, until the point came where he had to stand fast and vindicate the principles of the gospel. He agreed with much that the libertarians said about Christian freedom, but reminded them of the responsibilities which that freedom carried with it. He agreed with much that the ascetic party said about self-denial—after all, he practised self-denial far beyond what they did—but he insisted that self-denial must be a voluntary discipline, not to be imposed on others against their will, and not to be imposed on oneself in a spirit of legalism or with the idea that this was a way to acquire special merit in God's sight. To the one group he said, "Liberty, not licence"; to the other he said, "Liberty, not bondage". The people to whom he wrote were Christians, living in a non-Christian environment; they should therefore remember that the public reputation of Christianity, and indeed of Christ him-

self, depended on their behaviour. But there was an even higher incentive than that: they should remember above all that they were called to please Christ. To win Christ's approval mattered supremely in his converts' lives. To this end, then, he gave them every encouragement.

Gentile churches in a pagan environment

What were the features which distinguished a Pauline church and its members from the surrounding world? Members of a Jewish community in a pagan city were distinguished in a variety of ways: the males among them were all circumcised, they all desisted from ordinary work on the weekly sabbath and observed other special days in their sacred calendar, they abstained from some kinds of food which their neighbours ate as a matter of course. But Paul refused to have any of these distinguishing features imposed on his Gentile converts: no one must imagine that they must first become Jews before they could be Christians.

For his own part, Paul speaks of the cross of Christ as forming a barrier or fence between him and the world: that is probably what he means when he says that by the cross "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). What Paul calls "the word of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18) was as determinant for his way of life as for his gospel preaching and what this meant for him in practice can be discovered from a study of his writings. He presented his own example in this respect for the imitation of his

converts, but it had to be worked out differently for them. Paul moved on from one place to another, but most of his converts stayed in one place all their lives.

In the cities where they lived they were already members of social groups. They had their families, their neighbours, their fellow-workers. From none of these were they required to cut themselves off. If their former associates disowned them or would have nothing to do with them, that could not be helped; otherwise, former associations were to be maintained. Their maintenance, indeed, might provide missionary opportunities. The converted husband was not to give up living with his pagan wife if she was content to go on living with him. The converted wife was not to leave her pagan husband if he was willing to keep her as his wife, although this might, at times, involve her in delicate issues of conscience—if, for example, he insisted on her joining him in social activities which involved some degree of pagan worship.

Similarly, the social ties binding friends and neighbours together were not to be severed. A Christian might with a good conscience accept an invitation to a meal in a pagan home. He should no more ask awkward questions about the history of the food served at the meal than his wife should ask about the joint she bought in the meat market. Perhaps it came from an animal which had been sacrificed to a pagan divinity. What of it? It was neither better nor worse for that; it was in fact sanctified by the word of thanksgiving which the Christian pronounced over it. Normally the question of eating the flesh of animals which had been

sacrificed to pagan divinities would arise only for more affluent Christians; the poorer ones would eat meat very seldom.

But there were some activities in which a Christian could hardly engage without compromising his confession—those, for instance, which involved at least a token participation in pagan worship or the countenancing of sexual immorality. Thus an invitation to a banquet in a pagan temple was on a different footing from an invitation to a meal in a private house; whatever took place in a temple took place nominally at least under the patronage of the divinity worshipped there, and could be highly uncongenial to those who now served the living and true God. Here certainly was a situation in which the cross constituted a barrier between the believer and the world.

Christians who refused to take part any longer in such social occasions might well become unpopular with their old companions, even when those occasions did not involved what one New Testament writer calls "wild profligacy" (1 Peter 4:4). So many trade guilds and professional associations were under the nominal patronage of pagan divinities that a Christian could not easily continue membership in them. How, for example, would a silversmith in Ephesus fare if he were converted under Paul's preaching? Could he remain happily in a guild which derived most of its profit from the temple and cult of the great goddess Artemis?

The charges of anti-social sentiment brought against Christians on these grounds made it all the more necessary for them to show that they were not enemies

of society in any political sense. It was easy for those who did not like them to lump them along with subversive agitators. Any one who investigated the origins of Christianity could readily discover that Jesus, whom Christians acknowledged as their Lord, had been executed for sedition by sentence of a Roman judge. Therefore strict obedience to the ruling powers is enjoined by Paul and others on Gentile Christians, with the scrupulous paying of taxes and the recognition of the magistrates' authority in all the spheres of life in which it could properly be exercised.

But disputes within the Christian community should be settled within that community; they should not be brought for adjudication before pagan judges. Each Christian church was in some respects like a city within a city, a state within the state, and very much a welfare state. It was the responsibility of well-to-do members to make provision for those in material need. The same principle operated not only within each church, but among churches. Paul is sometimes credited with organizing Gentile Christianity, if not with being the effective founder of the church catholic, but in truth the only enterprise that he is known to have organized was the relief fund for the Jerusalem church which he launched in the churches which he himself planted.

It was a common enterprise like this, rather than any formal organization, that first bound the churches together and gave them a sense of unity, or at least enabled them to express their sense of unity. The basic sense of unity was there already. When Christians

visited another city in which a church had been planted, they knew they would find likeminded people, sharing a common faith, a common hope and a common life; this meant, on the most practical level, that they could be sure of congenial hospitality.

This positive bond of union gave cohesion to the Christian groups and to the Christian society as a whole. The negative features, the things they notoriously refrained from doing, were corollaries of this. Each city church or house-church was a social unit, a *collegium* in the eyes of Roman law, with common meals and common acts of worship and a common spirit of love and "belongingness". Exclusion from this common life was the ultimate sanction, but it was invoked only in extreme cases, where a member persisted in behaviour which not only contravened the ethical standards of the believing community but brought it into public disrepute. Exclusion was a matter of the utmost seriousness, for if the community belonged peculiarly to the Lord and was under his protection, the world outside lay under the dominion of evil; to exclude a member from the community was therefore, in effect, to deliver such a person to Satan (1 Corinthians 5:5). Happily, there was hope of recovery for excluded members; the shock of exclusion might indeed bring them to their senses and thus lead to their ultimate salvation.

Membership in those churches was not confined to one social class. Primitive Christianity was not a mass movement of slaves and other depressed groups. If the household codes incorporated in several New Testa-

ment letters include directions for Christian slaves (and very unrevolutionary directions at that), they also include directions for Christian slave-owners. The Corinthian Christians are reminded by Paul that they include "not many" who could be called wise, powerful or of noble birth "according to worldly standards" (1 Corinthians 1:26). There would have been no point in using such language to a community drawn from the submerged tenth of society; Paul speaks to them like this in an attempt to deflate their self-esteem. One of their number, Erastus, rose to high municipal office; another, Gaius, had a house large enough to accommodate "the whole church" (Romans 16:23). When someone like Gaius acted as host to the church, the church would probably include his household (his *familia*, to use the Latin term), not only relatives but retainers and slaves; it would span a great part of the social spectrum. Crispus, former ruler of the synagogue, who was one of Paul's first converts in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14; Acts 18:8), would also have been well-to-do; rulers of the synagogue were drawn from men and women of substance in the local Jewish community.

Lydia, Paul's first convert in Philippi, was an independent business woman with a house and household of her own (Acts 16:14, 15). Leading women, or wives of leading men, figure conspicuously among the foundation members of the churches of Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:4, 12); the women of Macedonia traditionally enjoyed greater independence than their sisters in the Greek cities farther south.

Those Christians of the first century were not able to cast off completely the social attitudes with which they had grown up, but they were probably able to do so much more thoroughly than western Christians of the twentieth century generally do, because the gospel of Christ crucified, which bound them together, not only formed a barrier between them and the world but dictated a revaluation, and often a reversal, of their previous social values.

People who have been so effectively "desocialized" and "resocialized" are exposed to the risk of developing a sect-mentality, of looking on their group as "a garden walled around", insulated from the encroachments of the wilderness outside. The course of Christian history in those early generations shows that this was not the dominant mentality among the churches. They were encouraged to be outward-looking in their practical charity as well as in their spoken witness. The Thessalonian Christians are urged to "abound in love to one another and to all", to "do good to one another and to all" (1 Thessalonians 3:12; 5:15). The garden was to take over more and more of the wilderness; the world must be rescued from the usurping tyranny of the evil one and brought into joyful allegiance to its true Lord. If Paul speaks of the cross as fencing off the believer from the world, he also views the world as the beneficiary of the redemption accomplished on the cross: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). The church could not have expanded as it did were it not that so many of its members took the initiative, by word and by action, in

being messengers of God's reconciling mercy to their fellow men and women.

Understanding Paul

One of the New Testament writers admitted that in the letters of "our beloved brother Paul" there were "some things . . . hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15f.). We need not be too surprised, therefore, if we too sometimes find a little difficulty in following his arguments. Yet he expected his readers to understand what he wrote to them, and they were not communities of supermen.

We are at a disadvantage as compared with the first readers of these letters because they were perfectly acquainted with the background of the letters, and we are not. It has often been suggested that in reading Paul's letters today we are like people listening to one end of a telephone conversation. We find it difficult to grasp the meaning of some of the things we hear because we cannot hear what is being said at the other end. A good part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians consists of a reply to a succession of questions which had been put to Paul in a letter recently sent to him by the Corinthian Christians. Their letter to Paul has not been preserved; we can only infer its contents from the terms in which Paul answers it. Perhaps we could grasp certain points in 1 Corinthians better if we could see the letter to which they refer. And in general the whole situation with which Paul's letters deal, the persons to whom he refers, the incidents which he

briefly recalls—all these were matters of common knowledge to his readers, and the merest allusion was enough to show them what Paul had in mind. But we have to do our best to reconstruct the situation, and it is always possible that we may be mistaken because we have lost an important element in it. It has been strongly argued, as we shall see, that 2 Corinthians was not originally a single letter in the form in which we have it now—that it consists of pieces of two or more separate letters written by Paul to his friends at Corinth. In Philippians too, it has been thought, there are signs that two originally separate letters have been joined together. Probably we shall never be able to settle such problems conclusively, simply because we do not know all the relevant details of Paul's relationship with the Corinthian and Philippian churches.

Again, Paul's style is not always easy to follow. This is partly on account of his habit of dictating his letters to an assistant. At times the impetuous torrent of Paul's thought seems to rush forward so swiftly that it outstrips the flow of his words, and his words have to leap over a gap now and then to catch up with his thought. We can only surmise how the assistant contrived to keep up with his words. Time and again Paul starts a sentence that never reaches a grammatical end, for before he is well launched on it a new thought strikes him and he turns aside to digress. Then, when he comes back to the main line, the original opening of the sentence has been forgotten. All this means that Paul is not the smoothest of authors, or the easiest to follow, but it does give us an unmistakable impression

of the man himself. Here is a man with something to say, and there is nothing artificial or merely conventional about the way he says it. And what he has to say is so important—for readers of the twentieth century as well as for the first-century Christians in Thessalonica, Corinth and Philippi—that the effort to understand him is abundantly rewarding.

Paul's letters and Christian beginnings

The fact that our New Testament begins with the four gospels and Acts, and then presents us with Paul's letters, tends to obscure for us the original order in which these documents were written. Most of Paul's letters were written before even the earliest of the gospels. The two letters to the Thessalonians are (with the possible exception of the letter to the Galatians) the oldest of the New Testament documents. This means that when Paul refers to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, or to some of his teaching, he is giving us our earliest surviving evidence. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 he tells us how Jesus instituted the Holy Communion and what he said as he did so. The first three gospel-writers also give us a record of this, but Paul's record is older by several years than the earliest of theirs, and must be treated with corresponding respect. We have to think not only of the date when this record was written down in this letter. Paul is not telling the Corinthians something they did not know before; he is reminding them of what he "delivered" to them by word of mouth when he was

with them five years earlier. Not only so: what he then "delivered" to them was what he himself had "received" at the beginning of his Christian career, perhaps seventeen years earlier still, and the ultimate authority for the record was derived from the Lord, who instituted the sacrament and spoke the words that explained his action.

There were no written gospels when Paul wrote these letters. Yet the letters were written to Christians—that is to say to people who had heard and believed the gospel story. But they knew it in an oral form, not in written records. Since they knew it, however, it was not necessary for Paul to relate it in his letters to them, except when, for purposes of his own, he thinks it wise to remind them of the gospel which they had heard from his lips. He does this, for example, at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, when he wishes to show his Corinthian readers how the resurrection hope is vitally bound up with the saving message which they have already received. But for the most part he regards that message as a foundation which has been well and truly laid, and he goes on to build upon it—to draw out and apply the implications of the gospel for Christian thought and life.

It is only rarely that Paul expressly quotes the teaching of Jesus when he urges on his converts the implications of the gospel. Sometimes, indeed, he does so; in 1 Corinthians, for example, he refers explicitly to Jesus' words about divorce (7:10f.), about the right of gospel preachers to have their material needs supplied (9:14), and about the significance of the

Lord's Supper (11:24f.); and in 1 Thessalonians he appeals to "the word of the Lord" as his authority for saying that believers who have died will rise at the Second Coming of Christ (4:15). But, although such passages are rare, it is not difficult to discover that Paul's ethical teaching is based firmly on that of Jesus, on what he calls "the law of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 9:21.

Paul's converts did not have a written record of the teaching of Jesus which could be put into their hands when they believed the gospel. It was very necessary that they should learn as soon as possible the elements of the Christian way of life, but they had to depend on oral teaching for this—teaching given them by Paul himself or by other Christian instructors, reinforced by their personal example (to which Paul in particular repeatedly drew his converts' attention).

At a very early time it appears that a recognized body of such oral teaching took shape. When Paul commends the Corinthian Christians for maintaining "the traditions" (1 Corinthians 11:2), or when he urges the Thessalonian Christians to "hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15), he is probably referring to this body of teaching. It was so well known that those who flouted it could be reprimanded for not living "in accord with the tradition that you received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). And this tradition is something that derives its authority from the teaching and example of Jesus himself; it was entrusted by him to his apostles to be handed on by

them to their converts and disciples, and so on to succeeding generations.

With the gradual appearance of the New Testament documents, this tradition, which at first existed exclusively in oral form, came to be increasingly enshrined in writing. This must be remembered when we read Paul's letters; he writes with authority, but the authority he claims does not reside in himself personally, but in the Lord whose accredited apostle he is and whose commands he conveys to his converts.

Acts and the Pauline letters

One specially valuable aid to the understanding of Paul's letters, particularly his earlier ones, is provided by his friend and fellow-traveller Luke in *The Acts of the Apostles*. Luke gives us a record of how Paul planted many of the churches to which he later sent letters, and this record is a very helpful background for the study of these letters. For example, in Acts 16 we have an account of the planting of the church at Philippi, in Acts 17:1-10 we have an account of the planting of the church at Thessalonica, and in Acts 18 an account of the planting of the church at Corinth. In introducing the plan of Paul's correspondence with these churches we shall make full use of the information provided by these accounts in Acts.

