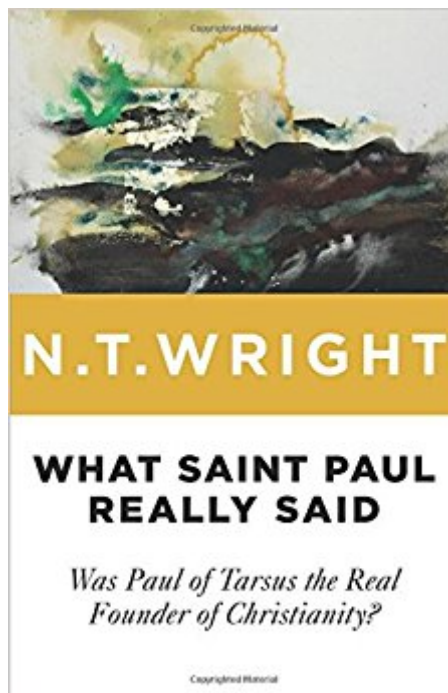




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What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul Of Tarsus The Real Founder Of Christianity?



Synopsis

In this book N. T. Wright provides a concise, authoritative account of the apostle Paul's contribution to the birth of Christianity. In exploring Paul's background and his teaching, Wright refutes the argument made by some scholars that it was Paul and not Jesus who founded Christianity. Rather, as Wright shows, Paul's gospel revolved around Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah and king, and Paul consistently pointed to the crucified and risen Jesus as the foundation of the church and Lord of all.

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Customer Reviews

-- The New York Times "The persuasiveness of Wright's book rests on his close readings of Pauline texts."-- Catholic Biblical Quarterly "An excellent book on the major issues of the interpretation of Paul in earliest Christianity."-- America "Manages to situate Paul within Judaism and at the same time to bring out what is new and fresh about Pauline Christianity. Wright's respect for the biblical text, knowledge of modern scholarship, theological imagination, pastoral concern, and ability to communicate make this an excellent guide to Paul and his theology."-- Theology Today "Crisply argued and passionately written, this volume will provoke the reader to return to Paul's letters with fresh insights and a host of new questions."

N. T. (Tom) Wright is Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and one of the most highly respected biblical scholars in the world today.

I have a friend who is really into N.T. Wright. I decided I needed to get caught up and set him straight on a few things, so I printed out the bibliography from *The Future of Justification* and decided to start with one of the most referenced (and shorter) books, *What Saint Paul Really Said*. I had my nit-picking glasses on, and a pen in hand. I didn't get past the preface before making a note that Wright is, "quite engaging and very enjoyable to read." All the more need to be careful. Chapter one is a history of the last 100 years of Pauline scholarship, covering Schweitzer, Bultmann, Davies, Kasemann, and of course Sanders. At the end of this chapter, I felt like I was "all caught up" on the theological situation, had a sense of a Wright's "big picture" theological strategy, and was enjoying his writing style more and more. The next 8 chapters are Wright's brief attempt to show Paul in light of his 1st century Jewish context. He covers Paul's own Pharisaic background, his encounter on the Damascus road, what realizing Jesus is the Messiah would have done to Paul's whole theological framework, what that means for pagans. Jews, justification, the future and The Gospel. The final chapter is a review of A.N. Wilson's *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*. In the back is an excellent annotated bibliography, including all of the classic works on Paul, the New Perspective (at the time), and those who disagree (i.e. Westerholm). My final analysis? I took the red pill. I find Wright to be incredibly stimulating, and I find the 1st century context to be shedding so much fresh light on how I read the Bible and think about theology. There are depths to the message of Christ that are incredible, and in order to dig deeper, we must understand its actual context, and not read our own (or our favorite theologian's) back onto it. Wright helps us see the incredible forest, not just our favorite trees. That said, I think Wright's portrayal of the forest leaves a few bare patches, justification and imputation being a couple. I'm not ready to go all the way with him here, though I have been stimulated to think deeply again about these issues. I realize this is a brief treatment, but I just couldn't follow his reasoning all the way through with him. Wright's work can be divided into two categories, I think: His massive scholarly work, and his popularizations. This fits into the latter. I highly recommend reading the popular and getting a sense of his general themes before diving in over your head. There is enough in the short books to revolutionize your thinking. I would personally recommend *The Challenge of Jesus* first, then *What Saint Paul Really Said*, and then dig into his larger works from there. After reading Wright, I am getting more fresh light from the Bible than I have in a long time. I am excited to read the Bible like I haven't always been. I am seeing depths of Who Jesus the Messiah Is that I've never seen before. Don't just read the reviews, critical or otherwise; read Wright, and see for yourself.

"What Saint Paul Really Said" is fairly short (only 192 pages), but it explains, in an accessible way, some fairly complex theology. Scholars over the centuries have debated what Paul meant and I found the book very helpful. Wright has been both an Anglican bishop and a New Testament scholar. He is an expert on Paul and wrote his PhD thesis on Romans. Wright is one of my favorite Christian writers and according to "Christianity Today" is one of the top five theologians in the world. Wright believes it is important to remember that Paul was a first century Jew. He suggests that much of what Paul believed before he became a Christian is compatible with the theology he outlined in the New Testament. Paul was a rabbi who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and also divine. For Wright the core of Paul's gospel was the death and resurrection of Christ. The proclamation of the gospel was the proclamation of Jesus as Lord, the Messiah who fulfilled Israel's expectations. In Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, nearly every Old Testament hope is fulfilled. Those who believe in Jesus Christ will have their sins forgiven. Wright also considers the role of the Holy Spirit to be crucial: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The most controversial chapter is "Justification and the Church." Wright understands justification as basically a law-court term. It means the judge's declaration that a person is 'in the right' in terms of the law court. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian. Wright believes that in Romans 2:4-11 Paul is saying that all human beings will be judged by their works at the final judgment. Those who are guilty of wickedness will be punished; those who have acted virtuously will be rewarded. Wright states that first-century Jews believed in a final judgment at which their works in the present time would be an important part, if not the whole part, of what counted. In Wright's view an honest reading of Scripture shows that Romans refers to justification by works (2:13: "It is not the hearers of the law who will be righteous before God but the doers of the law who will be justified"). Wright explains that salvation is achieved through a multi-stage process: (1) people hear the gospel; (2) the process continues with a combination of preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the hearers; (3) there is the birth of faith and entry into the family of Abraham through baptism; (4) justification in the present is based on faith; (5) there will be a future justification based on the entire life lived. Wright asserts that those who are presently justified through faith may be confident of their final justification by works, since those with true faith will always do good works. Wright does not say that we merit salvation by works alone. Wright believes that in the first-century context "works of the law" had little to do with Reformation ideas of works-righteousness. Paul's main problem with the "works of the law" was that it kept Jews and Gentiles separate. In Romans 3:28: "For we maintain

that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too. Wright points out that Scripture cannot be rationalized away because it is inconvenient or does not fit with protestant tradition. This is an enjoyable book and I thoroughly recommend it.

This book deals with Paul's main theological point: Jesus is Lord, and it deals with it from the perspective that Paul lived and died as a devote Jew of a very conservative stripe. It makes a very persuasive argument that Paul rethought his expectations about the Messiah and embraced Jesus as that Messiah, but did not change not his assumptions that the Messiah was the vindicator of Judaism. This book does NOT delve into the parts of Paul related to the role of women or slavery - "Difficult Paul" or as some think "Paul Re-spun". For those wanting to explore that, I recommend the book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, "The First Paul."

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