

Is Christian Morality Unique? Part I    The Letters of Paul

# Is Christian Morality Unique Part I

# Letters of Paul



**Slide Set 4 of 10**

**Michelle Nailon CSB**



The book of Acts, written by Luke, describes the early years of the church. After the Church Council (around 49-50CE), most of the story is about Paul. Why do you think this is so?

Before his conversion Paul had been a well-known brilliant scholar. After his conversion would you expect that Paul would be trying to re-interpret the teaching of the Bible to fit with the following of Jesus and "the way"?

Some present theologians suggest that he re-wrote the map of morality

In the light of a "raising of the bar" have you any clues as to how he would have done this?

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## Letters of Paul

Michelle Nailon CSB

Part I  
Slide Set 4 of 10

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After the death of Jesus, a person emerged in the late 40's CE who was to clarify the teaching of Jesus.

This man was to "re-draw" the map of Jewish morality in order to incorporate the world view of Greek philosophy.



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The person who emerged was called Saul. He was a very highly educated, Jewish Pharisee. Saul, later renamed Paul, had started out by trying to capture followers of Jesus and sending them to prison.

However on his way to Damascus to continue this, he was struck down by a blinding light. A voice called to him "Saul Saul why are you persecuting me? Saul answered "who are you Lord? The voice replied. I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting."

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“Paul your great learning is making you mad”  
(quote from the Roman Governor Festus)



After the vision, Saul now renamed Paul, became a leading follower of Jesus. As a Pharisee he was well versed in the Jewish moral law and he had practiced this meticulously.

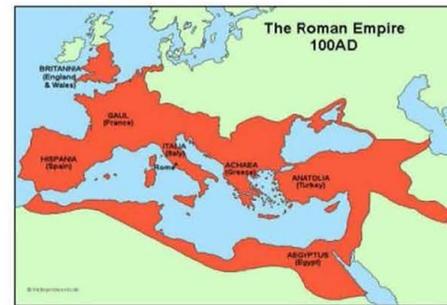
But now he began to reinterpret the law in order to make it more practical and relevant to the wider population and Greek philosophy of the Roman Empire.

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- Paul travelled widely around the empire and founded church communities to whom he wrote letters e.g. a community in Corinth.

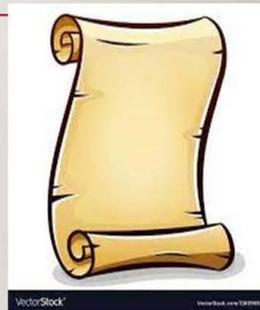


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To the present day Paul's letters continue to clarify the basics of Christian morality.

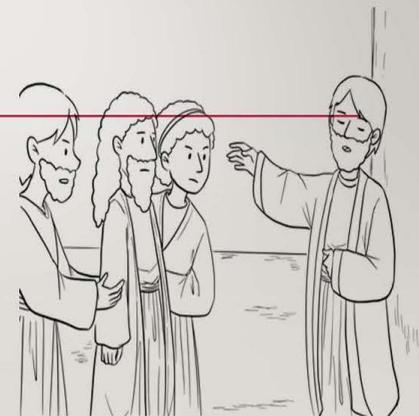
His teaching is to be found in his letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, the Galatians and the Romans etc.



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Written during the 50's, Paul's letters would have influenced the writing of the gospels that took place some years later.



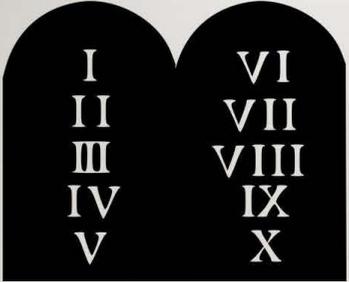
# St Paul attended the Jerusalem Council (end 40's)

## He welcomed and taught its mandate as a clarification of "the way"

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### What was Paul's Approach ?



As a Pharisee, Paul stressed the ten commandments which had been given to the Jewish people by Moses about 1200 BCE.

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Numbers 5, 6 and 7 (cf. Catholic numerics) are social commandments and they are as follows:

"Thou shalt not kill"	"Thou shalt not commit adultery"	"Thou shalt not steal"
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No. 108

In fact these rules are basic to the functioning of any society

<p>"Thou shalt not kill"</p> 	<p>"Thou shalt not commit adultery"</p> 	<p>"Thou shalt not steal"</p> 
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Life itself	Basic social support group	Basic Material Possessions
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As pointed out in a previous set of slides, the Commandments are based upon the "natural law" i.e. the need for life itself, the need for a prime social support group and the need for basic material possessions.

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### Keeping the Spirit of the Law



Rather than telling people to keep to a whole gamut of Jewish rules and regulations, Paul stressed the importance of keeping the spirit of the law. His approach had been endorsed by a church council held in Jerusalem possibly in the late 40's CE, early 50's CE. This mandated "avoid blood, fornication and strangling".

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In his letters we find out **how** Paul was shifting the "Thou shalt not" of the Commandments into **positives**.

**Thou shalt not**  
**Thou shalt not**  
**Thou shalt not**



No. 111

No. 112

**"Thou shalt not steal"**



**Donate to the needy**



For instance he encouraged people in Corinth to give money to the needy in Jerusalem when the people there were facing famine (2 Cor 8).

**"Thou shalt not commit adultery"**

The Letters of Paul



**Control sexuality**

Paul prohibited adultery in the communities he founded. He also encouraged people to control their sexuality in relation to marriage.

He did not tell people to abstain from sex altogether. But he encouraged them to do so if they believed they were called to this (1 Cor 7).



No. 113.

<p>© Christian Morality Unique! Part I The Letters of Paul</p> <p><b>“Thou shalt not kill”</b></p>		<p><b>Protect self-determination</b></p>
<p>Paul went further than a prohibition on killing others. Rather he stressed the need for <b>people’s self-determination.</b></p> <p>For instance in Antioch when pagan converts were told to “copy” Jewish circumcision and the many external observances of the law,</p>	<p>Paul insisted that they <b>should be free</b></p> <p>of too many regulations, so that they could determine their own day to day lives.</p> <p>He said the people coming from Jerusalem were trying to take away the freedom of Gentile converts (Gal. 2:4-5).</p>	

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# Paul challenged the Greeks

## God is OTHER

Paul not only challenged the Jews. He also challenged the Greeks, especially the idea that people share in a divine spark, that is, they share in the divinity of God.



No. 116

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Paul insisted that God is completely “Other”.  
cf. The first three Commandments

1. Thou shalt not have strange gods before me
2. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day

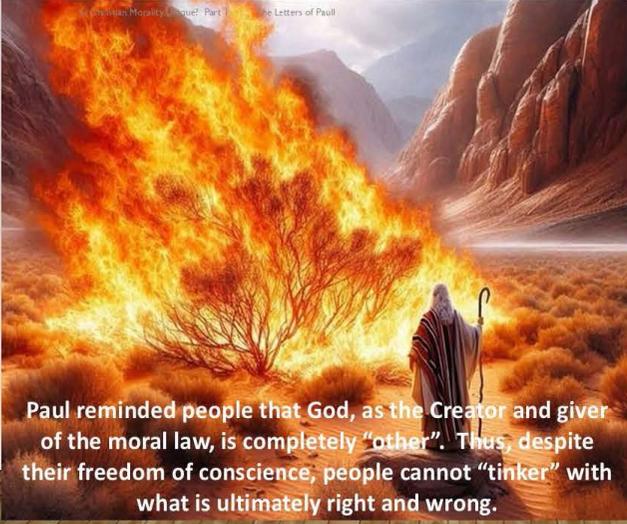


“I am who am”



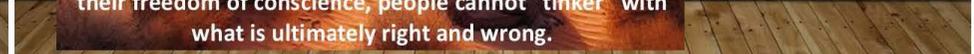
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“I am who am”

Paul reminded people that God, as the Creator and giver of the moral law, is completely “other”. Thus, despite their freedom of conscience, people cannot “tinker” with what is ultimately right and wrong.



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# God is Other

Paul reminded the Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) Christians that  
“only the Spirit of God can know God”



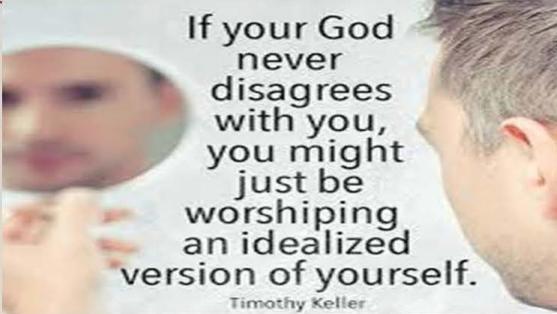
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Paul's message was similar to the following



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Paul set out his “morality map” so this could be applicable to all



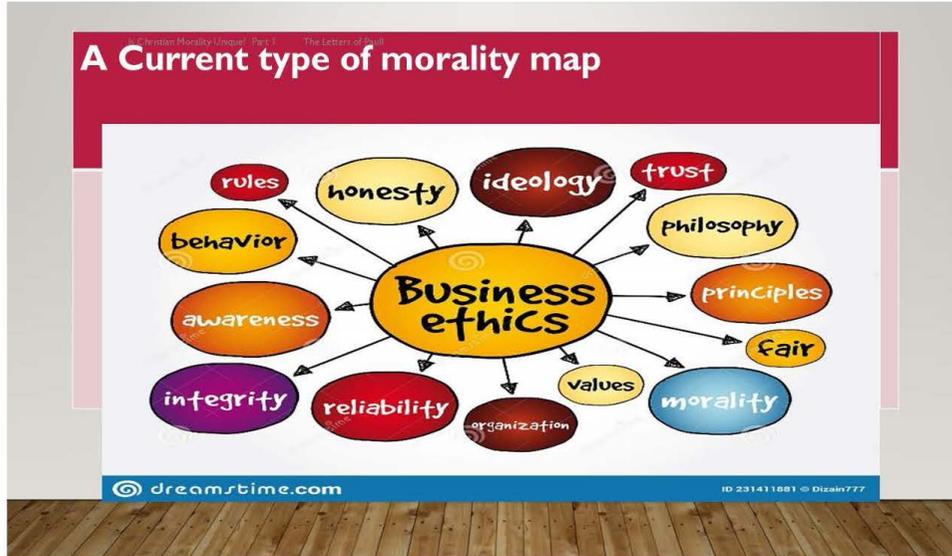
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Arguably, this map is distinct from some current types of morality maps because it is framed by the Commandments including three main social commandments

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As stated, Paul's "social morality map" is based on natural law and the Commandments

<p><b>Protect Self-determination</b></p> <p>"Thou shalt not kill"</p>	<p><b>Control Sexuality</b></p> <p>"Thou shalt not commit adultery"</p>	<p><b>Donate to the needy</b></p> <p>"Thou shalt not steal"</p>
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No. 124

<p><b>Outreach to the other</b></p> <p><b>Protect Self-determination</b></p> <p><b>Avoid blood</b></p> <p>"Thou shalt not Kill"</p>	<p><b>Outreach to the other</b></p> <p><b>Control Sexuality</b></p> <p><b>Avoid fornication</b></p> <p>"Thou shalt not commit Adultery"</p>	<p><b>Outreach to the other</b></p> <p><b>Donate to the Needy</b></p> <p><b>Avoid "strangling"</b></p> <p>"Thou shalt not Steal"</p>
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This morality map is orientated towards outreach to "the other"

Paul's map of morality  
Raises the Bar of the  
Commandments

# Paul, described as the first theologian, wrote in the 50's CE He set out parameters for the gospels, the first one being written around 70CE

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From the basis of the Commandments and “Thou shalt not” Paul encouraged people to act out of concern for the other. The negative of the Commandments was turned into a positive.

Based on the teaching of Jesus and outlined and taught by the Church Council in the early 50's CE, this approach was to be taken up and developed further, when the gospels were written some years later....

..and the gospel message was taken to the world



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A few comments about the world of the Roman Empire in first century CE. Because of the order imposed by the Empire, it was actually easier (and safer) to travel around the known world at that time than it was in the centuries beforehand and in centuries to follow.

As the century progressed the followers of Jesus faced a range of persecutions. However they could still communicate with each other and share their insights as their understanding of Jesus evolved.

One can assume that copies of Paul's letters, written in the 50's CE, were circulated around the followers of Jesus and reflected upon.

Then, Mark's gospel was written in about 70CE.

Matthew and Luke (writing around 85CE) both based their gospels on the gospel of Mark. Matthew's gospel was written for Jewish Christians and Luke's gospel was written for Gentile Christians. John's gospel was written around 100CE.

In the Acts.... Paul said how he had made an agreement with Peter that while Peter would preach to the Jews, Paul would preach to the Gentiles.

To what extent do you think it likely that over the first century CE, Church leaders discussed and decided about what would need to be written and for whom?