

Was Paul A False Apostle?

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Forerunner, "Ready Answer," August 2025

“Go, for [Paul] is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.” (Acts 9:15).

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis makes a useful observation:

The devil always sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one.

An unusual conversation reminded me of this quotation because the exchange involved an error that is contrary to what we typically encounter from nominal Christianity. That is, many view the apostle Paul as the champion of grace because some of his statements appear to nullify works of obedience (such as keeping the Sabbath) within a Christian’s walk (though accepting works of *charity*). The church of God is familiar with that error. But there is a corresponding opposite approach that is also an error. It is less common, but it seems to be growing in prevalence as Satan continues to wage war against God’s Word.

The conversation that recalled Lewis’ observation occurred in the church office parking lot. I was about to back out of my parking space when a car pulled into the spot next to my truck. The driver gestured that he wanted to talk—I thought perhaps he wanted directions—so we got out and made brief introductions, including a Covid-era elbow bump. Then this self-identified “son of Jacob” got his Bible, saying he wanted to go over some things.

He began in the early chapters of Romans, with Paul’s well-known teaching on justification by faith. However, he followed on by saying that Paul’s statements *contradict* “Brother James”—referring to James 2:24, where

James concludes that a man is justified by works and not by faith only. It was then that I noticed that in the margins of his Bible, certain passages were bracketed and labeled with the word “lie.” Glancing down the margin of his Bible, I saw where he had written, “Lie . . . Lie . . . Lie.”

In short, this son of Jacob wanted to save me from Paul, whom he considered to be a false apostle!

Is Paul Credible?

Among his more colorful assertions, this man claimed Paul was a great seducer. He asked me if, when younger, I went out drinking and trying to seduce women. I told him no. Well, he admitted, he had. He also confessed to having been in sales, which, in his mind, was apparently the same thing. In his younger days, he said, he would say whatever he needed to say to get what he was after, even though he did not actually mean it. He would knowingly say things just for effect, not because his words reflected personal belief or reality.

Thus, this man used his own example of ungodly persuasion to explain Paul's approach in Romans. The book indeed tackles both sides of a complex subject. Paul extols grace or faith in one section, and then in the next section, he appears to backtrack and say something in support of the law.

In this man's mind, all those places where Paul upholds God's law and works were just part of the apostle's seduction. They were hollow statements that allowed him to hide his real object, which was to undermine God's law. By his own admission, this son of Jacob was practiced in manipulating others, and it seems he projected his former ways onto Paul. Truly, we see things as we are.

Yet this accusation is nothing more than an insinuation. Like the serpent's words to Eve, this plants the seed of doubt, but it has nothing of substance to support it. Subsequently, nothing Paul writes can be used in his own defense, being automatically suspect.

The overall question of Paul's credibility is a branch off the age-old question of whether we can trust the Bible and how we know it contains the correct

books. One common misconception, which this son of Jacob repeated, is that the Catholic Church determined the biblical canon. So, he reasoned, if one distrusts the Catholic Church, then we as individuals must establish our own canon.

But the truth is that the Catholic Church did not determine the canon. It only agreed to the list of books already in use at the time—including Paul’s—and then added some apocryphal books (see Richard Ritenbaugh’s sermon, “[Forging the Canon](#)”).

Notice, then, the two perspectives. Most Protestants interpret Paul to mean they have been freed from God’s law. This man, seeing how Protestantism tends to use Paul’s writings to turn grace into license (see Jude 4), went to the opposite extreme and blundered into another devilish error. Thus, a pair of opposite errors is set before us, each problematic in its own way.

Paul Was Not Anti-law

This man is not alone. Within the religious world, an undercurrent exists that asserts that Paul preached a different gospel than Christ and started a new, false religion called “Christianity.” Anti-Paul sentiment was prevalent among the Ebionites, a sect that arose in the late first century or early second century. This sentiment is also found today among some followers of the Hebrew Roots movement.

Opposition to Paul arose early because of his conversion and subsequent renunciation of Judaism, making him an apostate in Jewish eyes. Confusion enters at this point because many believe Judaism to be the religion God delivered to Israel through Moses. In reality, while Judaism contains God’s law at its core (as does true Christianity), it also incorporates forms and thoughts picked up during the Jews’ exile in Babylon, as well as Greek thought (Hellenism). Over the centuries, it developed numerous additions to God’s law and countless traditions that obscured His intent.

Thus, while Paul was an apostate from Judaism, it is *not* true that he was against God’s law. He was against the misuse of works within the salvation process and against the traditions Judaism added, which Jesus was also against (Matthew 15:1-14; Mark 7:5-13).

The book of Acts shows Paul not merely giving lip service to God's law as some kind of "seduction" but *actively practicing the law* he allegedly discarded. Scriptures such as Acts 13:42-44; 16:13; 17:1-2; 18:4 illustrate his regular Sabbath-keeping and fellowship. His participation in vows (Acts 18:18) and feasts (Acts 18:21; 20:6) further demonstrates his commitment to the law.

Additionally, Paul's trial before Felix illustrates his true convictions. The apostle forthrightly stated, "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, *believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets*" (Acts 24:14; emphasis ours throughout). While a seducer probably would have shown his true colors to get out of this trial, attempting to placate Felix with platitudes of licentious grace, Paul instead doubled down and "reasoned [with Felix] about *righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come*," causing Felix to fear!

These are not the actions of a man willing to say whatever it takes to further his own agenda. His conviction compelled him to speak of God's requirement for obedience while on trial.

Peter's Character Witness

God has provided ample support for Paul even apart from his testimony about himself. Notice the conclusion of Peter's second epistle:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. (II Peter 3:14-16)

Here, the apostle Peter gives us a character witness of Paul. He also provides a warning about the tendency for untaught and unstable people to

misunderstand Paul's writings, twisting their meaning to their own destruction. In God's church, this passage is commonly referenced regarding Protestantism's antinomianism, but it also applies to anti-Paul rhetoric. His writings are deep and nuanced, but many today claiming the name of Jesus seem only able to digest the scriptural equivalent of sound bites and video shorts, missing the full depth.

Notice that Peter calls him "our beloved brother Paul." Those are terms of endearment, not terms used to describe a false apostle. In fact, Peter spends the entirety of the previous chapter warning about false teachers, but it contains not the slightest hint that he had Paul in view. Peter says that some things Paul writes are hard to understand, not that Paul is a false apostle! The problem lies in *understanding* Paul's material, not in the material or its author.

Peter goes on to state that Paul had wisdom "given to him," implying "by God." In other words, God inspired Paul to write what he wrote. (His "wisdom" could even include his difficult-to-understand style because God has not given everyone eyes to see and ears to hear at this time.)

Finally, Peter includes Paul's epistles—which were circulating among the churches—with "the rest of the Scriptures." It could also be rendered, "the other Scriptures." Peter puts Paul's writings in the same category as the writings of Moses and the prophets! (Peter may also be referring to the books that would become the New Testament canon, which was nearly complete at this point, perhaps missing just the final writings of John.)

Thus, despite Paul and Peter having some disagreements early on, Peter's testimony here—after most, if not all, of Paul's epistles were written—is that he is a beloved brother, gifted by God, whose writings fall in the same category as the other Scriptures, albeit people tend to misunderstand them.

Peter's endorsement-cum-caution here answers the critics who see Paul's claim of apostleship through private visions as self-promotion without external validation. While Peter does not directly call Paul an apostle (yet writes this endorsement within the context of "*the commandment of us, the apostles* of the Lord and Savior" in II Peter 3:2), neither does he dispute his apostleship nor accuse him of usurping a position. Instead, he implicitly

endorses Paul's letters, warning only of *misunderstanding* them in a way that can lead to destruction. Humble, sincere obedience to God's law does not lead to destruction—disobedience does.

Peter's validation of Paul has some far-reaching ramifications. If, as alleged, Paul is a false apostle, then those who support him are also called into question. If he is untrustworthy, then Peter is also unreliable because Peter vouches for him and his epistles, as does Luke. The faith-destroying contagion begins to spread.

The Support of John and Jude

The apostle John is especially significant regarding Paul's "threat" to believers. As the last original apostle, John saw the whole span of the first-century church—its personalities and its problems. He could have written an open letter, warning of "the great Pauline heresy," and ensured that this letter was included with the writings he collected and canonized for all future generations. Yet we have no such warning.

The New Testament warns against the leaven of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Herod. We are given the story of Simon Magus, who likely started counterfeit Christianity. We are warned about Diotrephes, the Nicolaitans, a "Jezebel," Gnosticism, the doctrine of Balaam, and the way of Cain—but not Paul. John's epistles cover some of the same ground as Paul's, and while John does also warn of false teachers, none of the warnings of the last original apostle fit Paul or what he wrote. The only thing that God has preserved for us that resembles a warning is what Peter wrote, which is really an endorsement, albeit with a caution that his fellow apostle's writings can be misunderstood.

Jude's short letter is almost entirely about false teachers. Notice his description:

These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage. But you, beloved, remember the words which were

spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. (Jude 16-18)

In verse 17, Jude refers to apostles of Christ, and in verse 18, he tells us what these apostles of Christ warned of: “mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts.” An apostolic warning that matches this appears in II Peter 3:3, a little before Peter notes that brother Paul’s epistles contain some things that are difficult to understand. So, Jude upholds Peter.

However, Jude refers to *apostles*—plural—meaning that there was at least one other apostle (other than Peter) who warned about end-time false teachers. The only other writer that is available to us who gave a warning like what Jude describes is Paul:

» Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons . . . (I Timothy 4:1)

» But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: . . . (II Timothy 3:1)

» For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers . . . (II Timothy 4:3)

» For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. (Acts 20:29)

Thus, although Paul was not a companion of Jesus, Jude still indirectly identifies him as an apostle of Jesus Christ by referring to what he wrote. The word *apostle* simply means “one sent forth,” meaning one commissioned with a message.

Luke’s Witness

The question of Paul's authenticity also involves the book of Acts, which was written by Luke, the apostle's traveling companion. Acts 1:21-22 relates the original disciples' search for a replacement for Judas:

Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.

Some use these verses to say Paul should not be considered an apostle because he did not accompany Christ throughout His ministry. However, this creates a dilemma: Through this same book, Luke testifies extensively about Paul and his evident apostleship. Therefore, if Luke and his writings are tossed out because they support Paul, then this passage has no bearing as a disqualifier of him. The book of Acts—in its entirety—is either part of the canon or it is not.

An event in the middle of the book gives Luke's endorsement:

But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. (Acts 14:4)

To identify who it is that Luke calls “the apostles,” we must look back to the beginning of Acts 13:

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. (Acts 13:2-3)

Clearly, Paul and Barnabas were the apostles in Iconium during the division there. To remove all doubt, further down in Acts 14:14, Luke writes that “when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude . . .” This passage shows that one did not have to have accompanied Jesus to be an apostle. Luke directly names Paul and Barnabas as apostles because they were sent forth.

Acts also records the vision of Ananias of Damascus, in which the Lord said to him, “Go, for [Paul] is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Similarly, Acts 19 chronicles that Gentiles at Ephesus received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of Paul’s hands (verse 6). While working incredible miracles, he boldly preached the Kingdom of God, as God’s Word prevailed through his work (verses 8-12, 20).

Again, if Paul is untrustworthy, then Luke—who wrote extensively about Paul—is suspect as well. In that case, we cannot trust his gospel, nor the book of Acts, both of which fill in exquisite details about Jesus, such as His birth and genealogy through Mary, as well as the stories of John the Baptist and the early church, which are not found elsewhere.

Significantly, if we exclude Paul and Luke, we also exclude all the New Testament support for Gentiles becoming believers, as prophesied (see Joel 2: 28; Isaiah 11:10; 40:5; 42:6; 49:6; 66:23; Jeremiah 16:19; Malachi 1:11; Amos 9:12). The remaining, disfigured New Testament would be anti-Gentile and chauvinistic, which some sons of Jacob would prefer because they are inclined to think of Israelites as superior.

Adding and Subtracting

Paul writes that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). An aspect of that truth is that our faith is dependent on what we consider to be “the word of God”! If we add apocryphal works into the mix, our faith will change. If we subtract works, such as Paul’s writings (and Luke, Peter, and Jude, who uphold Paul), our faith will likewise be radically altered.

Judaism added so many traditions, opinions, and pagan concepts that its ardent adherents could not recognize the Messiah when He walked and preached among them. Their faith had been altered because they were using a corrupted lens to view God’s pure Word. Messing with the canon always alters faith. It is for good reason that we are warned not to add to or take from God’s Word (see Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Revelation 22:18-19).

It has been said that if you believe what you like in the Bible and reject what you do not like, it is not the Bible you believe, but yourself. God does not give us a line-item veto to decide what to accept and what to reject in His Word, which is a lazy way of dealing with apparent contradictions. Instead, we must do the hard work of digging in and finding how all the Scriptures work together so that we can pattern our lives by every Word of God.