

# Chronology of Paul's Letters

This article attempts to provide at least a beginning of an answer to the questions regarding the dating of the Pauline canon. This article makes the assumption that all the letters are authored by Paul prior to his death (which is placed here as after the summer of 64, after the fire of Rome and during the persecution by Nero).

First, here is an outline of Paul's life. The dates for this are necessarily vague – there is a lack of consensus. Many individuals feel that all dates can be moved forward by about one or two years. The date and place where the letters were written are indicated by the bold letter titles, e.g., **ROMANS**.

	<b>Pauline Letters</b>	<b>Acts</b>
mid - late 33	<i>Conversion</i> near Damascus (implied in Gal 1.17c)	Damascus (9.1-22)
	To Arabia (Gal 1.17b)	
	Return to Damascus (1.17c): 3 yrs.	
	Flight from Damascus (2Cor 11.32-33)	Flight from Damascus (9.23-25)
	To Jerusalem (Gal 1.18-20)	To Jerusalem (9.26-29)
late 36	"The regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal 1.21-22)	Caesarea and Tarsus (9.30)
		Antioch (11.26a)
		(Jerusalem [11.29-30; 12.25])
		<b>Mission I:</b> Antioch (13.1-4)
		Seleucia, Salamis, Cyprus (13.4b-12)
mid 37	Churches evangelized before Macedonian Philippi (Php 4.15)	South Galatia (13.13-15.25)
		Antioch (14.26-28)
spr 51	"Once again during 14 years I went up to Jerusalem (for "Council," Gal 2.1)	Jerusalem (15.1-2)
	Antioch Incident (Gal 2.11-14)	Antioch (15.35); <b>Mission II</b>
		Syria and Cilicia (15.41)
		South Galatia (16.1-5)
sum 51	Galatia (1Cor 16.1) evangelized for the first time (Gal 4.13)	Phrygia and North Galatia (16.6)
		Mysia and Troas (16.7-10)
aut 51	Philippi (1Th 2.2 [=Macedonia, 2Cor 11.9])	Philippi (16.11-40)
	Thessalonica (1Th 2.2; cf. 3.6; Php 4.15-16)	Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica (17.1-9)
		Beroea (17.10-14)
early 52	Athens (1Th 3.1; cf. 2.17-18)	Athens (17.15-34)
early 52- spr 53	Corinth evangelized (cf. 1Cor 1.19; 11.7-9)	Corinth for 18 months (18.1-18a) <b>1 &amp; 2 THESSALONIANS</b>

	Timothy arrives in Corinth (1Th 3.6), probably accompanied by Silvanus (1Th 1.1)	Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia (18.5)
spr 53		Paul leaves from Cenchreae (18.18b)
		<b>1 CORINTHIANS</b> Leaves Priscilla and Aquila at Ephesus (18.19-21)
	Apollos (in Ephesus) urged by Paul to go to Corinth (1Cor 16.12)	Apollos dispatched to Achaia by Priscilla and Aquila (18.17)
		Paul to Caesarea Maritima (18.22a)
		Paul to Jerusalem (18.22b)
		In Antioch for a certain amount of time (18.22c)
	Northern Galatia, second visit (Gal 4.13)	<b>Mission III:</b> North Galatia and Phrygia (18.23)
aut 53 - sum 56	Ephesus (1Cor 16.1-8)	Ephesus for 3 yrs or 2 yrs, 3 mos (19.1-20; cf. 20.31) <b>GALATIANS, 2 CORINTHIANS</b>
	Visit of Chloe, Stephanas, <i>et al.</i> to Paul in Ephesus (1Cor 1.11; 16.17), bringing letter (7.1)	
	Paul imprisoned (? cf. 1Cor 15.32; 2Cor 1.8)	
	Timothy sent to Corinth (1Cor 4.17; 16.10)	
	Paul's 2nd "painful" visit to Corinth (2Cor 13.2); return to Ephesus	
	Titus sent to Corinth with letter "written in tears" (2Cor 2.13)	
	(Paul's plans to visit Macedonia, Corinth, and Jerusalem/Judea, 1Cor 16.3-8; cf. 2Cor 1.15-16)	(Paul's plans to visit Macedonia, Achaia, Jerusalem, Rome, 19.21)
	Ministry in Troas (2Cor 2.12)	
	To Macedonia (2Cor 2.13; 7.5; 9.2b-4); arrival of Titus (2Cor 7.6)	Macedonia (20.1b)
	Titus sent on ahead to Corinth (2Cor 7.16-17), with part of 2Cor	
	Illyricum (Rom 15.19)?	
late 56 - early 57	Achaia (Rom 15.26; 16.1); Paul's third visit to Corinth (2Cor 13.1)	3 mos. in Greece (Achaia) (20.2-3) <b>ROMANS</b>
Passover 57		Paul starts to return to Syria (20.3), but goes via Macedonia and Philippi (20.3b-6a)
		Troas (20.6b)
		Miletus (20.15c-38)
		Tyre, Ptolemais, Caesarea (21.7-14)

Pentecost 57	(Plans to visit Jerusalem, Rome, Spain [Rom 15.22-27])	Jerusalem (21.15-23.30)
sum 57 - sum 59		Caesarea (23.31-26.32)
sum 59 - early 60		Journey to Rome (27.1-28.14)
spr 60 - spr 62		Rome (28.15-31) <b>EPHESIANS, PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, PHILEMON</b>
spr 62		Release from Roman imprisonment (28.30)
spr 62?	Possible trip to Spain (Rom 15.24, 28)	
sum 62?	Crete (Tit 1.5)	
late 62?	Ephesus (2Tim 4.9-19)	
early 63?	Miletus (2Tim 4.20)	
	Troas (2Tim 4.13)	
wint 63?	Greece; winter in Nicopolis (Tit 3.12; 1Tim 1.3)	<b>1 TIMOTHY, TITUS *</b>
	Corinth (2Tim 4.20)	
sum 64?	Rome (2Tim 1.17)	<b>2 TIMOTHY</b>
late 64?	(Death in Rome [2Tim 4.6-8])	

\* A number of scholars placed the writing of I Timothy and Titus prior to the composition of Philemon. Additionally, some of the so-called "captivity epistles" - Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians – are considered by some scholars to have been written in Caesarea under captivity, rather than in Rome, around the years 57-60 AD.

The dates and order of travel after Paul's release from Rome in spring 62 are suggestions based on the scant hints left to us in the Pastoral Epistles, and a mention of an intended trip to Spain in Romans. Paul was apparently released under favorable circumstances in 62. Had his imprisonment then ended in martyrdom, it would surely have been depicted in Acts, as was the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6.1-8.1). The date for Paul's death given here, late 64, presents it as part of Nero's persecution of Christians following the great fire of Rome which began 19 June 64. Paul was apparently remembered, arrested, brought to Rome, tried, and executed. Paul's expectation of his coming martyrdom is stirringly preserved in 2Tim 4.6-8.

With the above chronological framework in place, it is possible to present some dates for the foundations of the churches to whom Paul wrote, dates for the conversions of persons to whom Paul wrote, and the dates at which the various letters were written.

Church/Person	Date of founding/ conversion	Date of Letter(s)	Place Letter Written From
Timothy	mid 37	1: autumn 56; or 62-64 2: 64	1: Corinth; or Macedonia 2: Rome
Rome	before 49	late 56	Corinth
Titus	before 51	62-64	Greece
Galatia	summer 51	55	Ephesus
Philippi	autumn 51	60-62	Rome
Thessalonica	late 51	early 52 (both)	1: Corinth 2: Corinth
Corinth	early 52	1: spring 53 2: 56	1: Ephesus 2: Ephesus
Ephesus	autumn 53	60-62	Rome
Colossae	autumn 53- summer 56	60-62	Rome
Philemon	autumn 53- summer 56	60-62	Rome

Some notes on each of the dates in the chart:

**Galatia:** The founding is set at around mid 51 by comparison with Campbell, who sets the Jerusalem conference "early to mid 51" (301) and settling on Paul's trip to Jerusalem (and the council) as likely to be early in 51 in order to enjoy Passover there. The range of time for writing the letter to the Galatians is depicted as sometime during the year 55.

**Philippi:** Founded just after the Galatian churches, its beginning is well-placed in about autumn 51. The range of time for writing the letter to the Philippians is depicted as early 60 to early 62, the time of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome.

**Thessalonica:** Almost immediately after the Philippian church, this church's foundation can also be dated to late 51, perhaps late autumn or winter. Both the letters appear to have been written almost immediately after the founding, and only a very little time apart, so they are depicted in the chart as having been written early in 52.

**Corinth:** Paul arrived in Corinth in early 52, and stayed until the middle of 53. The writing of 1Corinthians is well-placed in spring 53. The writing of 2Corinthians is depicted as sometime during the latter half of 56, prior to winter.

**Ephesus:** Paul arrived in Ephesus in spring 53, leaving Prisca and Aquila there (Acts 18.19-21), but didn't remain long himself. He returned in autumn 53 and remained for about three years. It's probably the beginning of this second period which should be considered the foundation of the Ephesian church. The letter to the Ephesians is depicted above as written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, early 60 to early 62.

**Colossae:** Colossae was founded by Epaphras (Col 1.16; 4.13), probably sometime during Paul's long stay in Ephesus (following Hemer, 181), as depicted above, autumn 53 to summer 56. The letter to the Colossians was probably written, as shown above, during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, spring 60 to spring 62.

**Philemon:** This follows the same dates as Colossae, as the area of the letter and some of its personalities are the same.

**Rome:** The church in Rome is depicted as having its beginning sometime before 49, as this is the year generally given for the expulsion of Jews from the city by Claudius, ostensibly for rioting over Christ. The earliest possible date for its foundation is 30. The letter was written late in 56.

**1Timothy:** Timothy was converted very early in Paul's career, in approximately mid 37. The black dot indicates the dating of the letter as proposed by Johnson. The yellow bar indicates the perhaps more likely time range for the writing of the letter, between the end of Paul's Roman imprisonment as described in Acts 28, and the time of his probable death in late 64, indicated by the red bar.

**2Timothy:** Same beginning of mid 37 as in 1Tim. The letter is clearly written not long at all before Paul's death, which was probably in the summer or autumn of 64.

**Titus:** Titus was converted some time before the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council, dated spring 51, as Paul brought him to it. The letter was apparently written just a little while before 1Timothy, so the same range is given as for that letter.

Timespans between founding/conversion and letter-writing:

**Galatians:** about 4 years

**Philippians:** about 8 to 10 years

**Thessalonians:** a few months

**Corinthians:** 1: about a year 2: about 4 years

**Ephesians:** about 6 to 8 years

**Colossian:** about 4 to 8 years

**Philemon:** about 4 to 8 years

**Romans:** about 8 to 26 years (founding date unknown)

**1Timothy:** about 19 (Johnson's date) or 25 to 27 years

**2Timothy:** about 27 years

**Titus:** about 12 to 15 or more years

## Some Conclusions

We can gain several things from this information, in connection with the character of Paul's letters themselves:

- 1.) Length of time converted corresponds to theological complexity in the letters:
  - a.) Romans, the longest and most theologically complex of the letters, showing that there has been time for a certain maturing of the congregation, is also paralleled by the probability that the Roman church was the longest established of those to which Paul wrote.
  - b.) Similarly, probably the second-longest established church at the time of writing, that of the Philippians, shows that the congregation is certainly mature, coming under no censure from Paul. Additionally, there is a clear indication of the beginnings of liturgy there, in the form of the hymn preserved in chapter 2. Reader Bradley Almond (in email correspondence) has also brought to my attention a further possible indication of the maturity of the Philippian church: the bishops and deacons are greeted in Paul's salutation, the only case of such a greeting in Paul's letters.
- 2.) The "problem churches" of Galatians, Thessalonians and Corinthians are all those with the shortest lengths of time from their dates of conversion to dates of the letters being written to them.
  - a.) The Thessalonian correspondence occurred very soon after Paul founded the church there. It is not surprising that some initial misunderstandings, or increased eschatological expectations are demonstrated by Paul's responses to such issues in both letters. Such is still common, especially so among the newly converted.
  - b.) The Corinthian correspondence indicates problems involving (to generalize) a conflict between Christian mores and societal mores. Paul works to demonstrate that the rules are quite different, in respect to jockeying for power and prestige, but are also similar in basic commonsensical moral issues like incest.
  - c.) The Galatian letter is one of the most fascinating, dealing with a problem that no doubt many of the strongly Jewish early churches met: that of the place of Judaic Law in the Christian's life. While it may have been a problem initiated by outsiders, the issue is still one with which the early congregations must have wrestled.
- 3.) Perhaps the most fascinating set of related letters is that of Ephesians-Colossians-Philemon. Ephesians (most likely the letter to Laodicea of Col 4.16; with Hemer 181, et al.), Colossians, and Philemon rightly are quite similar in various respects as they belong to the same timeframe of writing, with addressees in the same region, and were likely delivered by the same messenger. Colossians and Philemon indeed share the same set of addressees. Looking at the letters in this way, especially Ephesians and Colossians and the clear similarities between them, we simply find corroboration of the fact that they were written very close in time to one another, if not simultaneously, to congregations facing the same issues with some of the same people and therefore quite near to one another. The three are inextricably tied together.
- 4.) The unusually long period of conversion and the case of their addressees being coworkers of Paul make the Pastoral Letters quite distinct. The writing is not only that of teacher to pupil, father to son, but also of longtime peer to peers. They should be expected to be quite different from the letters to churches, offering us somewhat of a "behind the scenes" peek into the level of discourse between church leaders and their concerns, and perhaps even some 'boiled down" insights on church matters from one with longtime oversight of churches to those for whom such is a new responsibility. In this case, the character of the Pastoral Letters is perfectly in keeping with such expectations.
  - a.) This has always been a sticking point for me in reading arguments for these letters as pseudonymous which claim the letters to be too vastly different from the accepted works of Paul. One finds precisely what one would expect to find in the situations described in the letters: advice on the care of various churches from a more established leader, who expects an imminent end to such work on his own part, to two men for whom such individual responsibility of leadership is new.
- 5.) Such an integrated view of the letters can lead to the potentially fascinating investigation of inter-relationships between them based upon chronology and not just literary ties. For instance, is there any detectable "bleedthrough" of Paul's current situation in a given church in his letters to other churches? Can we possibly detect a subject that is currently on his mind through examining those letters that are from the same period and area? Can we construct, through examining the letters written at such various lengths of time from each addressee's conversion, a general outline of the issues faced in the very first few years of a generic church of this time period?