The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the thought and theology of the Apostle Paul. Teaching courses on Paul for several years, I became increasingly discouraged at how difficult it is for nontheologians to come to terms with Paul and his writings. Still, often enough, experience encourages me that people are certainly capable of wrestling with Paul. The experience is far too rare, however, and much too random for my satisfaction. It is my hope that this book will afford a way into reading Paul’s letters that will provide the nontheologian the opportunity to think with, and wrestle with, Paul’s thought in a coherent way—to scan a fuller horizon of Paul’s thought rather than settle for fragmentary glimpses.

OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING PAUL’S THOUGHT

The obstacles to understanding Paul’s writings and his thought are numerous, and at times seem insurmountable even to professionals. Some of these obstacles are present whenever we attempt to understand someone else’s thought, especially a person from another historical period and another culture. But Paul presents his own particular obstacles as well.

An Unsystematic System

In the first place, Paul never systematically summarizes his thought, as did Plato or Aristotle, for instance. We know Paul’s thought only through the few surviving letters that he wrote to the churches with which he was in contact. All of Paul’s writings are occasional letters; that is, they were written on a specific occasion in order to address a specific problem at a specific time for a specific people. Presumably, he had an overall philosophy that led him to respond to problems in the ways that he did. But he never outlined this philosophy for us. Thus, we
must extrapolate his general thought from the many, and often apparently conflicting, specific remarks. Yet it is difficult to understand his specific remarks without knowing something of his general thought. There is no way out of this circle—we must know both the general and the specific in order to know Paul’s thought, but we can know the general only through the specific and can understand the specific only if we have some sense of the general.

This process of extrapolation is, however, not entirely foreign to us. All of life consists, to some degree, of drawing portraits of people and their character and their views from their reactions to a variety of situations. You might be able, for instance, to extrapolate my philosophy of parenting from my daily interactions with my children, or you might come to a fairly accurate sense of my philosophy of education by observing me teach in a variety of situations. In either of these instances I might, on occasion, say explicit things that come close to being a statement of my philosophy of parenting or education. But even these explicit statements are contextual, and it may be difficult to discern or to express accurately the relationships between such explicit statements.

Unfortunately, an introductory work like this cannot itemize all of Paul’s occasional remarks closely enough in order for us to intuit the overall system. This book will provide something of a shortcut by setting forth a summary of my own extrapolation of Paul’s philosophy of life, based on my own experience of studying Paul’s interactions with his churches, as reflected in his letters.¹

**The Problem of Rhetoric**

A second obstacle to reading Paul lies in the form of his writing. Reading the Gospels or the narratives of the Hebrew Bible is much easier than reading Paul, for we all basically understand how to read a story: There is a plot—a beginning, a middle, and an end (so Aristotle)—and there are characters. These things we readily recognize. But to many readers Paul’s writing seems to go nowhere. His arguments are hard to follow; his transitions and emphases pass unnoticed. This is because Paul was trained both in Greco-Roman rhetoric and in rabbinic argument, and most modern readers do not have experience with either of these forms of writing. The purpose of rhetoric in the Greco-Roman world was to persuade. Education in the ancient world was primarily an education in rhetoric—how to recognize the way in which someone is trying to persuade you (i.e., how to listen wisely) and how to form a speech in order to persuade someone else (i.e., how to write and speak effectively). We learn early on in our culture the ploys of the advertising industry, how to read television commercials, for example. Unfortunately, however, we read Paul (and other authors from antiquity) the way a two-year-old watches commercials. We have not developed the critical-thinking skills to recognize when others are trying to persuade us, much less what strategies or devices they are using to get us to buy their product. The summary of Paul’s thought provided in this work will enable the reader to make some sense of what Paul is talking about. A careful study of any of Paul’s letters (or portions of the letters) needs to be supplemented by a basic introduction to how Paul uses standard rhetorical forms and devices.

**From Another Time and Place**

We encounter the third obstacle to reading Paul successfully just as we would with any writer living in another time and place.
Our distance from Paul’s time means that we must traverse several gaps between the then and the now. One such gap is the difference between Paul’s culture(s) and our culture(s). We are outsiders when we read Paul; it is as though we were listening in to one side of a private conversation that draws on shared knowledge between the conversants. He refers to circumstances or to people or events that he assumes his readers know without needing explanation. But we do not know what he and they could assume. Paul and his readers shared certain assumptions about what it means to be human (anthropology), certain social expectations (sociology), and certain ways of imagining the world (mythology) that are foreign to us. He even writes in a language that is foreign to most of us. As Federico Fellini commented, “A different language is a different vision of life.” Thus, I should not have been so surprised the first time I handed out a copy of Paul’s one-page letter to his friend Philemon and the students declared that they could make no sense out of this letter at all. It is as though I threw them into a foreign country, without any experience in the culture or language, and expected them to pick up the nuances of the conversation between two people sitting on a park bench. Impossible, indeed!

Studying Paul, then, is a course in cross-cultural studies, to some degree. And unless we can (a) understand another culture, one that is different from our own, (b) traverse the gap (back and forth, back and forth) between the other and the self (which means we have some understanding of our own culture as culture, and not as “reality”), and (c) be willing to accept the inevitable misunderstandings that are a part of any conversation that strives for understanding (and truth), we will not be able to understand Paul’s thought.

The primary purpose of this study is to introduce you to the thought of the Apostle Paul. Our goal is more like what you would find in a philosophy course than in a history course. But since, to understand someone’s thought, we must perceive some of the context of their thinking, it will be necessary to say a few things about Paul’s cultural and intellectual environment. Thus, each of the three parts of this book will be introduced by a chapter that sketches the chief intellectual issues that informed Paul’s thought within his culture.²

The summary of Paul’s thought that follows will draw on this basic cultural information. With this background in the intellectual and cultural issues at play in Paul’s thought, I will then develop several analogies based on modern experiences of life in order to help you imagine what Paul might have intended. That is, I will draw on our shared cultural assumptions and experiences, though perhaps in new ways. My summary of Paul’s thought can only be partial and provisional. I, too, must allow for the unavoidable misunderstandings when I attempt to understand someone from another time and place.

The “Terminological Gap”

The fourth obstacle to reading Paul lies in what I call the terminological gap, which is addressed most directly in this book. Paul uses several terms in his writings in an almost technical way. A solid grasp of Paul’s definitions of these terms is essential to understanding his thought and his writings. It might be helpful here to distinguish between a term and a word.³ Many of Paul’s words are familiar to us: sin, law, Christ, body, flesh, believe, spirit. That is, we recognize these words and use them ourselves on occasion. But what we mean by these words usually differs markedly from what Paul meant by
them. The problem, however, is not just that we define these words differently; these words also carry more weight for Paul than they do for us. When Paul uses the word *law*, for instance, there frequently lies behind this word a whole complex of ideas (and emotions) for which *law* is a shorthand expression. This is what I mean when I refer to Paul’s *terms*: specific words that serve as a somewhat stable shorthand designation for a complex of ideas. Thus, in order to “come to terms” with Paul, we must understand Paul’s terms; we must understand his technical vocabulary.4

These technical terms in Paul’s vocabulary make him difficult to understand, not only because we may not recognize them as terms or because we may not know the meaning of those terms for Paul but, more importantly, because we often recognize the words but they mean something different to us than they did to Paul. This is especially true for those who have grown up in a religious context, and even more true for those who have grown up in a Christian church. We have been taught the meaning of these words, or at least we know how to use them correctly. But I wager a safe bet that what we mean when we use these words is not what Paul meant. Indeed, in some instances, our use of these words can almost prevent us from understanding Paul’s quite foreign use. In short, these terms are common words with uncommon meanings.

Therefore, the task of coming to terms with Paul necessitates that we not only learn some things but simultaneously unlearn some things. We must both remember and forget. It is perhaps impossible to forget in this sense, however. And so we must move back and forth, as it were, between Paul’s definitions of these terms and our own previous definitions of them, contrasting the former with the latter. We must play on Paul’s field and ours simultaneously—and this is hard intellectual work. It is also at times hard emotional work because our education in these words—that is, our religious education—is deeply related to the things that we hold dearest in life. Good, rigorous, intelligent thought about things that matter to us is unavoidably connected with our emotions. To deny this healthy and necessary connection is to deny the profound importance of intellectual thought.

This study focuses on this task—coming to terms with Paul. The following chapters define four major terms in Paul’s thought: *righteousness, law, sin,* and *Christ.* The terms are interdependent, and you will find it of high value to reread the earlier chapters after you have finished the study.

The treatment of each term varies according to the subject matter and because of the constraints of laying out Paul’s thought in a linear manner. The discussions of *righteousness* and *law* will lay the groundwork and background for Paul’s thought. They will focus on the Jewish presuppositions of Paul’s theology. In this material most citations will be from the Hebrew Bible. The second part presents several interrelated aspects of Paul’s understanding of *sin,* including the notions of slavery and death. Paul’s notion of sin is necessarily related to his Jewish understanding. But in his discussions on sin, Paul also shows evidence of sharing some similar concerns with the Greco-Roman philosophers. Thus, this section will begin by briefly introducing Paul’s Greco-Roman context. The third and final part of the book addresses the most complex term that Paul uses: *Christ.* Here it will become evident that Paul has taken a decisive turn in his thought—one that entails a certain redefinition of the earlier terms. Along the way we will need to attend to several terms that relate to Paul’s understanding of Christ, for example, *justification, grace, faith, hope, spirit,* and *resurrection.* In this extended discussion of Paul’s experience of Christ, we begin to
see how Paul uses his tradition regarding righteousness and law in creative ways and in response to the Greco-Roman situation in order to articulate a new understanding of law, righteousness, and sin.

The Experiential Dimension of Paul’s Thought

I spoke in the last sentence about Paul’s experience of Christ. It is clear throughout Paul’s letters that his thought was integrally related to his experience. Paul was not a thinker who presumed that he was a mere objective observer of reality. His thought was unabashedly experiential—he was attempting to understand his experience and to assist the churches in understanding their experience. Paul’s theology is a theology for adults. That is, Paul’s thought depends upon his own life experience, and we can only understand Paul’s thought if we have experienced life. This may be overstating the case, but it is nevertheless crucial to acknowledge at the outset that Paul’s intellectual project consisted, in large part, of his efforts to understand his (and others’) human experience.

There was a time when I thought that the difficulty I had in teaching Paul effectively at the undergraduate level was related to the relative inexperience of young-adult students. It is, of course, true that college-age students have experienced less of life than a forty-year-old adult has. But I suspect the problem is not lack of experience so much as it is the lack of opportunity the students have had to reflect critically on their own experience. If we have not had the opportunity to name our experience, then we are unable to claim that experience as our own. Since theological thinking demands some awareness of how philosophical thought and personal experience are necessarily related, throughout each chapter I will ask the reader to think about her or his own experience—to name the experience. In addition, each of the book’s three parts closes with a section entitled Making Connections. These exercises suggest activities that will enable readers to make connections between human experience and the theological ideas presented in the preceding chapters.

It is my hope that the format of this book and the study of Paul’s reflection on his life experience will give you the opportunity to reflect critically on your own life experience. Perhaps Paul’s reflections will be helpful; or perhaps, by disagreeing with Paul’s reflections, you can claim your own different experience in strengthening ways.

THE VALUE OF STUDYING PAUL’S THOUGHT

Despite all the sometimes formidable obstacles to reading and understanding the Apostle Paul, despite all my frustrations and failures when trying to teach Paul’s thought in an undergraduate context—to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others—I have grown in my conviction that a study of Paul’s thought can be a valuable exercise in a multifaith, pluralistic context and can help us understand how we live together in a larger society.

Building Critical-thinking Skills

Studying the complexity and coherence of Paul’s thought and specialized vocabulary affords a prime opportunity to hone critical-thinking skills. This text is not written strictly for followers of Christ—though I trust that those who consider themselves Christians will find new encouragement for their faith. The more I study Paul, the more I become convinced that his thought is worth studying, even if one does not make any sort of faith commitment to adopt his thought as
one’s own. That is, you do not have to be a Platonist in order to value a study of Plato, or a Marxist to enjoy and learn from a study of Das Kapital. You do not have to make the religious commitment to Paul’s interpretation of reality in order to appreciate his intellectual achievement.

Interacting with Another Culture

Another value of an academic study of Paul’s writings lies in his cultural distance from us. The foreignness of Paul and his world presents a rich opportunity to struggle to understand another culture by creatively pursuing ways to traverse the gap between that culture and our own. A full study of Paul’s letters necessitates that we grapple with the everyday realities of another time and place—a time and a place where people lived in very different circumstances than we do, and where they thought and believed and “knew” ideas that are quite foreign to us. Although we can never fully know a person or a culture that is truly foreign to us, we can nevertheless learn how to make sense of the things in their world that seem peculiar to us. Meeting new people always affords an opportunity to expand our own limited horizons. We discover new experiences and new ways of thinking about old problems. And beginning this cross-cultural conversation can perhaps offer us new possibilities for moving in creative ways in our own culture, for no living culture is stagnant.

Thinking Theologically:
Connecting Intellect and Experience

The experiential dimensions of Paul’s thought can also provide a valuable occasion for us to wrestle with the ways that the intellect, our experience, and our emotions interconnect whenever we are discussing questions of meaning and value. Again, this is not to insist that Paul’s meaning and value are the right ones. Rather, the ways that Paul thinks about his own experience (and that of his churches) can be a catalyst for us to reflect critically and intelligently on our experiences in life.

Throughout this study I will use a variety of illustrations drawn from our actual present experience. Their primary purpose is to help us understand Paul’s language and thought. But the illustrations may function in a second way as well. We live in a different world from that of the Apostle Paul. Many in our world find it difficult to believe in a personal God or to care much about a relationship with such a God. For such people, all this God-talk that Paul does may seem to be unimportant at best, and so much nonsense at worst. One of the things I suggest by using these illustrations is that Paul’s God-talk—that is, his theology—is a potentially useful analysis of human relationships and human identity, and this is true even if one cannot buy into Paul’s whole mythological world.

The problems Paul analyzes under the rubric of sin and its relation to law, for example, are problems that we all face. Stated in its most basic way, the problem is, How do we deal with the authority figures who contribute to our lives? Whether I believe in God or not, I nevertheless have to wrestle with how I am going to relate to my parents, to those people who have fostered my life. As many will attest, this is a problem that is hardly resolved in our teens or our twenties. Perhaps most people carry this problem into their fortieths, their sixties, and beyond. Indeed, the problem goes beyond that of dealing with our parents. As we go through life, we adopt other authority figures—people whom we emulate and yet over against whom we also need to define ourselves. Human happiness, fulfillment, and maturity are somehow integrally connected with coming to
terms—in creative ways—with the people and places and institutions that have formed us both psychologically and sociologically. If I mix the language of illustration with that of Paul, I might say it this way: Maturity (righteousness) consists in coming to terms with our Creator—whoever that Creator might be. We do not have to believe in the story of Oedipus Rex in order to find Freud’s analysis of the Oedipus complex compelling. Nor is it necessary to believe in Paul’s mythology of God and Christ to find value in his analysis of a common and complex human difficulty.

My hope is that, by using these kinds of illustrations, you can begin to understand theology as a fruitful way of thinking about human life. If the God-language gets in the way of your understanding the dynamics of what Paul is saying, the illustrations allow you to shift to a human analogy and think about it on that level. The God-language can then become a potent shorthand enabling you to explore the dynamics of human experience—both your own and that of others. Theology is an intellectual language that seeks to articulate something of the ultimate in our human experience. It is a structure of thought that helps us think carefully about the ultimate questions and commitments of human existence: What are we? Why are we? How can we live? How do we die? Thus, the critical nexus of intellect, experience, and emotion in Paul’s theology not only can be a fertile ground for learning to think about our own past experience; it also can enable us to make decisions about the future intelligently.

In short, a prime value of studying Paul that will, I trust, emerge in this study is that of coming to a better understanding of the relationship between critical thought and ethics, between thinking well and living well. Thus, the goals of this book mirror my own teaching and life objective: To live thoughtfully, we must be thought-full persons.