You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being. (Gal 1:13–16)

INTRODUCTION: PAUL’S VISIONARY EXPERIENCE OF GOD

Despite a dearth of evidence moderns are wont to demand, without question something transformed Saul the persecutor into Paul the Apostle. What caused one “advanced in Judaism,... zealous for the traditions of [his] ancestors” to proclaim the crucified Jesus, cursed according to Jewish Law, as the Messiah of the entire world? What prompted Paul’s radical new understanding of the God of Abraham, and what was that understanding?

In the pages that follow I answer these and related questions in light of my proposal that Paul’s idea of God changed radically because of a personal vision of the resurrected Jesus. Chiefly Jesus’ resurrection proved he was vindicated by God, not cursed, and that, indeed, he was God’s Messianic Son as persecuted Christians were claiming. The unexpected resurrection of the crucified Jesus caused Paul to form a new understanding of God. No longer was he primarily lawgiver and judge, but creator of spiritual offspring: one who generated life out of Jesus’ sterile-like death and a power who made “lawless” non-Jews his offspring and members of the family of God. In subsequent chapters we will explore how Paul came to hold creator as his chief metaphor for understanding God. Further, we will investigate the potentiality of the metaphor of adoption to convey Paul’s new system of belief. Naturally we must pay attention to how Paul’s new understanding fits within the context of his
Greco-Roman environment, particularly the ruler cult, and finally we will see how other images, especially those drawn from the household, allow Paul to proclaim his radical message.

**THE RADICALITY OF PAUL’S IDEA OF GOD**

Paul’s conception of God is less radical in an absolute sense than it is radical in comparison with his own ideas about God prior to becoming an apostle. Unfortunately, although Paul himself contrasts his viewpoint as an apostle with his former values as a Pharisee, some scholars infer that Paul never really moved outside his former commitment to God’s identity as lawgiver and judge.¹ That is not the viewpoint of this book. I take quite seriously Paul’s statement that his former way of defining Jewish identity by means of adherence to Mosaic law was something he came to consider no better than garbage (see Phil 3:3–11; esp. 3:8).

What new basis of relationship with God did Paul come to advocate? Paul believed that no amount of natural birth status or of community recognition could make someone God’s offspring. Instead, for Paul, people must have the mindset of Christ. Christ looked not to his own interests but to the interests of others, and he did not put himself forward but, even in the face of death, submitted and trusted himself to God (Phil 2:1–8). Therefore, true status comes only from God and what God is able to make of one’s life, not from nobility of birth or recognition of accomplishment within the community (see 1 Cor 1:26–31).

In addition to this reversal in Paul’s own idea of the basis of relationship with God, Paul came to believe that non-Jews also were members of God’s elect community. The idea that Gentiles were among God’s people was not novel; Judaism had admitted non-Jews into its community virtually from the beginning. What was radically distinctive was Paul’s idea that Gentile converts did not have second-class status within the community. To be sure, even Paul’s thinking was not unique, since certain Jewish leaders, such as Philo of Alexandria, had also given special recognition to Jewish proselytes. Philo says that like Abraham, who was a model for Jewish proselytes, Gentile converts had made the tremendous

¹Regarding Paul’s autobiographical contrast between his former values as a Pharisee and his present commitments as an apostle of Christ, see Gal 1:11–17; Phil 3:3–11; and 2 Cor 11:1–12:10. Note 3 below lists some of the scholars who suggest that Paul remained committed to his former Pharisaic values.
sacrifice of giving up family, friends, and homeland in order to become God’s people.2

Paul exceeded Philo and almost all members of the Jewish community, however, when he allowed non-Jews to be equal members of God’s people without traditional admittance requirements, namely, circumcision, observance of Jewish dietary laws, and other Mosaic prescriptions. Only Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, like the ones Paul had formerly persecuted, had gone this far in lowering standards for Gentiles. Even in relation to Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, Paul stands out. He produced thoroughly positive argumentation demonstrating that God required that Gentiles be admitted to the community on such terms.

To the extent that Jews placed confidence in themselves rather than in God as the means of effecting something positive out of human action, to that extent Paul argued that Gentile converts were superior to Jews even in being Abraham’s descendants. Thus, because of the priority of trust in God over obedience to Mosaic law in Paul’s system of belief, I am opposed to modern interpretations of Paul that make him into a kind of closet rabbi and make his communities of converts into synagogues.3

Even Krister Stendahl, who rightly proposed that Paul’s idea of salvation must be interpreted not in terms of personal liberation from the law but as a social liberation whereby Gentiles become God’s people without becoming Jews, finally fails to grant Paul the cultural elasticity he deserves. By insisting on Gentile converts’ release from Mosaic law, Paul continued to have a legalistic mind-set. Namely, justification by faith was itself a commitment to legalism. Thus, out of excessive concern with the principle of liberation from the law, Stendahl says that Paul’s ministry was divisive and ineffective (see “The Apostle Paul,” 70–77).

Later in the book, I cite data in Paul’s letters and various scholarly explanations indicating that Paul did not model his congregations after synagogue communities. The synagogue is the wrong institutional

2Phil and certain other Greek-speaking Jewish representatives state that Abraham himself was a proselyte and had to be “adopted” as God’s son. As founder of the Jewish race and as someone who had to break his own traditional and hereditary ties to family in order to father a new people, Abraham was not himself a Jew. Nor was he an adherent of prescribed Jewish customs, since they did not yet exist. See Philo, Sobr. 56–57; Abr. 75; and Virt. 219. See also John Collins’s treatment of Jewish authors in Between Athens and Jerusalem, where he discusses the universalist tendency associated with the figure of Abraham in Jewish Diaspora authors of the Hellenistic and Roman periods (see pp. 35–46 and 204–7).

3E.g., Peter Tomson says that Paul conducted himself like a Hellenistic Pharisee who taught halakic instruction to his congregations (see Halakha in the
model for understanding Paul’s theological viewpoint. Modern advocates of this viewpoint depend entirely too much on the picture of the apostle’s ministry in the Acts of the Apostles and not enough on data within Paul’s own letters.  

I am not suggesting that Paul abandoned Jewish tradition; nevertheless, it is significant that he did not require Gentiles to become Jews in order to be God’s people. He clearly advocated a different basis of communal identity. Therefore, we must ask whether Paul’s theological differences with the Jewish community, including some Jewish-Christian churches, amounted to anti-Semitism.

At least three reasons exist why Paul’s representation of God should not be described as anti-Jewish. First, at the time he was writing, he thought of his converts not as adherents of a separate religion but as a reform movement within Judaism itself. Second, Paul was not opposed just to the priority of law as a way of defining the Jewish relationship with God. He was equally opposed to analogous Gentile principles and emphases within his own communities. Third, his idea of God did not derive from some alien quarter but was modeled on alternative traditions and emphases within Judaism itself. The unfolding argument of the book will make clear that antagonism to Judaism is not the center of Paul’s theology. Both what he argued for and what he argued against applied to non-Jews as much as to Jews.

ADOPTION AS THE TRUE BASIS OF BEING GOD’S FAMILY

Paul considered Gentile converts as much God’s people as the Jews. But since Gentiles were clearly not God’s race through physical descent from Abraham, Paul had to use the metaphor of adoption to justify their status as Abraham’s children (see Gal 4:1–7).

Letters of the Apostle, 51–53). Paul’s instruction, both theological and practical, derived continually from Scripture (see ibid., 58).

Acts says that Paul began each new stage of missionary activity in the synagogue(s) of the city he was visiting (e.g., see Acts 13:5ff.; 13:14ff.; 14:1ff.; 17:1ff.). By contrast, Paul’s own letters suggest that the founding of Paul’s churches resulted not from working in the synagogues but from working directly with Gentiles. E.g., whereas Acts 17:1ff. says that persecution of the church at Thessalonica arose from Jewish jealousy, Paul indicates in 1 Thess 1–2 that his converts were formerly not Gentile “Godfearers” (i.e., Gentiles attracted to the synagogue) but worshippers of pagan gods and were persecuted by fellow Gentiles after conversion.
It might appear, then, that Gentile converts constituted an anomaly within the Jewish community. Paul, however, argued just the opposite. He asserted paradoxically that all of God’s “legitimate” offspring are adopted, including the founder of the race, Abraham! Even Christ, Abraham’s promised offspring, was empowered to effect the Gentiles’ inclusion only by means of his own resurrection and anointing at God’s hands (spiritual adoption).

Where Did Paul Get His Idea of Spiritual Adoption?

Paul emphasized trust in God, rather than confidence in conventional ways of status definition (noble birth and recognition of one’s achievements by members of the community), as the true basis for being God’s people. Unfortunately, this emphasis on the subjective disposition of trust, often described as “justification by faith” by Pauline scholars, fails to capture the role of God in effecting salvation. Paul is more concerned with God’s action in creating something out of our faith than with our trust as such. In fact, Paul argues that precisely God’s power to effect something out of human faith was the condition for trusting him.

Returning to the key question, what led Paul to alter his former conception of God as lawgiver and turn to his new apostolic emphasis on God as spiritual procreator? Paul indicates, especially in his letter to the Galatians, that this shift came as a result of a mystical experience. Paul refers to the experience in Gal 1:12 as a “revelation of Jesus Christ,” and he makes it clear here and elsewhere in Gal 1–2 that his new belief in Jesus’ resurrection was in no respect the result of human persuasion. He certainly was not driven to believe in Christ’s resurrection out of some personal inadequacy in his ability to obey Mosaic law.

Rather, Paul insists in Gal 1:13–14 that his adherence to Mosaic law and his own excellence in performing the law motivated him to destroy the Christian movement. What fueled Paul’s opposition was the lawlessness of certain liberal Hellenistic Christians in admitting to the Jewish community Gentile converts who did not meet traditional admission requirements.

Nor was this the only reason Paul persecuted the church. For liberal Hellenistic Christian converts were advocating the view that a man

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5In Gal 1:13–14 Paul connects his violent persecution of the church explicitly to his zeal for the traditions of his ancestors, i.e., the laws/customs thought to derive from Moses. Similarly, in Phil 3:5–6, Paul states that his former zeal for the law as a Pharisee motivated him to persecute the church.
condemned and executed under Mosaic law, Jesus of Nazareth, was the Messiah. On the basis of Jewish Scripture and Mosaic law, Paul knew that Jesus was just the opposite of God’s promised agent of blessing. Paul indicates his former line of attack on the followers of Christ in Gal 3:13: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” According to Deut 21:22–23, whenever anyone in the Jewish community committed a crime punishable by death and was executed, the atrocity of the offense was accentuated by hanging the offender up to public view on a tree. Anyone subjected to such a scandalous death was believed to be cursed by God and capable of contaminating the very soil on which the community relied for its livelihood. Therefore, Mosaic law required that the corpse of the criminal not remain on the tree overnight but be buried the same day (see Deut 21:23).

Because Jesus was publicly “hanged on a tree” by being crucified, Paul knew that he was accursed by God. Moreover, by making something positive of this man, his followers were keeping the scandal in view and thus spreading the contamination. Therefore Paul aspired to lay this Jesus to rest once for all by destroying the people who kept his scandal alive (see Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). To Paul’s utter surprise, however, God revealed the resurrected Jesus to him. Since the crucified Jesus was alive, he therefore must have been vindicated by God and not cursed, and if vindicated, then he must be the Messiah whom his followers claimed.

And if the crucified one was vindicated and not cursed, then Mosaic law was not fully able to explain the ways of God. This revelation about the law had to be as surprising to Paul as the fact that God had vindicated a criminal and made him an agent of blessing. He was driven back to Jewish tradition to find something that made sense out of God’s resurrection of an executed criminal and the salvation of “lawless” Gentiles. Although it is probably impossible to reconstruct the order in which the pieces fell into place, the importance of the Abraham tradition to Paul’s idea of God allows us to use it as a starting point.

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6The scandal that Paul associated with Jesus’ death by crucifixion is not confined to Gal 3:13 and like statements in Galatians. In 1 Cor 1:18–25 Paul admits the irrationality and scandal of preaching that God effected salvation by means of the crucified Jesus, e.g., see v. 23: “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Philippians 2:8 accentuates the radicality of Christ’s submission to God by not stopping with the giving up of his life but by adding “even death on a cross.”

7As illustrated here and later in the book, in Galatians and Romans Paul connects Jesus’ status as Christ and Gentile converts’ status as God’s people explicitly with the Abraham tradition.
It is unlikely that Paul interpreted the crucifixion positively at the outset. More likely, he initially reflected on more obvious, negative aspects about Christ and Gentile converts. He knew that Jesus had not faithfully adhered to the law, or he would not have been condemned and executed. And he knew that Gentiles were becoming God’s people even without adopting traditional Jewish customs. Thus, like Christ, Gentiles were acceptable to God apart from their adherence to Mosaic law. The Jewish precedent that made sense of both oddities was God’s promise to Abraham that all nations (Gentiles) would be blessed through his offspring. Somehow, the accursed Jesus must be the promised offspring through whom the Gentiles were becoming God’s people.

Paul found correspondence with, and confirmation of, this idea in the fact that God had to adopt Abraham to father the Jewish race. At the time of God’s promise, Abraham himself was not Jewish, neither circumcised nor obedient to Mosaic law. Therefore, Christ’s and Gentile converts’ lack of adherence to Mosaic law, far from making them different from the founder of the race, was analogous to Abraham’s own lack of legal qualifications. At all three stages, God had adopted people by spiritual, not physical, means to be his offspring. None were qualified by birth or by their performance of the law. Only trust in God’s grace constituted their basis of inclusion. Moreover, Gentiles were at no disadvantage in comparison with Abraham’s actual descendants. From Paul’s conversion viewpoint, only spiritual offspring (i.e., those whom God admitted through grace), whether Gentile or Jew, were truly Abraham’s race.

Paul underscores Christ’s paradoxical resurrection out of scandalous death as the event that designated him as Abraham’s promised offspring in Gal 3:13ff. In turn, it formed the basis for God’s further designation of Gentiles as Abraham’s offspring:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. . . . Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, “And to offsprings,” as of many; but it says, “And to your offspring,” that is, to one person, who is Christ. (Gal 3:13–14, 16)

The manner in which Paul connects Christ, Gentile converts, and Abraham is a topic taken up on several occasions in this book, but the most sustained explanation is given in ch. 8.
The only positive qualification Abraham, Christ, and the Gentile converts shared was their dependence on God to effect something out of their present situation.

To be sure, people’s faith in God’s ability to do what he promised was, for Paul, the necessary attribute that qualified them to be his offspring. Nevertheless, it is not the subjective disposition of trust on which we should focus if we want to understand Paul’s idea of God. Faith is only an appropriate response to what is the true source of Paul’s theology, his recognition of God’s benevolent power as creator to procreate life out of negative situations, even out of death itself.

More explicitly, how is God’s salvific action as creator similar typologically in the cases of Abraham and Christ? What most characterized Christ’s death, from Paul’s former Pharisaic viewpoint, was the scandal it represented. According to Jewish law, being hung on a tree for having committed a crime punishable by death was a terrible stigma. Not only was such a person thought to be under God’s curse; the criminal could mediate curse to others. Abraham, the so-called father of the race, had reached old age without procreating an offspring with Sarah. Like Christ’s, their situation was scandalous and shameful. They were sterile. Metaphorically speaking, then, Paul could liken Abraham and Sarah’s barrenness to (Christ’s) death, and the enlivening of their procreative powers to (Christ’s) resurrection (cf. Rom 4:17–21).

In reverse, Paul could liken the crucified Christ, whose accursed status could have made the very soil unproductive, to Abraham and Sarah, accursed by sterility. Correspondingly, his resurrection may be compared metaphorically to Isaac’s miraculous procreation. Thus, for Paul, through Christ’s resurrection God made him Abraham’s promised offspring and, simultaneously, the promised Son (the Christ) who could mediate spiritual procreation to Gentiles.

Indeed, since the promised blessing to the nations was effected through Christ, Paul describes him, rather than Isaac, as Abraham’s miraculously procreated son.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, “And to offsprings,” as of many; but it says, “And to your offspring,” that is, to one person, who is Christ. (Gal 3:16)

The similarities between Abraham, Christ, and the Gentile church as spiritual offspring, together with the analogous ways God effected their spiritual procreation, will be explained in greater detail in subsequent chapters. For the time being, this must sufficiently explain how Paul came to replace his conception of God as lawgiver with the idea of
God as creator and “Father.” But what about Christ’s adoption as Abraham’s and God’s Son, an idea many readers may regard initially as problematic?

**How Did Paul Understand Jesus’ Adoption?**

First of all, Paul’s image of adoption is a metaphor. This does not mean the idea is any less true, but it does mean the image resists simple, literalistic explanation. In addition, the images must be discussed in terms that would have made sense in Paul’s own first-century setting. It is utterly wrong to describe Paul’s presentation of Christ’s adoption in twentieth-century terms, whether of the liberal or of the fundamentalist variety. For example, Paul did not advocate, on the one hand, the modern view that, prior to his human life on earth, Jesus had a fully conscious, personal existence in heaven. Nor, on the other hand, did he endorse the so-called adoptionistic Christology of modern liberals, who say that Christ was human, and nothing more, until God empowered him to be his agent of salvation.

Moreover, we may not identify Paul’s conception of Christ with creedal statements of the fourth and fifth century CE: “true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father,” etc. Paul’s representation of Christ was not so detailed, in a literalistic sense, as that of the later church fathers. Neither was it as explicit as we moderns would like. He was less concerned with Christ’s metaphysical nature than with his role in the mediation of God’s salvation. Paul was even less disposed to philosophical declarations than many of his Jewish and Christian contemporaries. Although he was a Greek-speaking Jew exposed to ideas about wisdom (σοφία) and reason (λόγος) as divinized agents of God, Paul does not clearly identify Christ with such figures. Unlike John’s Gospel, for example, Paul’s writing does not refer explicitly to Christ as the Word (Reason) of God. Nor do we find anything in Paul’s letters comparable to Philo’s idea of the Logos as a divine intermediary.

On the other hand, Paul does indicate that Christ had some kind of existence prior to that lived in the historical Jesus. Thus he states that Christ was the “spiritual rock” from which the water flowed that sustained Jewish forefathers in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4). Did Paul think that Christ was literally present as a rock, allaying the Hebrews’ thirst? Or was Paul indicating, metaphorically, that the same divine power of nourishment that sustained the Hebrews in the wilderness was now present in Christ’s sustenance of the church? We do not know.
We find another example of Christ’s prior life exhibited in the so-called Christ hymn of Phil 2:6–11. Although Paul was not the original author of this hymn, he quotes it approvingly as it speaks of Christ before his life as the historical Jesus:

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

Despite the divinity attributed to Christ even before his life as a mortal, it is significant that Paul ascribes even greater status to Christ as a result of Jesus’ scandalous suffering and death:

And being found in human form,  
humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Whatever previous status Christ had, Paul says that Jesus’ full empowerment as universal Lord was not effected until after God resurrected him. Moreover, the glory of his reign results in praise not of Jesus himself but of God, precisely in his capacity as Father: “Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

One can hardly escape the conclusion that both Jesus’ status as universal Lord and his identity as divine Son are given definitively only at the resurrection. Nor can one ignore the political overtones of Jesus’ appointment as Lord. Paul’s use of the title Christ (the “anointed”) indicates that God has appointed Jesus as the successor to David’s throne. Moreover, the universality of Christ’s rule can not be fully explained by means of Jewish precedent, even if it includes the idea of Christ as God’s ideal ruler in an apocalyptic sense. Later chapters of this book will show that the types of lordship Paul attributes to Christ’s rule were precisely the same as those attributed to Roman emperors.
In summary, then, Jesus’ various roles as promised offspring of Abraham, anointed successor to David, and divine and human being all resist simple definition. On the one hand, Christ himself had to be empowered by means of God’s resurrection to be Abraham’s promised seed (heir) and David’s spiritual successor. In both the political and familial realms, Christ’s status was generated by God at his resurrection, so that Christ himself was a fellow citizen and sibling of other recipients of God’s new spiritual reality. On the other hand, Christ is the paradigm for spiritual sonship in Paul’s system of belief, and he has the temporal priority of being “firstbegotten Son” and “first (leading) citizen” of the realm. Even recognition of this temporal priority probably does not do justice to Paul’s conception of Christ’s special status. Paul never calls Christ “brother,” but always “Lord.” Thus, an unrelieved ambiguity lies at the heart of Paul’s metaphors. Christ is coheir in a new family and fellow citizen in a new realm, but he is also Lord of both.

These comments have not resolved exactly how Christ was the spiritual recipient of God’s procreative powers, but they have showed that Paul’s images should not be defined too literally. The images need to resonate as metaphors. The next section considers the centrality, for Paul, of God’s identity as creator. Two aspects of this idea are discussed: whether the Father as creator constituted Paul’s leading idea about God, and whether there was any progressive development in Paul’s idea of God during his apostolic career. Although not as important for most readers as the issue of Christ’s adoption, these subjects are strategic concerns for scholars trying to reconstruct Paul’s theology.

THE CENTRALITY OF GOD AS CREATOR IN PAUL’S BELIEF

Striking both in the way Paul connects Christ’s saving sonship to resurrection and in the way he interprets God’s adoption of Abraham to be father of a spiritual race (including God’s role in Abraham and Sarah’s procreation of Isaac)—is God’s analogous role as creator. Paul’s

9For example, see Paul’s reference to Christ as “first born” of many children in Rom 8:29. A comparable emphasis is indicated in Gal 3:16 where Christ is referred to as the offspring promised to Abraham through whom all God’s blessings would be mediated. The same idea of Christ’s priority appears in Paul’s metaphor of Christ as “first fruits” (1 Cor 15:20, 23). Christ’s status as political head of God’s new social order is suggested by such statements as 1 Cor 15:27: “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”
emphasis on the analogous nature of these acts demonstrates that God shows himself to be the creator who brings life out of death, fertility out of barrenness, and hope out of hopelessness.

Despite the importance of these correspondences in certain Pauline letters, readers might be skeptical of the centrality of spiritual adoption and of God’s identity as creator in Paul’s remaining letters. True, he calls attention to the parallels between Christ and Abraham only in Galatians and Romans, and admittedly explicit references to spiritual adoption are confined to these letters. Still, God’s identity as creator is the most fundamental element in Paul’s idea of God, as this book will show. For the time being, allow me to state the matter in the way it became personally meaningful for me. By puzzling over the correspondences Paul drew between Abraham, Christ, and Gentile converts and by attending to his regular reference to God as “Father” at the beginning of all his authentic letters, I was led increasingly to the importance, for Paul, of God’s creative identity. The explicit references to spiritual adoption made the idea of God as Father (creator) come graphically alive. And once I grasped the spiritual reality behind such references, I could see like emphases in Paul’s letters even when God’s procreativity is not stated explicitly. The reader is invited to see these emphases in the following examples from Paul’s letters.

Is “Creator” Really Paul’s Central Image for God?

If the analogy of God’s generative powers were confined to Abraham and Christ, we would have cause for doubting the centrality, for Paul, of God’s identity as creator. Paul extends the analogy, however, to his own change from destroyer to builder, and to Gentile converts’ status as Abraham’s offspring. The texture of Paul’s language in every letter, as well as his stock images, presupposes God’s identity as creator.

Paul frequently illustrates the way God has effected life out of his Gentile converts’ deathlike situations. Indeed, these statements are as important to Paul as his emphasis on what God effected in the cases of Abraham and Christ.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Cor. 1:26–30)
For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. ... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. ... For the people of those regions [Macedonia and Achaia] report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God. (1 Thess. 1:4–5, 6, 9)

Paul depicts God’s salvation in both instances above, just as in the case of Christ and Abraham, in terms of God’s creativity. Thus, in the case of the Corinthians, Paul contrasts their former lack of status with their present identity as God’s people. God’s character as creator is made explicit by Paul’s statements that God created something out of nothing when he chose the Corinthians and that God was their source of life. Correspondingly, in the case of the Thessalonians, Paul likens their transformation to what God effected out of Christ’s crucifixion: their persecution from fellow townspeople corresponds to Christ’s crucifixion, and their being lifted above adversity (“with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit”) corresponds to Christ’s resurrection. And when Paul adds that the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve a living and true God, he has in mind God’s vivifying power to effect transformation.

Paul assumes that the same power that created the physical universe is also the creator of the new spiritual world. Moreover, the spiritual universe is not a totally new work but a regeneration and perfection of the existing order. Granted, the physical creation must be liberated from the enslaving and degenerative effects of sin. On the other hand, God enables it to grow to its full-term, spiritual potential. Paul identifies God as the creator of both orders, physical and spiritual, on several occasions.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:19–23).

For it is the [same] God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

The most striking aspect of Paul’s representation of God as the source of universal regeneration (i.e., spiritual regeneration) is the way
Paul likens God’s creativity to the affectionate relationship that a father has with his offspring. Thus he describes God’s special favor toward Gentile converts in terms of Jewish ideas of election (i.e., being called out from other peoples). Indeed, apart perhaps from the prophet Hosea, Paul presents the familiarity of the relationship in more intimate terms than any other biblical representative.

Nonetheless, since God is the universal creator, Paul assumes—as the above citation from Romans 8 attests—that it is only a matter of time until all creation will share, paradoxically, the same special relationship with God enjoyed by children. For the most part, the following chapters in Romans concentrate on God’s role as the special Father of Gentile converts. Still, never far in the background is Paul’s conviction that the same power who called the world into being will eventually regenerate it.

These examples certainly expand the number of Paul’s letters in which God’s identity as creator is important. Whether or not these examples are enough to demonstrate its centrality for Paul, they provide sufficient warrant for examining the subject in greater detail. Thus, we proceed to another presupposition, that God’s identity as Father (procreative creator) was Paul’s most foundational and organizing theological metaphor from the beginning of his apostolic career.

**Was There Any Major Development in Paul’s Idea of God?**

Scholars often assume one of the following views about Paul: (i) his thought lacks continuity because he always was addressing situational issues in his letters; or (ii) his thought exhibits an underlying coherence, but it derives from a recurring external problem, namely, Judaizing opposition to his missionary work.

Christiaan Beker, Daniel Patte, Norman Petersen, and several other scholars have recently proposed not only that there is a coherence to Paul’s thought but that it derives from the apostle’s own theological convictions and not from recurring external circumstances to which he had to respond.¹⁰ I agree with this group of scholars that Paul’s own theo-

¹⁰E.g., see the following works: Beker, *The Triumph of God;* Patte, *Paul’s Faith;* Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul.* In recent professors and former students at Yale University I find a similar emphasis on Paul’s own theological agenda; e.g., see works by Nils Dahl, Abraham Malherbe, and Stanley Stowers. Some published essays by Wilhelm Wuellner also emphasize the importance of Paul’s convictions in shaping his rhetoric. Dieter Georgi’s *Theocracy* attends similarly to Paul’s somewhat systematic appropriation and adaptation of Greco-Roman ruler cult ideology to his picture of God and Christ.
logical convictions give coherence to his language and theology. Although our respective emphases appear to have arisen independently of one another, our viewpoints are complementary and supportive. We share the opinion that the same system of values and convictions may be assumed in all of Paul’s letters.

So far as I recall, none of these scholars says anything about evolution or development in Paul’s thought. This does not mean that they think that Paul’s system of convictions remained static. For example, in one way or another, Beker, Patte, and Petersen show that Paul adapted his convictions to fit the individual circumstances of each letter. Nonetheless, they do not think that Paul altered his central theological values in the course of his apostolic career.

Since most interpreters assume that Paul’s authentic letters were all written within the last decade of his life, they do not find the idea of development a problem. It can be assumed, in this opinion, that Paul’s defense of the Christian church was fully formed by that stage. By contrast, I hold the less popular view that Paul’s missionary work in Greece, as well as his correspondence with churches there, began about a decade earlier than is usually assumed. In this view, Paul’s letters span a period of about two decades. Although Paul’s longer contact with churches on the Greek mainland is not a subject defended or even described in this book, it does make the idea of theological development more feasible. Nonetheless, because of contrary evidence in his letters, I still reject the idea of any major development in Paul’s thought. The data in Paul’s letters show that his fundamental idea of God as creator—though radical in view of his former ideas about God—was in place at the start of his apostolic career.

Most scholars agree that 1 Thessalonians was Paul’s earliest letter, whether written in 50–51 CE or, according to the earlier chronology

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11 I confine the analysis of Paul’s metaphors and central conception of God to the seven letters almost all agree were written by Paul: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

12 This chronology, which places Paul’s missionary work in Greece earlier in his career, draws on the chronological thesis first proposed by John Knox in 1936 and published in book form in 1950 (Life of Paul). Knox’s teacher, Donald Riddle, used the chronology in 1940 in Paul, Man of Conflict. Since the publication of Knox’s book, Donald Rowlingson has published an essay in support of the thesis (“The Jerusalem Conference”). Similarly, M. Jack Suggs has written in support of Knox’s chronology (“Paul’s Macedonian Ministry”). John Hurd, F. Stanley Jones, and a few other scholars have also supported Knox’s viewpoint. The most recent defense, in book form, of an early Pauline chronology was written by Gerd Luedemann (Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles).
suggested above, about 40 CE. Already in this first letter Paul refers to God several times as “Father” at the outset. Moreover, by referring to the Thessalonians as “beloved” and “chosen” by God in 1 Thess 1:4, Paul clearly defines “Father” in the affectionate sense of father of the family. In turn, Paul addresses the Thessalonians as “brothers and sisters,” i.e., spiritual siblings, and, in various other ways discussed later, shows that they are God’s offspring. Thus, the ideas of adoption and of God’s identity as spiritual procreator are assumed already in Paul’s earliest letter. Although Abraham himself is not presented as a model of adoption, Christ, Paul, and the churches of Judea are evoked as analogies for the Thessalonians’ experience of God’s life-begetting power. In particular, Christ’s death and resurrection are presented as the primary paradigm of God’s creative power to generate life out of death. The idea of God as life giver is clearly present.

Nor is it insignificant that God is regularly identified as “Father” at the beginning of all of Paul’s letters. Even more important, Paul refers to himself as the “apostle of (to) the Gentiles” (e.g., see Rom 11:13–14; 15:14–21; Gal 2:1–10; also Gal 2:8), and he indicates by other means that his apostolic status derives directly from God and not from a Jewish, in-
stitutional basis. This kind of apostolic authority shows us how “Father” is to be interpreted with regard to Paul’s converts. Their status as God’s offspring does not derive either from physical birth status as Jews or from performance of the Jewish law. They are God’s people as Gentiles, without becoming Jews, as a result of God’s procreative grace.

Nowhere does Paul ever advocate a different gospel for the conversion of Gentiles. He simply did not evolve from Pharisaism to his “law-free” mission to Gentiles. The change was abrupt. From the start, he was a defender of the “law-free” Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian church he formerly tried to destroy. Indeed, he states explicitly that he had never been an apostolic advocate of Gentiles’ circumcision or subjection to Jewish dietary laws.

To what may we attribute Paul’s unerring commitment to the same theological values from the beginning of his missionary career? His mystical experience of God. From the time Paul became convinced that God had resurrected a man condemned under Mosaic law, he had to reconceive his idea of God. As a result of this experience, Paul could no longer think of God as lawgiver and judge. Nor could he any longer require Gentiles to obey Mosaic law as the basis of acceptance before God. The idea he did find compatible with his mystical experience of the resurrected criminal and with the admittance of Gentiles qua Gentiles into God’s community was God’s identity as creator. One’s status as divine offspring derived directly from confidence in God’s power to make it happen and not from natural (“human”) status or achievement. We shall see that Paul adapted this fundamental vision of God as creator to address several different contexts, but he never departed from the conception itself.

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13E.g., see 1 Cor 1:17–25; 2 Cor 4:1–12; 5:11–21; 11:1–12:10; Phil 3:3–11; 1 Thess 2:1–16. These references indicate that Paul’s authorization looks foolish and insignificant from the vantage point of conventional (human) authority structures. Thus, his authority is of a special, spiritual nature.

14In the first two chapters of Galatians, see Paul’s discussion of his unswerving position against the circumcision of Gentiles. Also, in Gal 2:11ff. see Paul’s opposition to Jewish Christians’ withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentile converts at Antioch because of the Jewish Christians’ ostensible support of Jewish dietary laws.