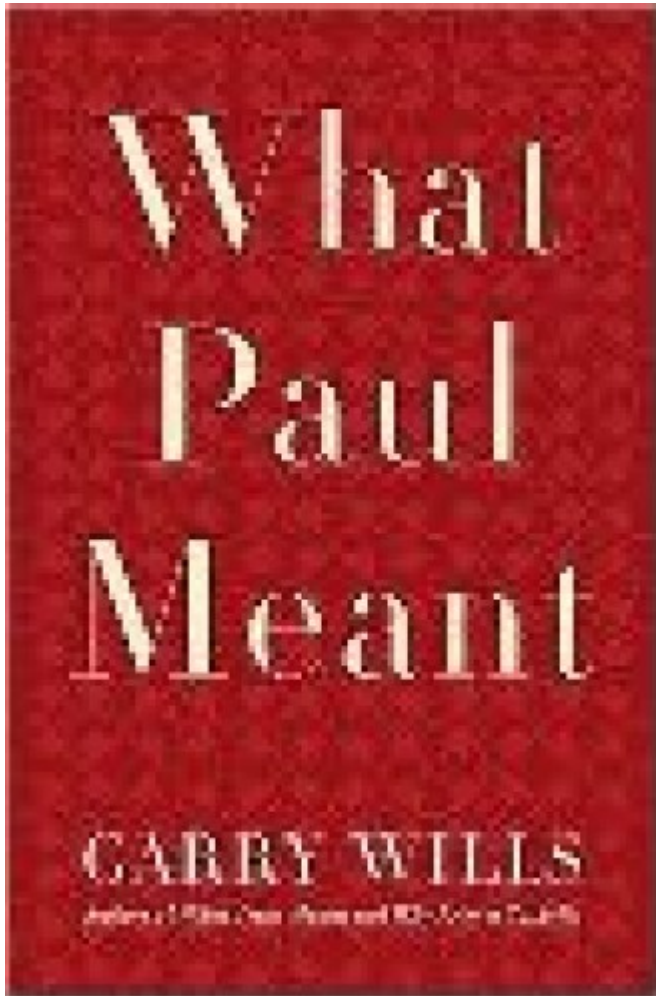


Paul's gospel

By [Paula Fredriksen](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

In Review



What Paul Meant

Garry Wills

Viking

A premier public intellectual and an award-winning author of books on American history, Garry Wills has turned his attention more recently to religious topics and

figures, in *Papal Sin*; *The Rosary*; *Why I Am a Catholic*; a wonderful study of Augustine; and an energetic translation of Augustine's masterwork, *Confessions*. This past year, quitting the late Roman Empire for a period some three centuries earlier, he has been drawn to write on New Testament topics. The most recent product of this new phase of his thinking is a brisk, imaginative essay inspired by that outsize figure of earliest Christian tradition, the apostle Paul.

What Paul Meant draws first of all on Wills's own reading of the letters that academic consensus considers to be authentically Pauline. These are, in canonical order, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Some of the letters in the New Testament—Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus—Wills regards (rightly, in my view) as later ancient Christian interpretations of Paul, as are also, in different ways, the pseudepigraphic letters of Peter and James.

Wills fixes his interpretive focus on Paul's texts by looking at both the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospels. He examines Acts to contrast Luke's late-first-century account of Paul's call and apostolic career with Paul's own, midcentury one. He evaluates the traditions about the preresurrection Jesus to gauge what of Paul's message might go back to Jesus himself.

Wills constructs his analytic scaffolding in part by appealing to modern scholarship on the apostle, appropriately and especially recognizing the profound impact of Krister Stendahl's seminal essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" on current historical reconstructions and modern theological interpretations of the apostle's mission and message. But Wills also often strikes out on his own, offering fresh translations of problematic passages in the letters, reimagining Paul's missionary situations, and constructing very complex patterns of hostility and betrayal within the early Christian communities in Jerusalem and in Rome to account for Paul's ultimate fate, which Wills takes to be death under Nero in Rome.

Wills writes as a nonspecialist to nonspecialists. This approach's vices are its virtues, and vice versa. On the positive side, *What Paul Meant* presents a vivid interpretation of the apostle and his times, conveyed with conviction and clarity. Wills's limber prose, unfettered by the interpretive caution and uncluttered by the sorts of arguments and qualifications necessary in formal academic writing, sweeps the reader along through tangled topics, neatly sketched: Paul and Jesus, Paul and Peter,

Paul and women, Paul and Jews, Paul and Jerusalem, Paul and Rome.

In this book, as in his earlier study of Augustine, Wills displays his great gift for exposition. He can communicate enormously complex interpretive problems in astonishingly little space with great lucidity. For example, his discussion of the problems in using Acts to reconstruct the historical Paul—the La Brea Tar Pit of Pauline historiography—is the single clearest such exposition I know of. Wills’s exploration of Paul’s convictions about the raised “spiritual body” of Christ and the raising of those “in Christ” binds together Paul’s teachings on resurrection, redemption and eschatology with glowing coherence. He communicates Paul’s passionate joy in these convictions, enabling the modern reader to appreciate the power of the beliefs that motivated the extraordinary exertions of Paul and his fellow messianic missionaries in the decades after Jesus’ execution.

Yet these expository virtues entail vices familiar to anyone who is committed to having ancient religious texts convey modern religious (thus usually ethical) meaning. Heuristic clarity comes with a cost. In an otherwise excellent chapter on Paul and his female co-workers, for example, Wills asserts that Paul himself “believed in women’s basic equality with men,” but concedes that “it was impossible for a man in that culture, patriarchal in both its Jewish and Roman societies, to shed every remnant of sexism.” To frame the issue this way is to foist anachronism upon it. No ancient person, male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, ever thought in such terms about these issues. Sexism and gender equality are our issues, and rightly. In my view it is good to be committed to gender equality whether or not Paul (or Jesus) were ever so committed.

As a historian of ancient Christianity, I think that legitimating modern American liberal views by appealing to ancient charismatic apocalyptic Jewish teachers (whether Paul, Jesus or, for that matter, Rabbi Akiva) puts an unreasonable amount of pressure on them to be ethically relevant to us and violates their integrity as ancient persons who were concerned about ancient—not modern—issues. (On a different point Wills himself defends the same principle.) And as a political liberal, I fear that legitimating liberal political values by appealing to ancient religious figures leaves us in a precarious situation vis-à-vis the positions on other issues that these figures unquestionably took. Wills makes no mention, for example, of Paul’s views on “fornication,” which evidently included condemnation of sexual pleasure between married partners (1 Thess. 4:3-5); nor does he bring up Paul’s statements on “homosexuals” (e.g., at 1 Cor. 6:9, where Paul condemns male same-sex activity

both for the penetrator, the *arsenokoitês*, and for the penetratee, the *malakos*). Are such omissions accidental? Perhaps, but I doubt it.

To focus on such aspects of Wills's essay, however, is to risk misdescribing his project. Despite the historical cast of its title, *What Paul Meant* is not fundamentally a historical work. Erudite and engaging, slyly humorous and dead serious, scholarly and passionate, *What Paul Meant* is first of all a public statement of Wills's personal sense of this foundational figure and of his protean theological legacy. "Paul meant what Jesus meant," Wills urges: "that love is the only law."

But, of course, both the historical Paul and the historical Jesus meant many other things besides. And much of their meaning—about the polluting power of demons, the potency of divinely mandated protocols of purification, the nearness of God's kingdom, the sanctity of Jerusalem's temple as the earthly dwelling place of Israel's God, the resurrection of the dead, and the transformation of the living at history's end—makes much better sense in their own historical and cultural context than in ours.

When Wills writes, then, that both Paul and Jesus opposed "religion," that both taught that "the worship of God is a matter of interior love, not based on external observances," that both were "radical egalitarians," that both "saw only two basic moral duties, love of God and love of neighbor," we glimpse not these two ancient figures, but rather the sources of Wills's own keenly felt Christian commitments. So too with the dedication that opens his book: "To the Catholic Workers who know what Jesus meant."

By focusing on particular aspects of Paul's message, by interpreting them as he does, and especially by lifting up the injunctions of Deuteronomy 6:5 (love of God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love of neighbor) in their Pauline and, later, evangelical iterations, Wills continues to fight the good fight against ecclesiastical complacency, moral obtuseness and religious smugness that he began with such critical clarity and commitment in *Papal Sin*. He closes with Paul's words (newly translated) in Philippians 4:8-9: "Whatever things are true, whatever honorable, whatever making for the right, whatever lovable, whatever admirable—if there is any virtue, anything of high esteem—think on these. All you have learned, have taken from tradition, have listened to, have observed in me, act on these, and the God who brings peace will be yours." Amen.