

EDITING PAUL

How Paul Argues and Persuades and How Christians Argue About Paul

Christians are often divided in their views about what they should believe and how they ought to behave based on an understanding of the letters of the apostle Paul.

In his letters, Paul employs a variety of arguments aimed at persuading his readers to behave in certain ways and avoid others. Often he focuses on specific behavior in a Christian community. His views on correct spiritual teachings and morality are interpreted in different ways leading to ***A House Divided***.

PURPOSES:

1. To understand Paul's writings better by examining the nature of his arguments.
2. To understand how Christians argue about why they should or should not follow what Paul wrote.

General Types of Arguments

Culture

Culture consists of the way people live in groups bounded by space and time. Culture includes literature, art, philosophy, religion, language, clothing, eating, ceremonies, customs, work, government and laws. It is reasonably argued that to understand Paul's letters people ought to understand the culture or cultures in which he lived and those where his audience lived. What makes the whole matter more complicated is that we are tasked with understanding ancient languages from about 2,000 years ago.

Paul wrote in Greek and likely knew Hebrew and Latin as used in the 50s and 60s. He lived as a part of Jewish culture within the Roman Empire and areas influenced by Greek culture. In addition to the official state religion, there were Greek and Roman gods and the stories associated with them. Greek, Roman, and Hebrew writings had been available for hundreds of years.

Paul often provides guidance to the people in the churches identified in his letters. That guidance occurs in a cultural and biblical context. What the guidance meant for them is one task. A second task is to determine what that guidance means for Christians today.

Paul argues that Christians should behave better than the people in non-Christian cultures. In culture x, people do this; therefore, you should be as good as, or better than, those people.

Nature

Paul argues based on his understanding of nature. If a condition exists in nature then it is natural and therefore the right thing to do.

Experience

Paul tells the story of his conversion more than once. This personal experience was life-changing. He also shares personal struggles. Sometimes he refers to his experiences to offer guidance to others. An argument might look like this: I had this experience, which, along with my credentials, allows me to offer you guidance or instruction.

Spiritual Metaphor

Like many writers, Paul uses metaphors to improve his readers' understanding of a spiritual concept. Examples of his metaphors are hard hearts, old self/new self, crucified, circumcised, armor of God. When people miss the metaphor, they may focus on the literal meaning of a word or phrase, which can lead to an out-of-context rule for living.

Spiritual analogies

Arguing from analogy is a common way speakers and writers attempt to influence their audience. When Paul uses an analogy, old stories take on new meanings. Old Hebrew stories can have new meaning when we read them in light of Jesus life and ministry or contemporary experiences. Examples include Adam and Jesus, the Church and a human body, and the order of creation of Adam and Eve as well as Eve's deception in the garden.

Moral Foundations of Some Arguments

Authority

For many people in the world, God is the ultimate authority. People perceived as closely connected to God, or speaking for God, gain authority with their followers. Paul argues for his authority as one sent from God. And he uses his authority to persuade others. The emotion linked to authority is fear of punishment for wrongdoing. Fear is linked to respect. The argument is like this: Because I have this set of credentials from God or people in authority, I have the right to instruct you in how to act morally and how to understand scripture. A prime example is Paul's repetition of his conversion story.

Loyalty

Human beings almost universally expect loyalty from family and friends. The opposite is betrayal. Loyalty is built on trust. Loyalty often shows up in relationships as reciprocity. The feeling linked to loyalty is fear of losing a vital relationship and anger at betrayal. Examples: Because I am your leader and have done this for you, I have the right to expect loyalty from you. Because I am committed to you, you ought to be committed to me.

Purity

People in most, if not all, cultures find some things disgusting. This often generalizes to people and their behavior. Although protective against germs and viruses, disgust can be used to marginalize and oppress minorities. Purity becomes a metaphor when referring to thoughts and behavior. Paul often argues for purity in contrast to certain types of sexual behavior. A general form in "If-then" format: If you are pure then you can enjoy being a part of God's Kingdom; therefore, do not be sexual immoral [pornos] or impure [akathartos].

Love and Care

Love is a common human virtue. This can be expressed as caring and avoiding harm. Love is indeed a powerful feeling and motivator as human and animal parents may sacrifice themselves for their young. Some of Paul's arguments appeal to love as a guide to right behavior: Because God loves so much, we ought to love others or do the following.

Equality and fairness

If we observe children playing games, we see they have a sense of fairness. Adults have a keen sense of fair play in sports and at work. The opposite of fairness is cheating, which may be punished in law, policy, or social interactions. Inequality implies some are worth

more than others. Anger is a common emotion associated with a perceived lack of fairness or inequality.

People who are not treated as well as others fight for equal treatment. The fight can cost people their lives. Some of Paul's arguments refer to equality, which is an inclusive concept. He faced barriers to inclusivity like the idea that new male converts should be circumcised. Women have often been barred from leadership positions in society and in the church. And slaves were not equal to masters. Sometimes Paul argues we are all God's people connected to each other and to God through our shared relationship to Jesus; therefore, we have equal worth in God's Kingdom. Sometimes he presents women and slaves in an unequal hierarchy of submission under God.

Recognizing Paul's premises and conclusions.

For ... Eph 5.5 γάρ (gar) for, however

Because... 1Thes 4.6 διότι (dioti) on the account that, because

For this reason... Rom 1.26 διό (dio) οὗτος (houtos)

Therefore... Eph 5.7; Philemon 8 διό (dio)

HOW CHRISTIANS ARGUE ABOUT PAUL'S LETTERS

Christians have divided opinions about what the apostle Paul wrote, what he meant, and how his teachings should guide people today. The importance of these different opinions influenced my study when I wrote about morality in *A House Divided*. There is no doubt that Paul has had a tremendous influence on the doctrines of Christian groups, the behavior of the faithful, and the laws where Christians have had influence. There is a Sacred Cow problem as noted by Furnish. That is, are Paul letters the inerrant words of God through Paul or are they Paul's words? Furnish also identifies the problem of seeing Paul's teachings as a White Elephant—ideas that are no longer useful. I would combine the metaphors as the problem of the Elephant in the Sanctuary—how should we deal with a problem so large that millions of people are affected depending on how a group of people, mostly men, decide?

Cultural Context Arguments

I wrote about culture in the section about Paul's arguments. Here I look at ways Christians use cultural arguments. These arguments are mostly used to ignore one of Paul's teachings. That is, what Paul wrote applies to the culture in which the recipients of his letters lived and not to our current culture.

Culture and Appearance

Paul explicitly argued that women ought to be modest in their appearance. He writes about clothes, jewelry, and hair.

A psychological argument is that people often find the appearance of people from other groups as strange, weird, or even objectionable and therefore create rules about acceptable group identity.

Culture and Language

In Romans, Paul taught that people who had same-sex sex will not inherit the kingdom of God. Christians who affirm same-sex relationships have argued that the word translated in Romans should not be men but males, which they explain is important because males includes both boys and men. Thus, the prohibition is against sexual exploitation of boys. Also, the translation of ἀρσενικοίτης (arsenokoitēs) in 1 Corinthians 6: 9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 should not be translated as homosexuals or similar words because the word refers to pederasty in the local culture.

One psychological argument related to language and translations is the presence of a confirmation bias—people look for evidence that supports their point of view and ignore contradictory evidence.

Culture and Relationships

Christians had slaves for centuries. They saw Paul as supporting master-slave relationships, which were common in his cultural setting and for many centuries thereafter. Paul's moral guidance was that masters should treat their slaves well and that slaves should obey their masters.

A different argument from the language argument regarding same-sex relationships is that Paul did not address the current situation of a loving and committed relationship between same-sex couples. A psychological argument would note that Paul, like many men and women, find same-sex sex disgusting, which motivates people to create laws and moral codes prohibiting same-sex activity.

Biblical Context Arguments

The Bible available to Paul was the Hebrew Bible. Paul's letters were written before the gospels and he wrote a large portion of the New Testament. I'll use the common Christian term "books" to include the letters of Paul and other documents in Christian bibles (although there is a common core set of books, some Bibles have additional books).

Paul's Authentic Letters

Christians do not agree on which letters Paul wrote. Thus, some arguments based on what Paul wrote about women or slaves are based on assumptions about what Paul did or did not write. For details, see [The First Paul](#) by Borg and Crossan. Psychologically, it is difficult to overcome tradition. People accept statements as truth after they have been repeated regardless of contrary evidence.

Various Contexts

Christians also argue about what context to use when interpreting what Paul wrote. Consider possible contexts. A word or phrase within a section of a letter.

an entire letter.

all of Paul's letters.

all of the New Testament.

all of the Bible.

all of the Bible plus nature.

Biblical context and language

In addition to arguing about the cultural meaning of Paul's words, Christians argue about which words were in the original letters and what words in current languages best convey the meaning of the ancient words; hence, we have a plethora of translations. The morality of divorce and remarriage has changed for some Christians in recent decades based on the meaning of divorce and a comparison of Jesus' words with those of Paul.

For centuries Christians believed that it was a sin to get divorced based on what Jesus said. Others believed divorce was permissible if one partner committed adultery. Even then, a divorced Christian was not free to remarry until their first spouse died. To remarry meant they committed adultery. Following the rise in divorce in the 1900s, Christians argued that the word divorce meant "cut off" thus, people were free to remarry following a divorce. In recent years, more and more clergy and Christian counselors argue that divorce is permissible in cases of spouse abuse.

Biblical context and guidance

Paul expressed concern about women's clothing and adornment (1 Timothy). Some Christian groups have emphasized plain clothes, no makeup, and no jewelry based on the text without considering cultural contexts. The same type of argument supports church policies limiting what women can do. Psychologists describe this type of thinking as Intratextual Fundamentalism.

Biblical context and examples

Sometimes Christians will argue against a specific teaching based on biblical examples that suggest the teaching is not as restrictive as the words imply. For example, Paul limited what women could do in church and ministry in some texts. Mainline protestant groups and some Pentecostals argue against the limitations in the various letters.

Examples of **how they argue from biblical texts without relying on cultural arguments**:

- Paul recognized women in church leadership, therefore, he did not intend to limit all women.
- Paul claimed that there is no difference between women and men in Christ therefore, a person's sex does not matter in Christian service.
- Paul was talking about a specific woman or certain women in select communities therefore, his teaching does not apply to all women.
- Jesus showed respect for women therefore...
- A few women in the Bible held leadership positions therefore...
- Women have been filled with the Spirit who gifted them; therefore, God has called them.

Biblical context and old laws

Both Jesus and Paul emphasize the importance of being guided by love. One argument employed by a growing number of contemporary Christians to affirm same-sex relationships and marriage is this principle of acting according to love. They argue that the biblical teaching of Jesus and Paul about love would include the loving and committed relationships between same-sex couples. In contrast, Christians opposed to same-sex relationships argue that Paul's teaching is consistent with, and expands upon, the old Leviticus law against same-sex sex between men. Note that in Romans, Paul also prohibited same sex-sex for women, which was not found in Leviticus.

Biblical context and perceived contradictions

Some Christians experience confusion when finding contradictions in Paul's writings or between what Paul wrote and what others wrote like the whole matter of the role of women in the church or what clearly defines sexual immorality. Progressive Christians argue that the contradictions are what one would expect from different writers. Those who view Paul's words as God's words with the associated concept of inerrancy, may argue that the perceived contradictions are mysteries.

Notes

Furnish uses the expression The Sacred Cow regarding how Christians view scripture. I studied many articles and books when writing [A House Divided](#). That bibliography is too lengthy to include here. Some references that might be helpful.

Borg, M.J. & Crossan, J.D. (2009). *The first Paul: Reclaiming the radical visionary behind the church's conservative icon*. [HarperCollins](#).

Furnish, Victor P. *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*. 3rd ed. Nashville: [Abingdon](#), 2009.

Haidt, Johnathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: [Pantheon](#), 2012.

I am open to suggestions to improve on what I wrote.
Geoff Sutton 2022 <https://suttong.com>

Recognizing Paul's Arguments-- Discussion

Read the following references to various texts and identify the argument Paul uses to support a teaching. In some cases, more than one type of argument may be employed. Consider how Christians affirm or argue against Paul's teachings.

GROUP 1

- 1 Corinthians 5:1 not even...
- 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20 rights & bodies
- 1 Corinthians 7: 8-9 why singles should marry
- 1 Corinthians 7: 10-16 why you should not divorce
- 1 Corinthians 11: 2-10 why cover
- 1 Corinthians 11:13-15 why hair

GROUP 2

- 1 Corinthians 14: 1-25, especially 6-11 foreigners
- 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 why women should be silence- disgraceful
- 1 Corinthians 15: 12-32 If-then resurrection
- Philemon 17-21 why Phil should
- 1 Thessalonians 4: 7-8 Why be holy
- 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 why you shouldn't grieve

GROUP 3

- Romans 1: 26-27 shameful
- Romans 2:25-29 why no circumcision
- Romans 5: 12-20 therefore ...sin
- Romans 7: 14-20 Why Paul sins
- Galatians 1:11 – 2:14 why Paul has authority
- Galatians 3: 26-28 for y'all one

GROUP 4

- Ephesians 5:3-7 why be pure
- Ephesians 5: 21 why submit
- Ephesians 5: 22-24 why wives should submit
- Ephesians 5: 25-33 why husband should love
- Ephesians 6: 1-3 why obey and honor
- Ephesians 6: 5-8 why slaves should obey