

BOOK REVIEW

What Paul Meant by Garry Wills (Penguin 2006) 193 pages \$16.95 available from the Catholic Bookshop, Favier House, Braddon.

I chose this book about Paul because it is not too long and not too expensive. The author is a scholar of both Greek and History but he writes in a colloquial easy to read style. His best known work is: *Why I am a Catholic*. Sometimes in our liturgies we take texts out of context and apply them to the now, with little reference to their meaning for the original sender or recipient. Wills argues that Paul is much misunderstood because his hearers/readers interpret his words and actions differently from what Paul himself intended. After the introduction it is a good idea to skip straight to the Appendix, "Translating Paul", before going any further. What Paul means to us is not the same as what Paul meant in his own time. This is important because Paul's time was so close to Jesus' time. Paul's record of his experience of the Risen Jesus and His first followers was written 25 - 50 years before the gospels and the other epistles. Some of the issues where Wills claims Paul has been misunderstood are: predestination, faith and works, anti-Semitism, sexism, pessimism, and his relationships with Peter, Jerusalem and Rome. Another problem arises about who wrote what. Wills deals with only those epistles (seven out of thirteen) which, most scholars agree, were definitely written by Paul. Paul is presented as a busy missionary, engaged in on-the-run crisis management and damage control as Christ's first followers struggled to find their identity. Were they Jews, "Jews plus" or not Jews at all? Looking back, we see them as early Christians. Wills maintains Paul never saw himself as establishing a new church. Paul saw his hearers' as Jews and "Jews plus" (my term). Paul accepted Jesus as the Messiah promised to the Jews but – and this was the new bit - Paul's revelation was that Jesus the Messiah had come to the Gentiles as well. The other major problem with Paul is that we have two versions of events – one from his own letters and one from Luke's Acts of the Apostles and the two versions do not compute. Wills takes some pains sorting this out. I wanted a comparative timeline. Although he acknowledges that Luke was writing at a different time, to a different audience, and with a different theological purpose, Wills' view is that, when writing about Paul, Luke was something of a "spin doctor". *What Paul Meant* is a comprehensive study of the seven letters, allowing us to see the development of Paul's own understanding of his mission. The reader can discern fact from (occasional) speculation because Wills is careful to annotate his sources. Unfortunately these are not collected into a bibliography. Despite his special emphasis on accuracy and relevance in terminology, and his excellent chapter on "Paul and Women", Wills constantly refers to Jesus' earliest followers as "the Brothers". This usage reminds us that knowing what Paul meant is but a starting point for understanding what his words mean today. It is, nevertheless, a good and necessary starting point for those who wish to learn more about Paul.

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