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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Apostle of Struggle: Reappraising Howard Thurman on Paul

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Abstract

Howard Thurman, the great 20th-century African American thinker and pastor, has often been characterized as holding an antagonistic view of the Apostle Paul, based primarily on several passages in his most important work, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949). One of those passages describes the anti-Pauline position of his grandmother, a former slave, Nancy Ambrose. In this article we argue that Thurman was, in contrast to his grandmother, oftentimes an admirer of Paul. Our thorough consideration of Thurman's published and unpublished work, as well as the work of his various intellectual and religious mentors, uncovers that he had a much more nuanced position on Paul than is normally described. He saw Paul as a profoundly radical and original thinker, who was nonetheless compromised by his Roman citizenship, distancing himself from his fellow Jews. For Thurman, a mentor to many in the civil rights movement, the question of citizenship was crucial, and he used Paul to help explore the complex intellectual, religious, and social situations of African Americans, caught between two worlds, ambivalent about trying to fit into a world that was ambivalent about them. In this way, for Thurman, Paul was a model of personal struggle and religious complexity.

Keywords: Howard Thurman; Paul, the Apostle; slavery; citizenship; Roman citizenship; American citizenship; African American views on Paul

In 1979, toward the end of his life, the great African American religious thinker Howard Thurman wrote that the "most persistent struggles of my life have always centered on the gray areas of compromise." How to survive in a society to which a person "cannot approve, or cannot assent," without damaging the core of one's soul. In this, he writes, "over and over I have echoed the words of the Apostle Paul (Romans 7:21, Moffatt's), 'I desire to do what is right but wrong is all that I can manage.'"[1] This was indeed the central religio-political question of his life and career – how, as a person, as an American citizen,

[1]Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 249–250. Citing *A New Translation of the Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*, trans. James Moffatt (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928).

as an African American, as a Christian, to live a moral life in a profoundly immoral and un-Christian society, and to decide when compromise was necessary, and when it was impossible. Throughout his life, Paul was a model for Thurman of someone who had wrestled with his own dilemmas. Paul was a Jew in a Gentile world. He was seared with a religious truth that fit uneasily, or perhaps not at all, into existing religious alternatives. Paul had to chart his own religious path, with all the self-confidence this required and all the loneliness and rejection this often entailed. Thurman did not always agree with Paul's choices, and there is no evidence that Paul was particularly influential in his religious thought, or that he ever worked toward a systematic Pauline theology. However, Paul is a crucial link in Thurman's religious thinking, as a man both nourished and riven by his internal and external contradictions. Each, in their own way, was an apostle of struggle.

Is it surprising to hear Thurman, toward the end of his life, describing such a deep identification with Paul? Regarding Paul, Thurman is best known as his sharp and severe critic. Some have argued, like Lisa Bowens, the author of an important recent study of African American attitudes toward Paul, that Thurman "explicitly reject[ed]" Paul, and found him "largely dispensable" to his faith.[2] Not so. Bowens, in *African American Readings of Paul*, wants to "explore the complicated relationship that African American have had with the apostle [Paul]."[3] She is surely correct about its complexity. An African American anti-Pauline discourse began in the antebellum South and has persisted to the present, often contesting the vigorous pro-Pauline tradition Bowens ably documents. She accurately describes Albert Cleage, the prominent 20th-century minister and Black nationalist, as a bitter opponent of Paul.[4] Cleage held that "the tremendous confusion in Christianity grows out of the fact that after the death of Jesus, the Apostle Paul began to corrupt his teachings with concepts which were essentially the pagan concepts of the Gentile oppressors."[5] And there were other critics, unmentioned by Bowens, who were bitterly anti-Pauline, such as James Baldwin, who wrote that "the real architect of the Christian church was not the disreputable, sun-baked Hebrew who gave it its name, but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul."[6] But she – and she is not alone – has misplaced Thurman in this anti-Pauline camp, where he does not belong.[7] Instead, Thurman, as we will show from sources throughout his life, displays in microcosm the very kind of complex and sometimes competing African American views of Paul that Bowens highlights from Black history as a whole.

There is no question that Thurman's discussions of Paul were sometimes negative. In the early 1930s, Thurman started to write of the "religion of Jesus," which he opposed to organized, institutional Christianity. The religion of Jesus was the religion practiced by Jesus, as opposed to the religion about Jesus, which became Christianity. Thurman said in 1935 that he made "a careful distinction between Christianity and the religion of Jesus.

[2]Lisa Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 237.

[3]Ibid., 2.

[4]Ibid., 234–238.

[5]Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 44.

[6]James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993 [1963]), 44.

[7]Cf. William Turner, "Preaching the Spirit: The Liberation of Preaching," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* **14**, no. 1 (2005): 3–16, who argued that both Thurman and Cleage "credit Paul with planting the seeds of slaveholding Christianity" (4). We know of no passage where Thurman argues Paul inspired Christian slaveholding, as opposed to enslavers using Paul for their own purposes. Thurman and Cleage were both involved with the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, though the two men never met. Cf. Peter Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2021), 212–215.

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In my opinion the churches and all so-called Christian institutions are built upon the assumption that the Strong man is superior to the weak man and as such [have] the right to exploit the weak and be served by them."[8] A few months earlier, Thurman published his first formal exposition of the religion of Jesus, counterposing it to the religion of Paul in an article titled "Good News for the Underprivileged." Thurman's comments on Paul were not entirely negative, prefacing his remarks by calling Paul "this flaming mystic tentmaker," the "first great creative interpreter of the Christian religion." He then proceeded to establish his Jesus/Paul dichotomy. He argued that Jesus was a "poor Jew," a "member of a minority race, underprivileged and to a great extent disinherited. The Jews were not citizens of the Roman Empire … They were a captive group, but not enslaved." Paul was a diaspora Jew and a Roman citizen, who "could never escape the consciousness of his citizenship."[9] To make his case, Thurman quoted Romans 13 on the need to obey Roman authority, as well as Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters." And, as Thurman often noted, Paul's consciousness of his citizenship was not merely theoretical. Here and in other places, he referred to Paul's confrontation with the centurion in Acts 22:22–29. "If a Roman soldier pushed Paul into a ditch, he could appeal to Caesar." But if a "Roman soldier pushed Jesus of Nazareth into a Palestinian ditch, he could not appeal to Caesar because he was just another Jew in the ditch."[10]

Thurman reprised his argument about the differences between the religions of Jesus and Paul in his best-known book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949. What interested Thurman the most about Paul was his psychology. As for his Roman citizenship, Thurman wondered, "should he [Paul] deny himself merely because he was more fortunate than his fellows? To what extent could he accept his rights without feeling a deep sense of guilt and betrayal? He was of a minority but with majority privileges." His citizenship was "like a magic formula always available in emergencies." Thurman argued that it was to Paul's credit that he used his citizenship status only once, in the confrontation with the centurion. But even if, argued Thurman, Paul's use of his citizenship rights was "understandable," it nonetheless warped him and the religion he did so much to shape, leading to the Christian toleration of slavery and other societal injustices. Thurman did offer a caveat, however, that it would be "grossly misleading and inaccurate to say that there are not to be found in the Pauline letters utterances of a deeply different quality – utterances which reveal how his conception transcended all barriers of race and class and condition."[11] But this qualification has largely been ignored by Thurman students. In the pages below, we attempt to set the record straight on Thurman's reception of Paul by drawing attention to the many places where Paul is a model for Thurman's Christianity.

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was one of the most important and influential religious thinkers in mid-20th century America. Born in 1899, raised in Daytona, Florida, he was educated at Morehouse College (1919–1923) and Rochester Theological Seminary (1923–1926; hereafter, RTS).[12] His academic and ministerial positions included Morehouse and

[8]Howard Thurman, "Columbo Journal," in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker, vol. **1**, *My People Need Me: June 1918–March 1936* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 303–305. Hereafter *PHWT*. Throughout his career Thurman used gendered language to refer to humanity, and sometimes, to make a point, made use of a racially offensive term directed against African Americans. We have not altered his language.

[9]Thurman, "Good News for the Underprivileged," in *PHWT*, 1:264–265.

[10]Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle: Paul" (1955), Folder 108, Box 11, Howard Thurman Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archives, Boston University. Hereafter HTC.

[11]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), 32–33.

[12]RTS merged with several others over time to form the present Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School.

Spelman Colleges (1928–1932), Howard University (1932–1944; Dean of Chapel, 1936–1944), the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, an intentional interracial and interdenominational congregation (1944–1953), and Boston University, where he was the dean of chapel (1953–1965). Thurman combined the Protestant modernism he was taught at RTS with his abiding interest in mysticism and personal and experiential religion. He was also a leading advocate of radical nonviolence, and in 1936 headed a delegation of African Americans that met with Mohandas K. "Mahatma" Gandhi. He was a mentor to many leaders of the civil rights movement, among them Martin Luther King Jr., James Farmer, Pauli Murray, James Lawson, and Jesse Jackson.[13]

Thurman, with his interest in both religious introspection and social activism, was interested by both Paul, the fearless seeker of his God, and Paul, the diaspora Jew in a Roman world, and the question of how such people situate themselves in a social and political reality that is radically imperfect. And he was fascinated by Paul's claim of Roman citizenship as a means of warding off the arbitrariness of the administration of Roman law, especially in comparison to his fellow Jews, the vast majority of whom were not Roman citizens. There was no issue more central to the civil rights movement. As Martin Luther King, Jr. warned in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington: "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights."[14] The demand for Black citizenship dates back to the earliest days of the American republic. Its possibility was decisively rejected in the infamous U.S. Supreme Court decision *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), and then resoundingly affirmed with the guarantee of birthright citizenship with the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868). But after the demise of Reconstruction, African American citizenship rights were ignored and traduced, as Thurman experienced growing up in Jim Crow Florida.[15] For Thurman, as for King and many others, citizenship was a way of life that embraced and shaped the entire person, their inner spiritual strivings as well as their dealings with others, their communities, and their larger polities. And it was the way Paul dealt with the various aspects of his Roman citizenship, not always to Thurman's satisfaction, that most interested Thurman, along with the implications and lessons to African Americans in the mid-20th century, who, like Paul, could not take their status as citizens for granted.

I. It Is Complicated: Thurman's Relationship with Paul

One major reason for the emphasis on Thurman's distrust of Paul comes from a story that he told for the first time in print in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, involving a conversation

[13]For key secondary works on Thurman, cf. Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*; Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); Luther E. Smith Jr., *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981); Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked For a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); and Walter E. Fluker, ed., *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground: Reimagining Howard Thurman's Life and Work* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023).

[14]Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 211.

[15]For Black citizenship, cf. Orville Vernon Burton and Armand Derfner, *Justice Deferred: Race and the Supreme Court* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: Norton, 2019); and Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

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with his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose. This has become, in Bowens' words, the "Ur-text to advocate [for] African American rejection of Paul."[16] Nancy Ambrose was born into slavery in 1843 or 1844 in Moseley Hall, Madison County, Florida, near the border with Georgia. Her enslaver was John C. McGehee, who grew cotton on his 2400-acre farm, where about one hundred persons were enslaved in 1860. McGehee was a fanatical defender of slavery. He was the president of Florida's secession convention in Tallahassee in early 1861, and, as Nancy remembered, used all the means at his disposal to keep his human property properly compliant and obedient. With Howard Ambrose, Thurman's namesake, who died in the 1880s, she had eight children, including Alice, Thurman's mother. Nancy and Alice were particularly close, and they spent most of their lives together. At some point, probably in the 1890s, they moved to Daytona, Florida, where Thurman was raised after his birth in 1899.[17] Nancy Ambrose became a pillar of the Mount Bethel Baptist Church and of the Black community in Daytona. One of Thurman's earliest memories was burying his head in his grandmother's taffeta dress on Sundays to take a brief respite "during the endless hours of the worship service."[18]

Nancy Ambrose never learned to read, or, more precisely, had been prevented from learning to read while enslaved, and never thereafter acquired the tools of literacy.[19] When young Howard grew up, and became a very proficient reader, one of his regular tasks became reading passages from the Bible to Nancy. She always selected the passages she wanted to hear: "some of the more devotional psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again."[20] In the summer of 1921, having finished his sophomore year at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Thurman went home to Daytona and spent time sitting on the front porch with his grandmother. Nancy Ambrose was a formidable woman, someone who, in Thurman's words, "was the sort of person who had so much beauty in authority that you didn't ask her 'why' about anything."[21] But screwing up his courage, he finally asked her a question that he had no doubt been wondering about for a long time – why she had so infrequently asked for any selections from Paul. And she told the following story, as related in *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

> During the days of slavery the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee [sic] was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text. 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters … as unto Christ.' [Eph 6:5; Col 3:22]. Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read, I would not read that part of the Bible.[22]

Thurman often told the story about his grandmother and Paul, perhaps most memorably in a 1968 talk, which he dedicated to her, who lived "in almighty tenderness and wisdom born only of God," and "who [first] opened up to me the richness of the Book, even

[16]Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 229.
[17]Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 27–30.
[18]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 13.
[19]Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 43.
[20]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 30.
[21]Thurman, "On American Slaves and the Bible" (1968), Folder 45, Box 6, HTC.
[22]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 30–31.

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though she did not read a word of the Book." Enslaved people, Thurman said, "were exposed to the Book, and the Book [was] far more important than the Church."[23] That is to say, for Thurman, and for Nancy Ambrose, there was no set text, no dogma in her Bible. Every person had to create their own Bible – the Bible they needed, not the Bible that a minister would seek to impose on them. Thurman's unlettered grandmother taught him how to read the Bible with the "hermeneutics of moral intuition."[24] Or, in Thurman's words, to read the text by "trying to find some persona that would give them strength to abide the vicissitudes of a cruel fortune." Thurman wanted others to read the Bible as freeing them, rather than constraining them to a particular set of beliefs and practices. Nancy Ambrose had no need to include the Pauline Epistles in her Bible, except for a single chapter. When she was in the right mood, she would sometimes say to Howard, "'Boy! Read that chapter' and I would always know which one she meant." It was the famous thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians.[25] Like her grandson, Nancy Ambrose was more interested in connecting to the deepest sources of her faith than maintaining a superficial consistency.[26]

Nancy Ambrose was hardly the only enslaved Christian angered by white Christians preaching Pauline exhortations on obedience. In 1833, Charles Colcock Jones, a prominent white southern minister, recorded that when he started to preach on slave obedience to an enslaved congregation using Paul's Epistle of Philemon as his text "one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves."[27] In 1853, the Black abolitionist William Wells Brown included the following discussion in his novel *Clotel*: "'I think de people dat made de Bible was great fools,' said Ned. 'Why?' [said] Uncle Simon. 'Cause dey made such a great big book and put nuttin' in it, but servants obey yer masters.'"[28] Anger at Paul continued after Emancipation. Frederick Douglass said in 1874 that Philemon had been "recited by a thousand clerical tongues. Precisely to what use this part of the Holy Book will be put now that there are no more slaves to be returned to their masters, it is not for me to say."[29] Nonetheless, there does not seem to have been an organized anti-Pauline current among Black Christians in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Nancy Ambrose's protest against Paul was both solitary and largely silent, and, whether she was influenced by similar-minded persons or not, she decided to abhor and forswear anything and everyone tainted with the enormous crime of slavery. She told her grandson of being surreptitiously sermonized by the slave preacher who told her and others that "you – you are not niggers. You – you are not slaves. You are God's children."[30] This was Thurman's religion of Jesus as well. In 1976, explaining to an interviewer why, even as a little boy, he could never end his prayers with "Jesus Christ our Lord," he

[23]Thurman, "On American Slaves and the Bible."

[24]J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 174.

[25]Thurman, "On American Slaves and the Bible."

[26]Allan Dwight Callahan argues in "'Brother Saul': An Ambivalent Witness to Freedom," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 240–241, that Nancy Ambrose's hostility to Paul was largely limited to his injunctions on slavery, but that is not how Thurman describes his grandmother's comments.

[27]Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 294.

[28]William Wells Brown, "Clotel, Or the President's Daughter," in *Clotel and Other Writings*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (New York: Library of America, 2014), 116.

[29]Frederick Douglass, "Speech of the Hon. Frederick Douglass at the Pic-Nic of the Welch Guard, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 30 August, 1874," *New National Era*, 3 September, 1874.

[30]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 50.

credited the influence of his grandmother: "She had a feeling about Jesus that was a little like my own. Or mine was a little like hers."[31] God's presence could be felt directly and did not require intermediaries, and certainly not the ministrations of white enslavers.

The greatest misconception about Thurman's views on Paul is the assumption that he simply endorsed and agreed with his grandmother. He nowhere says that. Instead, he declares that "since that fateful day on the front porch in Florida I have been working on the problem her words represented."[32] Thurman certainly insisted in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and elsewhere, that the views of the disinherited ought not be ignored or condescended to, and that the complicities of white Christianity in slavery and Jim Crow must be acknowledged and redressed. There was no greater influence on Thurman's early understanding of religion, and of Paul, than the Afro-Christian syncretic worldview of his grandmother. But if Nancy Ambrose was unlettered, Thurman's understanding of Paul was a product of deep and extensive reading.[33] Nancy's critique of Paul was largely limited to his use in defense of slavery. Thurman focused on the "gray areas of compromise" in Paul's life as a Jew in a non-Jewish and often anti-Jewish world, and how to relate the radicalism of Paul's religious thinking to his hidebound politics.

Thurman's earliest published comments on Paul, while he was in school at RTS, are entirely positive. In an article published in the *Student Volunteer Movement Bulletin* (1925), he cited Philippians 3:13–14 to make the case that "as long as we merely try to imitate someone else in our devotion, our piety and our devotion and our living, so long will we be superficial, ineffective and incomplete." Paul modeled, on the other hand, a "personal spiritual power."[34] Two years later, in a sermon titled "Finding God," he claimed that "the quest for fulfillment is perhaps the most real quest in all the world," and, after providing several more recent examples, mentioned Paul: "when the Apostle Paul says 'woe unto me if I preach not the gospel,' [1 Cor 9:16]" he was "expressing the inner urge that drives him on … the quest for fulfillment is the quest for God; and it may be, when I have that for which my heart hungers, I have found God."[35] To find one's "inner urge," to chart one's "inner sea," was key to Thurman's understanding of religion. Decades later, in 1953, he began a series of sermons on this crucial topic, the "inner life," by paraphrasing 2 Corinthians 4:15–18: "my outer man decays, my inner man is renewed," because my "eyes are on the unseen, not the seen."[36] In 1928, newly hired in his first academic position at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, Howard Thurman gave a series of sermons on the subject of "Man and the Moral Struggle." The subjects he focused on were Job, Jesus, and Paul.[37] Those sermons are no longer extant, but the "moral struggle" of Paul became a favorite theme for Thurman. In 1949, and again in 1954–1955, he gave a series of connected sermons with the same general theme – "Man and the Moral

[31]Landrum Bolling, "Conversations with Howard Thurman," Folder 33, Box 16, HTC.

[32]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 31.

[33]Nancy often told her grandson "your only chance is to get an education. The white man will destroy you if you don't." Cf. Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 46.

[34]Thurman, "The Perils of Immature Piety," in *PHWT*, 1:50, 48. Thurman's paraphrase of Philippians ran, "Brothers, I for one do not consider myself to have appropriated this; my one thought is, by forgetting what lies behind me and straining to what lies before me, to press on to the goal for the prize of God's high call in Christ Jesus." Thurman returned to this passage for a later sermon, "The Moment of Crisis—II" (1958), Folder 14, Box 10, HTC.

[35]Thurman, "Finding God," in *PHWT*, 1:111.

[36]Thurman, "The Inner Life: Introduction," in *The Inner Life and Social Responsibility*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), 51–52.

[37]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 82.

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Struggle" – and in both series Thurman included sermons on Paul. In 1958, he gave another sermon on Paul in a series with a similar theme, "The Moment of Crisis."[38] Moral struggle, or the "moment of crisis," for Thurman, occurs when a person seeks a goal that has "ends that are transcendent, and boundless" and "involves me in the kind of struggle in which there is at stake the ultimate destiny of my life."[39] This often involved difficult choices, conflicting loyalties, severing old ties, and establishing new connections. For Thurman, Paul was an exemplar of the moral crisis, and an example of how the consequences of an individual moral struggle can reverberate far beyond a single personal drama.

How Howard Thurman developed such an early regard for Paul given the influence of his grandmother is, before now, an untold story. But she was not the only potential roadblock for developing an appreciation for Paul. Thurman came of intellectual age at a time of intense interest and challenging interpretations of Paul, both among scholars and the general public. A century of higher criticism of the Bible had forged dividing lines between religious progressives and conservatives. As Patrick Gray has argued, in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, "anti-Paulinism" was in vogue, challenging old orthodoxies, especially among liberal thinkers.[40] To select a few authors we know Thurman admired, George Bernard Shaw stated in 1914 that "there is not one word of Pauline Christianity in the characteristic utterances of Jesus."[41] Leo Tolstoy blamed Paul for the "arbitrary separation of the metaphysical and ethical aspects of Christianity."[42] The growing awareness of the historical development of Christian dogma led many to label Paul as the "real founder of Christianity," though this was often a dubious honor, since it was easy to make Paul answerable for all the author disliked about its current state, leaving Jesus untouched and uncorrupted by Christianity's failures. We do not know if Thurman ever read Bouck White's popular 1911 book about a socialist Jesus, *The Call of the Carpenter*. But if he had, he would have read that Paul was a mere "stockbroker in Rome's world corporation," which "blinded him" to the social evils around him. For White, Jesus had a special message to "the disinherited classes," the message that "society has disinherited them, but God has not disinherited them."[43] The influence of these broader anti-Pauline currents on Thurman's thinking is speculative. No doubt of greater impact were his studies at RTS from 1923 to 1926. As early as 1918, his first significant mentor, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, later the longtime president of Howard University (1926–1960), counseled the teenager to develop a critical attitude to Biblical texts, to get a "first class theological training," and to "cultivate the historical perspective" on the Bible, in part as a way of learning the "teachings of Jesus and Paul."[44] RTS provided that for Thurman.[45]

[38]Thurman, "Paul," in *Moral Struggle and the Prophets*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020), 41–51. Cf. Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle: Paul"; and "The Moment of Crisis—II." Other subjects of Thurman's sermons in the "Man and the Moral Struggle" series include Prometheus, Faust, Captain Ahab, Second Isaiah, Job, Jesus, Joan of Arc, and Albert Schweitzer.

[39]Thurman, "Introduction: Man and the Moral Struggle," in *Moral Struggle and the Prophets*, 7.

[40]Patrick Gray, *Paul as a Problem in History and Culture: The Apostle and His Critics Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 80–84.

[41]George Bernard Shaw, "Preface on the Prospects of Christianity," in *Androcles and the Lion, Overruled, Pygmalion* (New York: Brentano's, 1914), xiii–cxxvii.

[42]Leo Tolstoy, *Church and State, and Other Essays* (Boston: Benjamin R. Tucker, 1891), 17.

[43]Bouck White, *The Call of the Carpenter* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Page, 1911), **235**, 103.

[44]"Mordecai Wyatt Johnson to Howard Thurman, 18 June 1918," in *PHWT*, 1:1–4.

[45]Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 79–96.

The dominant figure in progressive Christianity and the Social Gospel in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century was Walter Rauschenbusch, professor of New Testament and then Church History at RTS until his death in 1918. Johnson had studied at RTS under Rauschenbusch, which greatly influenced Thurman's decision to apply there. Paul was, for Rauschenbusch, a "social conservative," who regarded the "Empire as a divine instrument of order and justice." Yet Rauschenbusch both accepted and challenged the view that had developed in Pauline scholarship that saw Paul as indifferent to social causes. "Paul was not as apathetic toward social questions as is usually assumed."[46] Paul showed concern for hunger (1 Cor 11), commended the hospitality of the rich in his communities (Rom 16; 1 Cor 16), and encouraged work in the face of millennial fantasy (2 Thes 3). In good Baptist fashion, Rauschenbusch even found Paul discouraging state interference in the practice of religion (1 Cor 6).[47] Rauschenbusch also wrote a short book on Paul, *Dare We Be Christians?*, which is largely a discussion of 1 Corinthians 13 and the importance of love as a social virtue.[48] Where Paul appears as a social conservative, Rauschenbusch excused him on account of his imminent eschatology. And to pit Jesus against Paul on questions of social change was overly simplistic. In doing so "We have turned the eagle-minded Paul, one of the greatest champions of freedom and progress in all history, into a personified code of law and precedent that bids us ever remain where he stood."[49]

When Thurman arrived in 1923, Rauschenbusch's influence still hovered over the seminary. Most of the faculty had been his students or acolytes. Thurman's Bible courses both at Morehouse and then RTS were taught by students of Rauschenbusch. The only course he took on the Bible while an undergraduate at Morehouse College was taught by Charles Dubois Hubert, of whom Thurman would later write that he "was a solid, pervasive influence on the life of all the college men of my generation."[50] Hubert had taken a B.D. degree from RTS in 1912 – the first African American to have done so. In relation to Paul, Thurman's most important instructor at RTS was Conrad Moehlman (1879–1961), another of Rauschenbusch's students and the principal Bible professor at the time. When Thurman arrived at RTS in 1923, he took the General Introduction to the New Testament course with Moehlman, followed by courses with Moehlman in the Religion of the New Testament, the Life of Jesus, and New Testament Greek.[51] Several pages of type-written notes on "Paul" from his General Introduction to the New Testament course at RTS still survive.[52] Moehlman was a progressive Baptist and the author of a pathbreaking work on Christian antisemitism. He believed that white Christians needed to challenge "the three inherited unethical Christian attitudes [that] involve the American Indian, the Negro, and Judaism." It is perhaps from Moehlman that Thurman was introduced to the idea of the "religion of Jesus" as distinct from institutional Christianity. Moehlman wrote of the latter that it had "transformed the religion of Jesus into a theology," a secondhand faith that was only a religion "concerning Jesus."[53] According to Thurman,

[46]Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), **102**, 110.
[47]Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 124, 131, 133–134, 156.
[48]Walter Rauschenbusch, *Dare We Be Christians?* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1914).
[49]Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 154, 160.
[50]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 46.
[51]Cf. Thurman's transcript from RTS: *PHWT*, 1:350–351.
[52]Thurman, "Notes on Paul," Folder 1, Box 98, HTC.
[53]Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 88.

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Moehlman "introduced me to the vast perspective of the Christian movement through the centuries, and the struggle for survival of the essential religion of Jesus."[54]

In his first book, *The Unknown Bible* (1926), Moehlman, like Rauschenbusch, described Paul as a working missionary rather than the *ex-cathedra* expounder of church doctrine:

> Paul's correspondence is often regarded as a theological syllabus. But the man who transplanted the Christian religion into Greco-Roman civilization was a prophet and a missionary rather than a dogmatist. Engaged in saving Christianity from the short circuit of Jewish ceremonialism, confronted by a vigorous, reactionary propaganda, with an apostolate bounded by world limits, he found little time for dogmatic treatises. Paul did not write epistles in the sense of having a later public in view or the future for an audience. He wrote letters to his own churches to meet some particular need. His correspondence was confidential, natural, personal, a heart-to-heart affair.[55]

Moehlman dedicated *The Unknown Bible* to the German New Testament scholar Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), adding, "some of whose conclusions regarding the New Testament this study seeks to appreciate." Harnack had also appeared throughout the footnotes of Moehlman's dissertation on "savior" language in early Christianity.[56] Among German biblical scholars, Harnack had a rather conservative position on the dating and historicity of Acts, as well as the authorship of the Pauline Epistles (only doubting the authenticity of some portions of the Pastoral Epistles).[57] This kind of historical-critical conservatism comes across in Moehlman both in his comments on the authorship of the Pauline Epistles and in his use of Acts.[58] Thurman likely, then, took his historical-critical lead from Harnack, via Moehlman. He nowhere doubts the historicity of Acts or the Pauline authorship of Ephesians. The canonical Paul was the historical Paul. This was not inconsequential to Thurman's interpretation of the Apostle, such that Paul's social conservatism could be explained by recourse to his citizenship status – a view taken from the spectrum of canonical Pauline materials.

Thurman's main advisor at RTS was George Cross, the professor of systematic theology and former colleague of Rauschenbusch. Cross's first book was a summation and evaluation of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, which was regarded by many as a foundational document of liberal Protestantism.[59] Cross' own conception of Paul was split between admiration and disapproval, praising him for "revolutionizing the popular view of the gift of the Spirit by setting the extranaturalistic reference at the periphery of the Christian faith and practically nullifying these miraculous gifts or, at least, placing the idea of the *charismata* at the periphery of the Christian life. Instead, he internalized and

[54]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 54.

[55]Conrad Moehlman, *The Unknown Bible: A Study of the Problem of Attitude Toward the Bible* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 198.

[56]Conrad Moehlman, "The Combination *Theos Soter* as Explanation of the Primitive Christian Use of Soter as Title and Name of Jesus," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1918).

[57]Adolf von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literature bis Eusebius, Teil II: Die Chronologie*, *Band I: Die Chronologie der Literatur bis Irenäus nebst einleitenden Untersuchungen*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1958 [1896]), 233–239, 246–250, 480–485.

[58]Moehlman, *The Unknown Bible*, 196–200; Conrad Moehlman, *The Story of Christianity in Outline: A Study of Its Conquests and Defeats* (New York: Rochester, 1930), 26–30.

[59]George Cross, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: A Condensed Presentation of His Chief Work, "The Christian Faith"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1911).

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ethicized the gift of the Spirit…. Our personality is enhanced thereby, for the very mind of Christ is in us." But if his Paul was no Pentecostal, Cross still held that when Paul trafficked in the language of the apocalypse he mingled the natural and the supernatural in ways that undermined individual identity, since it reduces "our personal strivings" to a replay "of the universal strife of cosmic forces," and "personality seems to fall into a plane of existence lower than the cosmos, to be of subordinate worth, and to be destined to dissolution." When this happens, "Jesus is once more removed from us. He has passed into the realm where the personal and the non-personal are fused."[60]

While Thurman's views of Paul, as they developed, differed somewhat from Rauschenbusch's – Thurman was never as positive about Paul's social involvements as Rauschenbusch – he would come to share with Rauschenbusch and his instructors at RTS an ambivalent set of positions on the Apostle. And Thurman also shared their commitment to seeing Paul as a historical personage, someone who faced real life problems, someone whose views on God were a product of his own struggles to live out deeply felt religious experience.

II. The Inner Struggle

Once set under Moehlman and Cross, Thurman's reading of Paul seems to have remained consistent throughout his life. Several texts, over time, were particularly important in his conception of the Apostle. In Philippians 3:13–14, Paul describes the life of faith as an athletic competition in which one must struggle to attain the prize at the end—the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. References to this text are found in Thurman's earliest published work (cf. above), as well as his much later and more seasoned preaching.[61] If the race was to be run in the world, the real competition, for Thurman, was an inner one. Romans 7:7–25 depicted the push and pull of the spirit and the flesh against one another and the disappointments and triumphs that played out in the earnest struggle to overcome human limitation and misplaced desire. Paul was laudably pursuing the moral struggle, according to Thurman.[62] And it was to Romans 7:21 – "I desire to do what is right, but wrong is all I can manage" – that Thurman turned in describing the complexities of "[t]he most persistent struggles of [his] life."[63] The inner conflict between the mind and the passions described in Romans 7 was a window into the Christian psychology of Paul.[64] The stress falls here on *Christian*, for Paul, as we saw above, was "the first great creative interpreter of the Christian religion."[65] Thurman did not, however, seem to hold

[60]George Cross, *Creative Christianity: A Study of the Genius of the Christian Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 77–80.

[61]Cf. Thurman, "Perils of Immature Piety"; and "The Moment of Crisis—II."

[62]Thurman, "Paul."

[63]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 249.

[64]Thurman, "Paul." While this was a popular view at one time, it is a less favored position in Pauline scholarship now. Cf. Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* **56**, no. 3 (July 1963): 199–215; Stanley Stowers, "Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (Προσωποποιία)," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 180–202; Emma Wasserman, "The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Revisiting Paul's Anthropology in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* **126**, no. 4 (2007): 793–816.

[65]Thurman, "Good News for the Underprivileged." Recent scholarship has emphasized the Paul was not a Christian, but a Jew. Cf. Matthew Thiessen, *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023); and Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: Harper One, 2009).

to the radical notion that Paul was the inventor of Christianity, as was popular in the influential History of Religions school in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and as had trickled down more popularly to writers like Shaw (cf. above). Rather, Thurman seems closer to Harnack, who argued against many of his contemporaries by claiming that Paul "was the one who understood the Master and continued his work."[66] Paul was for Harnack and Thurman an interpreter of Jesus. The break, for Thurman, was not between Paul and Jesus, but rather between Paul and Pharisaism. While Paul did retain from his Jewish pedigree and identity the psychological benefit of the long tradition and culture of Israel, he made a "definitive break with the religion of his fathers."[67]

Thurman also learned at RTS that Paul was a mystic. Moehlman spoke in class of a Pauline "mysticism," and how, according to Rauschenbusch, the Lutheran Reformation "took from Paul mainly justification and predestination, and not the mystic and inspirational elements."[68] We find in Thurman's notes from Moehlman's class references to the Pauline "new life, a mystical union of the believer with Christ," which "is a life of moral fellowship with Christ. Here Paul is in the realm of mysticism, the immediate contact of spirit with spirit."[69] Moehlman's emphasis on Pauline mysticism derived not only from Rauschenbusch, but also from the work of Albert Schweitzer, who was a subject of great interest in Moehlman's *Story of Christianity in Outline*, a set of published notes for students in his Church History course.[70] If these published notes are representative of Moehlman's thinking in the mid-1920s, then we can say with a high degree of confidence that it was Moehlman who introduced Thurman to Schweitzer's *oeuvre.* In a chapter entitled "Christianity Today," Moehlman discusses "the heroism of missionaries from Paul to Schweitzer," and proposes as a "topic for [student] investigation" a "summary of the achievements of Schweitzer."[71] Paul and Schweitzer serve as chronological bookends for the story of Christian missions in Moehlman's notes. But for Thurman the two men exuded a deeper connection—a mysticism rooted in religious experience and requiring personal ethical transformation. The two would later sometimes appear together in Thurman's recycled sermon series "Man and the Moral Struggle" (cf. above), and two short letters survive in French from Schweitzer to Thurman.[72] Thurman had read Schweitzer's *Paul and His Interpreters*, which had been published in English in 1912.[73] Perhaps Moehlman had first recommended it in class. Schweitzer, already in *Paul and His Interpreters*, spoke of Paul's Jewish "eschatological mysticism," whereby sacramental union with Christ's death and resurrected life was "a precursory phenomenon of the approaching end of the world."[74] Schweitzer's defense of the nature of Pauline eschatological mysticism against the History of Religions school would take full bloom in his later *Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (1930).[75] Thurman characterized Paul's mysticism in terms similar to Schweitzer:

[66]Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (London: Williams and Norgate, 1901), 176.

[67]Thurman, "The Moment of Crisis—II. Cf. "Jesus and the Disinherited—IV," Folder 67, Box 12, HTC.

[68]Moehlman, *The Story of Christianity in Outline*, 218 (cf. also 79).

[69]Thurman, "Notes on Paul."

[70]Moehlman, *The Story of Christianity in Outline*, 99, 311, 313, 317.

[71]Ibid., 311, 317.

[72]"Albert Schweitzer to Howard Thurman" (1944; 1956), Folder 12, Box 29, and Folder 9, Box 35, HTC.

[73]Thurman, "Albert Schweitzer, Spiritual Genius" (1949), in *Moral Struggle and the Prophets*, 11–18.

[74]Albert Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 242, 217.

[75]Albert Schweitzer, *Mystik der Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930).

> He [Christ] answers my [Paul] moral struggle because the Life that I have been taught, spelled with a capital "L," the Life that I have been taught would come to pass at the consummation of the age when the redeemer with a sign would come back on the clouds and redeem Israel and all the people who were responsive to his will and his Law. That Life I am experiencing now, and it is a Life that transcends death. If I can be as full of Christ as Christ was full of God, then Christ will become for me the answer to all of my needs just as God became for Christ the answer to all his needs.[76]

Schweitzer, and in turn Thurman, sought ways to transform Paul's Jewish eschatological mysticism into something usable for Christians 2000 years later. Schweitzer found in Paul's wrestling with the already-and-not-yet of life in Christ "a depth and reality, which lay their spell on us" and an "ardour of the early days of the Christian faith" that "kindles our own," producing "a direct experience of Christ as the Lord of the Kingdom of God" that "speaks from it, exciting us to follow the same path."[77] Thurman clearly admired the kind of spiritual urgency of Schweitzer's Christianity and the radical "reverence for life" that it produced, having "read much of Schweitzer" and having engaged with him in an ongoing correspondence.[78] At times, Thurman's autobiography even veered closely to Schweitzer's. A story from the 1957 Academy award-winning documentary, *Albert Schweitzer*, which was written and narrated by Schweitzer himself, described how as a child he went out on a Sunday morning with a friend to hunt birds with slingshots. As he drew his sling back to shoot at a bird, his "acute pains of conscience" were resolved by the ringing of the church bells, at which point the young Schweitzer put down his sling and shooed the birds away. It was a defining moment in his young life that he took to be a "voice from heaven" and produced in him over the years a reminder of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" whenever he heard church bells ringing.[79] Toward the end of his life, Thurman described strikingly similar moments from his own childhood:

> Continuously I have wrestled with the moral dilemma of reverence for life [echoing Schweitzer's concept]— at first with a quiet unease, and later with an acute sense of urgency. I was never able to resolve the issue in a manner that would bind me. As a boy, frightened as I was by rattlesnakes, I hated to kill one. All during my early years it was my job to kill the chickens we ate on Sunday by breaking their necks with a quick twist of the wrist. Finally, I made such a fuss over having to do it that Grandma stopped insisting. But every Saturday morning during the summer months when I worked as a delivery boy for the market, I had to kill many chickens, pluck the feathers, cut off their heads, and bring them in to the butcher for weighing and dressing. As traumatic as that experience was, it did not compare with what awaited me when I took a job at a slaughterhouse. It was there that I learned how to kill sheep and watch them as they seemed complacently to offer their throats to be cut by the sharp knives. None of these experiences, however, turned me into a vegetarian. Over and over I have echoed the words of the Apostle Paul (Romans 7:21, Moffatt's): "I desire to do what is right but wrong is all that I can manage."[80]

[76]Thurman, "Paul."
[77]Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, 396.
[78]Thurman, "Paul."
[79]*Albert Schweitzer*, produced and directed by Jerome Hill, 1957.
[80]Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 249–250.

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We find here Paul, Schweitzer, and Thurman melding into one – three great strugglers for whom Life in God affected moral transformation in fits and starts.

But it was not until Thurman's study with the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones at Haverford College in the Spring semester of 1929 that he came into a deeper appreciation of mysticism and understood that he himself was a mystic standing within a long tradition.[81] Jones was the leading American student of mysticism in the early decades of the twentieth century and emphasized the direct experience of God as a basic religious experience. Jones addressed Paul's religion in several of his works, including a biography of the Apostle for young adults titled *St. Paul the Hero*.[82] For Jones, Paul stood at the beginning of the tradition of Christian mysticism. As he wrote in 1909:

> I shall not claim that Paul was exclusively a mystic, for that claim would be as partial and one-sided as the claim that has sometimes been made that he was exclusively a Rabbinical, scholastic theologian. But I shall maintain that there was a very marked mystical tendency in his nature, and that there is a strong mystical element in his writings. It is no straining of the facts to say that Paul's "Gospel" was deeply grounded in an immediate, personal experience of the Divine Being, who impinged upon him, invaded him, and finally became the inward principle and spirit of his very self. In a word, we have a man whose religion was *first-hand*.[83]

Jones would return to this theme throughout his long and very prolific career, lamenting in *The Inner Life*, "There is no lack of books and articles which spread before us St. Paul's doctrines and which tell us his theory – his *gnosis* – of the plan of salvation. The trouble with all these external accounts is that they clank like hollow armor. They are like sounding brass and clanging cymbals. We miss the *real thing* that matters – the inner throbbing heart of the living experience."[84] Paul, for Jones, was not a cloistered mystic, but also "a man of action," who received a call "to arm *cap-a-pie* for the positive, moral battles of life."[85] And Paul's views rested "not upon the testimony of books, not upon the transmitted tradition of the primitive Galilean group …. It was a thing primarily of *experience*. … the thing that counted most for him was his own undoubted personal experience of the invasion of God."[86] Paul, for Jones, was a demonstration that life could be unified. "It is always a foolish blunder to take half when it is just as easy to have a whole, but the tendency to dichotomize all realities into halves and to assume that we are shut up in an *either-or* selection, is an ancient tendency and one that very often keeps us from winning the full richness of the life that is possible for us." For Jones, Paul exemplified the truth that "there is no line that splits the outer life and the inner life into two components."[87]

III. Paul, Citizenship, and Privilege

Probably no one, save Nancy Ambrose, was as influential on Thurman's intellectual and spiritual development as Rufus Jones. Thurman would deliver an important sermon series

[81]Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 112–115.
[82]Rufus M. Jones, *St. Paul the Hero* (New York: Macmillan, 1917).
[83]Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 9.
[84]Rufus M. Jones, *The Inner Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 86.
[85]Jones, *The Inner Life*, 84–85.
[86]Rufus M. Jones, *The World Within* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 162.
[87]Jones, *The Inner Life*, 82–84.

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titled "The Inner Life," which had as its centerpiece a sermon "The Flow Between the Inner and the Outer."[88] Thurman identified with Jones's notion of the "affirmation mystic," the mystic who believed the point of mysticism was to encourage social change. But Thurman was also distressed that Jones, despite his Quaker heritage and his intense involvement in organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee, seemed relatively indifferent to the plight of Black Americans.[89] Although he learned much from his white mentors, he always recognized the gap between their lived experiences and his own. Whatever he learned from them, he never forgot the lessons of his grandmother.

At the same time as his study with Jones, in early 1929, Thurman published his first extended discussion of slavery, in which he argued that "the slave was not an underling, for that implies belonging to the same order, but lower in the scale. The slave was essentially a *body*." The belief that Black people were essentially subhuman or nonhuman had proven to be "extraordinarily long-lived" and that "far from questioning the ethics of the position, a master–slave ethic evolved that is still to be reckoned with. The sanction for this ethic is not far to seek."[90] Thurman then provided a long excerpt from George Dodd Armstrong's 1857 book, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, a defense of slavery by a Presbyterian minister from Virginia.[91] His selection opens with Armstrong claiming that "slave-holding does not appear in any catalogue of sins or disciplinable offenses given us in the New Testament," citing Philemon and the passages in Ephesians and Colossians used to defend slavery, among other sources. Thurman concludes that, to the present day, much of mainstream American Protestantism taught an "anti-Christian ethic."[92]

As we have seen, by 1935 Thurman viewed Paul as representative of Christianity's failure to address slavery, racism, economic inequality, and other social ills. The question of Paul's attitudes toward slavery had been addressed by most of the leading Pauline scholars since the early-19th century. Most tried to find excuses for Paul's attitudes. The main defenses of Paul included (1) that abolitionism was simply not that important a political issue in the Roman Empire in the first century CE, and Paul reflected attitudes current at the time, (2) that as the leader of a small, persecuted sect, Paul was afraid that open attacks on slavery would bring unwanted attention from Roman authorities, (3) that Roman slavery was different, and more benign, than its Atlantic-world counterpart, and (4) that the texts by Paul that appear to defend slavery either have been misinterpreted (Philemon), or are not authentically Pauline (Ephesians and Colossians).[93] Schweitzer championed another explanation of Paul's attitudes to slavery and social issues more generally, arguing that he was so focused on the imminent return of Christ that he became indifferent to the existing social realities. For Thurman, attempts to explain away Paul's views on slavery were beside the point, because even if somehow these explanations could exculpate Paul, there was no way to absolve American Christianity, or the uses to which Paul had been put, of the charge of aiding and abetting slavery and racism. Thurman's main interest in the matter of Paul on slavery was always less about Paul himself than contemporary white American attitudes to African Americans and racial minorities.

[88]Thurman, "The Inner Life: Introduction," 46–55.

[89]Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change: Rufus Jones" (1978), in *The Way of the Mystics*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), 141–160. Thurman could only study with Jones as a "special student" since at the time Haverford did not admit African Americans.

[90]Thurman, "'Relaxation' and Race Conflict," in *PHWT*, 1:148.

[91]George Dodd Amstrong, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1857).

[92]Thurman, "'Relaxation' and Race Conflict," in *PHWT*, 1:149.

[93]John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).

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Whichever epistles were or were not authentically Pauline, they all were part of the New Testament and shaped Christian attitudes to slavery and social change for centuries. The argument of Rauschenbusch, Schweitzer, and others that Paul's social conservatism could be explained by his expectations of an imminent Parousia might explain Paul's views, but had little utility for explaining why racism persisted in mainline mid-twentieth century Protestant Christianity, where overly fervid speculation about the Second Coming was not a preoccupation. At the same time, with Schweitzer, Cross, and others, Thurman felt that to focus on Paul's belief in the imminence of Christ's return reduced the latter's utility as a Christian thinker for those now not worried about the apocalypse. The problem with Paul, and the problem with too many white American Christians, was not that they expected the sudden transformation of the world, but that they did not believe that the world could, would, or should be transformed at all, and they accepted current social divisions as permanent, perhaps even divinely ordained.

For Thurman, American social attitudes were epitomized in their understanding of citizenship. Americans were citizens who, like Paul, saw their citizenship as a privilege, something unique to them, something that separated them from non-citizens rather than a right to be universally shared. He also knew and criticized Blacks who had become a bit too comfortable with the meager allotment of power whites allowed them.[94] Many contemporary scholars doubt that Paul was a Roman citizen, or that, if a citizen, it would have been leveraged as described in Acts.[95] But even if Thurman had been familiar with this scholarship, he probably would not have been impressed. He knew all too well what it meant to be a citizen, and what it meant to have your citizenship be rendered worthless. He knew what happened when Black Americans were confronted by the American equivalent of a hostile centurion. It was Paul's unearned and unexamined pride in being a citizen that Thurman detested.[96]

Thurman and the African Americans of his generation could never take their status as citizens for granted, or think it uncontested. Since the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, all persons of African descent had American citizenship as a birthright. This right had been extraordinarily hard won, something to cherish and protect. But after Reconstruction, African Americans saw their citizenship rights diminished, neither honored nor respected by most whites. It was the same situation that applied to Palestinian Jews, who were "a captive group, but not enslaved, neither free nor not free."[97] In 1940 Thurman wrote that "the Negro … is not a citizen, and his position is a perpetual threat and constant disgrace to democracy." Black citizenship was ephemeral, a sometime thing. It was only during World War I, after the long post-Reconstruction nadir, that "the Negro became aware to some degree of his citizenship," but this was

[94]Thurman, "Commencement Address Delivered at the Tennessee A & I College," in *PHWT*, vol. 2, *Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?, April 1936–August 1943* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 156–164.

[95]Cf. Wolfgang Stegemann, "War der Apostel Paulus ein römischer Bürger?," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* **78**, no. 3–4 (1987): 200–229; and John C. Lentz, Jr., *Luke's Portrait of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 43–51. Ernest Renan and Franz Overbeck were early doubters. Cf. Emil Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi, Dritter Teil: Das Judentum in der Zerstreuung und die jüdische Literatur* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1909), 128 n. **25**.

[96]Several books published in the late-nineteenth century viewed Paul's citizenship as lifting him above his fellow Jews. Cf. William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (New York: G. Putnam, 1896), 30; and Lyman Abbott, *Life and Letters of Paul the Apostle* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1898), 50.

[97]Thurman, "Good News for The Underprivileged," in *PHWT*, 1:264.

snatched away after the war.[98] Citizenship that cannot be depended upon was not really citizenship. "The screaming of the disinherited is the hope of democracy," in large part because "Negroes are increasingly unwilling to accept the status of third or fourth class citizenship."[99] "There are no degrees in citizenship," he wrote in 1965. "A person cannot be almost a citizen but not quite. He is a citizen or he is not a citizen."[100] That said, Thurman dealt with the "not quiteness" of his citizenship his entire life. As Thurman saw it, like Paul, Black Americans lived in a society in which there was a vertiginous divide between persons with and without citizenship rights.

Some African Americans saw Paul as an ardent defender of citizenship rights. In 1905, Francis J. Grimké, a well-known Washington, D.C. minister, delivered a paper before the American Negro Academy titled "The Negro and His Citizenship," which opened by quoting Acts 22:25–29. "In this passage," Grimké wrote, "attention is directed to four things: To the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen; to the fact that he was about to be treated in a way that was forbidden by his citizenship; to the fact that he stood up for his rights as a Roman citizen; and to the fact that those who were about to infringe on his citizenship were restrained, were overawed." For Grimké, "the apostle stood up manfully for his rights," and the former wished that all African Americans would do the same. "We are *citizens* of this great Republic: and citizenship is a sacred thing: I hope we realize it. It is a thing to be prized; to be highly esteemed. It has come to us after 250 years of slavery, of unrequited toil." To do and act otherwise was "to be civilly and politically dead."[101]

Thurman certainly agreed with Grimké that citizenship – Black citizenship – was sacred, and it needed to be defended. But if, for Grimké, Paul's assertion of his citizenship was an act of solidarity with his fellow Jews, then, for Thurman, Paul's citizenship claims meant the opposite – the complacent exercise of a privilege that the vast majority of Jews did not possess. For Thurman, the most basic and fundamental meaning of citizenship was to have confidence that the legal system would fairly protect your person. Those without citizenship continually face the question of "how not to be killed" and the fear of "dying under circumstances that degrade and debase; dying like a dog in an alley, or a rat in a gutter." To be without citizenship, to know that at any time you could be the object of unprovoked violence, was, on a personal level, "degrading" and "disintegrating," to "have it burned into you that you do not count."[102] Those who had never experienced this could not know what it felt like, nor its psychic toll. And this was why, for Thurman, Christianity had nothing to say for the disinherited—those, as he said, with their backs against the wall.[103] At the same time, Thurman knew why citizenship was so attractive to Paul and others. It was at once a "get out of jail free" card and a potential passport to a wider world. For Thurman, Paul, as a citizen, was cosmopolitan, urban, and sophisticated. Jesus, on the other hand, was rural, local, and, while certainly not simplistic, basically simple – he wanted everyone to understand his message. Paul could write dense theology. Jesus told stories and parables. For Thurman, Jesus was a country boy who never lived in a big city,

[98]Thurman, "A 'Native Son' Speaks," in *PHWT*, 2:250.

[99]Thurman, "Co-Pastor of Interracial Church Views Racial Tension as Evidence of Progress," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 23 June, 1945.

[100]Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Investigation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 85.

[101]Francis J. Grimké, "The Negro and his Citizenship," in *The Negro and the Elective Franchise*, American Negro Academy Occasional Papers 11 (Washington, D.C.: American Negro Academy, 1905), 72–85.

[102]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 69. Cf. "The Will to Segregation" (1943), in *PHWT*, 2:341.

[103]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7.

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while Paul was a city boy who spent much of his life traversing the biggest cities in the eastern Roman Empire, and this was reflected in their understandings of God. "Jesus was simple," Thurman said in a sermon in 1955. "He was direct. The distance from the center of his being to the circumference was very short." But with Paul, the city-bred intellectual, "the distance from the center to the circumference was very involved."[104]

Whom did Thurman prefer as a religious thinker, the rural itinerant or the cosmopolitan traveler? He was, he said in 1955, "strangely ambivalent." At times we seek "simple Jesus with no complicated dogma, no metaphysical salvation, no involved [theories] of redemption, regeneration, orientation," who spoke of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and said "O man, how little you trust God." But "at other times, No!"[105] The simplicity seems artificial, too oblivious of life's stresses, and inadequate for our needs. We seek complexity, a transcendent claim that can resolve smaller dilemmas. We want "the thinker, the theologian Paul who seeks to provide a structure that will be a weapon in the hands of the defenseless movement so that it might conquer the world." The distinct approaches of Jesus and Paul, Thurman wrote, "sometimes [are] mingling with each other and become one stream; sometimes separating. Sometimes we want one or the other, sometimes we need them to be aligned."[106]

Paul, for Thurman, was the epitome of a divided soul. In 1950 Thurman said that the division between the spirit and the flesh was for Paul the "striking dualism that haunts him all the time."[107] But for Thurman, Paul was haunted by other dualisms as well – the religious divide between the law of Israel and the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, between the Jesus followers in Jerusalem and his mission to the gentiles, and between being a Jew and being a Roman. Paul was an intellectual from an oppressed minority who was not content to remain within his minority world, and sought exposure and inclusion in the wider world, without relinquishing his identity as a member of a disinherited group. Jews thought he was too Roman, Romans thought he was too Jewish. He had to operate within a society whose majority was generally either hostile, indifferent, uncomprehending, or ignorant of his situation. Thurman knew and felt acutely the tension of being caught between two worlds and liked to quote Carl Sandberg's description of a flying fish: "Child of water, child of *air*, wing thing, fin thing; I have lived in many half worlds myself, so I know you."[108] Paul was that kind of fish out of water, and that could explain, though not justify, his attitudes toward slavery.

What Thurman found most laudable about Paul was that, though he was by nature a dichotomizer, he was never comfortable with unresolved dualities and struggled to transcend them. One of Thurman's core beliefs was that no contradictions were final: "Life is against all dualisms," he said in 1980, and he believed "that ultimately all dualisms exhaust themselves, and that therefore when in my journey I make these separations, I'm

[104]Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle: Paul."

[105]Ibid.

[106]Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle: Paul." In 1975, Thurman told an interviewer about his experience of leaving Daytona to attend high school in the much larger city of Jacksonville. "Jacksonville was a metropolitan city, and there's a kind of sophistication that city people have, the dramatic instance in our religious history is the psychological difference between Jesus and Paul. Jesus was a country person. Paul was a city man, and that turns up in all sorts of subtle ways that are disturbing sometimes, but at any rate, I was with the city boys but I was a country boy in that sense." Cf. Bolling, "Conversations With Howard Thurman," 19.

[107]Thurman, "The Fruits of the Spirit I: Love" (1950), Folder 68, Box 11, HTC.

[108]"India Report" (1938), in *PHWT*, 2:129.

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dealing with the unrealities of my reality."[109] But the only way to overcome dualisms for Thurman was to grant them their power; to confront them, wrestle them to earth, and resolve them. In 1951, at Fellowship Church in San Francisco, Thurman gave a sermon series on loyalty. The hero of the first sermon, "The Meaning of Loyalty," was Paul, and Thurman concluded that "Paul felt he could be loyal to Paul by being loyal to that which was capable of putting the parts of Paul together."[110] "The moment of crisis," Thurman said in a 1958 sermon on Paul, "is the experience through which an individual passes when he is caught by two forces moving in different directions," pulled in one direction by the familiar and the accustomed, "to hold the line, to dig in," and in the other "to go forward, to take a step that has never been taken before, to move into an unexplored area, to change." On the road to Damascus, Paul came to a "point of tension that could not maintain itself without yielding one way or another," and he decided that Jesus was not dead, and this made his expiation on the cross and his resurrection the center of his faith.[111] But though he appreciated and to some extent identified with Paul's struggle, he did not necessarily approve of Paul's resolutions of his crises. If Paul placed the cross at the center of his faith, Thurman never liked the cross as a symbol of his own. The cross, he said in a sermon on Paul, reminded him of growing up in Daytona, when the cross meant for him "these big burning wooden things in front of school houses, [or] down at the end of our street, at the time of tension, when the Klan moved."[112] The problem with making the resurrection the central fact of Christianity is that it imbued it with a "significance that no word of Jesus has," thereby elevating the death of Jesus over the words of Jesus. "Suppose the Sermon on the Mount had the emotional impact and push and vitality and creative thrust we find in the cross, the whole story of man's life in western culture would be a very different story."[113] And as Thurman often suggested, if all Christians had been taught that ending all forms of racial prejudice was central "to the work of salvation," how different the history of the United States might have been.[114] Thurman appreciated the universalism of Paul's conception of a Christ in which there was no "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female," but disliked its limitations to followers of Jesus. For Paul, Thurman said, "if you are not part of the body of Christ then you are only potentially a part of the brotherhood of man."[115]

Despite his disagreement with key aspects of Paul's theology, and with what he saw as his conservative social thought, Thurman worked to arrive at a more complex view of Paul: "I had to work my way through many crucial experiences of turmoil and trauma, to arrive at a place that I could contemplate the meaning and significance of this figure [Paul] without having it sordid and unclean and full of those things that make for brutality and woe."[116] And so Thurman struggled with his own mixed feelings about Paul, admiring the

[109]Thurman, "Interview on Religion and Aging" (1980), in *PHWT*, vol. 5, *The Wider Ministry, January 1963–April 1981* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 307.

[110]Thurman, "The Meaning of Loyalty I," in *Democracy and the Soul of America*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022), 16.

[111]Thurman, "The Moment of Crisis—II."

[112]Thurman, "The Moment of Crisis—II." Cf. Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 17.

[113]Thurman, "The Moment of Crisis—II."

[114]Thurman, "The Christian Minister and the Desegregation Decision" (1957), in *PHWT*, vol. 4, *The Soundless Passion of a Single Mind, June 1949–December 1962* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 170–177.

[115]Thurman, "Jesus and the Disinherited—IV."

[116]Thurman, "The Moment of Crisis—II."

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Paul, who, in his personal struggles to understand his faith, saw ethical universalism as the guiding principle of his religion, and rejecting the Paul, who, at the same time, placed the Christological above the ethical.

To make clear how personal the question of Paul's citizenship was to Thurman, he offered the following analogy to Paul's situation. "Suppose," wrote the very dark-skinned Thurman, as the civil rights struggle was heating up in 1959:

> I went down to Mississippi, just as I am, and because of some extenuating circumstance, all the laws of Mississippi that have to do with segregation would not apply to me, I would have "open sesame" to the city of Vicksburg. Now do you see what it would mean? This would tempt me to do what, this would tempt me to say to my friend in Vicksburg, who was having a lot of trouble, under great pressure, not to listen to me [when I said] "they aren't really so bad if you could see the other side of the street as I do. Now take it easy."[117]

There are many issues, like slavery and white supremacy, to which there are not two sides that morally serious people need to consider. For Thurman, Paul, for all his revolutionary brilliance as a thinker who challenged so many of the religious and social beliefs he had inherited, never seriously interrogated his own social status, and that deformed his outlook on questions such as slavery and civil obedience.

At other times, Thurman saw Paul as an inspiration to his political commitments. In his famous conversation with Mahatma Gandhi in early 1936, Thurman asked about the meaning of the term "nonviolence." Gandhi told Thurman that he coined the term for western ears as a translation of the Sanskrit word "ahimsa," but he never really liked the word nonviolence, "because it was a negative word, its meaning only conveying what it is not, rather than what it is." So, asked Thurman, what is ahimsa? Gandhi told him it meant "love in the Pauline sense, yet something more than the love defined by St. Paul, although I know St. Paul's beautiful definition is good enough for all practical purposes," no doubt referring to 1 Corinthians 13.[118] This sort of love was very much on Thurman's mind when, in the 1940s and 1950s, he thought of ways to implement radical nonviolence and spoke frequently of the need for "apostles of sensitiveness," small groups of individuals who would put into practice its principles and tactics, believers in faith, hope, and above all, love—love directed both to their supporters and their detractors. In discussing the apostles of sensitiveness in 1946, he stated that his "prayer to God is that your love may grow more and more rich in knowledge and in all manner of insight, that you may have a sense of what is vital—Thus speaks the Apostle Paul to the church at Phillipi [Phil 1:9–10]. A sense of what is vital – a basic and underlying aliveness to life and its vast potentialities at every level of experience—this is to be an Apostle of Sensitiveness."[119]

In the end, Thurman both admired and was disappointed with Paul. A person of such insight into himself and the nature of the divine should have known better. Even if his social conservatism could be explained by pride in his citizenship status, this was still not

[117]Thurman, "Jesus and the Disinherited—IV."

[118]Mahadev Desai, "With Our Negro Guests," in *PHWT*, 1:335. Gandhi wanted to extend Paul's injunction because "ahimsa includes the whole creation, and not only human[s]."

[119]Thurman, "Apostles of Sensitiveness," in *PHWT*, vol. 3, *The Bold Adventure, September 1943–May 1949* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 171. Cf. also, Thurman, *Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (Mills College, CA: Eucalyptus, 1947); and *Apostles of Sensitiveness* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1956).

an excuse. It was one of the main arguments of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that though we are shaped by our class, race, and social status, we are not in the end defined or limited by them. They can be transcended, and that was the very purpose of radical nonviolence, a common ground whereby the oppressed and their oppressors can slough off their toxic inheritances.[120] This is what Jesus accomplished, but Paul could not. To live like Jesus, however, was, for Thurman, an impossibly high aspiration. The rest of us, like Paul, can never fully transcend our contradictions. But, like Paul, we can try to do so.

For Thurman, Paul, both for better and for worse, was a product of his uncertain and anomalous status, accounting for both his achievements and his failures. In a 1955 sermon on Paul, he quoted the passage from Ephesians 6:5, adding "no slave would ever say that. No!" He continued with several more quotes of Paul at his seeming worst, at his most abject endorsements of Roman authority, such as "all government is ordained of God" (Rom 13:1), commenting that such "strong words" merely "dramatize his ambivalence." However, "there is much more in the [Pauline] epistles than those words." For "at times, when caught on an updraft of tremendously moving spiritual insight and conviction with reference to his Lord, Paul breaks out in idyllic music in the 13th chapter, 1st Corinthians—It is a death defying leap away from the involvement of the tensions of his conflict as a free Jew in the midst of Jews who are not free."[121]

Paul was for Thurman the apostle of struggle, who like himself, was a religious intellectual from a minority group, who intensely felt and lived out the conflict between his ethnic and religious particularity and his human universality.[122] He concluded the sermon in 1955 by saying that "when a man transports to his life's struggle, the kind of integrity, the kind of energy which Paul brought, he will find waiting for him in the darkness the light that is God." In Thurman's view, the religious quest is basically a search for self-knowledge. For Paul, this quest was especially arduous and protracted. "Life has to make sense, if the individual is to live life with dignity and meaning." This meant "brood[ing] over the stubborn, recalcitrant, unyielding aspects of my experiencing until, at last, they crack open and become a part of my experience. That is my job; if I am to live with dignity. It was Paul's job, as it is your job."[123] Living with dignity, assuredly, was Nancy Ambrose's job, her lifelong struggle and vocation. It was the message that that enslaved preacher had given her when he told her that she was a child of God, and this was the greatest life lesson she imparted to young Howard. And we suspect that if she had heard this sermon on Paul preached by her grandson, she would have heartily given her assent.

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[120]Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 55–56.
[121]Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle: Paul."
[122]Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*," 390–394.
[123]Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle: Paul."

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