

One Lord, One Faith, Two Pauls

The Paul of Acts and the Paul of his own letters are two significantly different figures. In Acts, Luke presents Paul within a wholly unified church that quickly resolves all doctrinal issues.

Acts of the Apostles vs. Paul's Letters		
Topic	Acts Says	Paul's Letters Say
Paul's persecution of the church	Paul went "house-to-house" in Jerusalem, physically persecuting Christians and dragging them off to prison (Acts 8:1-3). Even after his conversion, the disciples in Jerusalem were still afraid of him (Acts 9:26).	Paul confessed that he persecuted Christians before his conversion, but didn't provide any details about his location or methods (although in Gal 1:13 he admitted he was violent). Strikingly, he said that upon his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem he was "still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea" (compare Gal 1:18-24 with Acts 9:26)
Paul's conversion narrative	Acts gives three separate narratives about Paul's encounter with the heavenly Jesus while traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, each with conflicting details (Acts 9, 22, and 26)	Paul himself merely said that God "revealed his son to me", without providing any narrative or details; he also implied he lived in Damascus before and after his conversion. (Gal 1:17)
Source of Paul's gospel	After the encounter, Paul received instruction from Ananias in Damascus and immediately began preaching there (Acts 9:10-22).	It was of utmost importance to Paul to establish his complete independence from the apostles in Jerusalem, so he insisted that he received his gospel by direct revelation from the heavenly Christ – not from any human (Gal 1:11–12). Accordingly, he was adamant that he immediately went to Arabia instead of Jerusalem : "I did not confer with any human, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia , and afterward I returned to Damascus." (Gal 1:16-17)
Paul's first interaction with the Jerusalem apostles	Upon Paul's return to Jerusalem, Barnabas introduced him to all of the apostles and told them about his conversion. Then they embraced him and he preached alongside them in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-28).	Paul acknowledged that he did in fact meet with Peter and James (only those two) in Jerusalem, but it was three years after his conversion and subsequent sojourn in Arabia. Also, he said he stayed there only fifteen days , after which he went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:18-21).
Paul's apostolic status	Acts uses the term "apostle" for Paul only twice (Acts 14:4 and 14:14). Notably, however, Paul did not meet the apostolic qualifications stated in Acts 1 . "The twelve" were considered the primary apostles, and Paul's authority flowed only from Jerusalem's endorsement of him.	Throughout his ministry, Paul claimed that he was a fully legitimate apostle – "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:1). He felt compelled to continue defending his apostleship extensively (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 10–13) and repeatedly claimed equality with (and independence from) those in Jerusalem. A common phrase of his in this context: "I am not lying!"
Paul's apostolic rivals	They're briefly mentioned in Acts 15:1 and were the impetus for the Jerusalem Council; they were traveling apostles who visited Paul's churches after he had moved on, and taught that circumcision was a requirement for Gentile believers.	Paul's letters agree with Acts about the existence of these rivals; he sarcastically called them "super-apostles" and became furious when he found out what they were doing. Apparently they carried letters of recommendation from Jerusalem, which further incensed him.
The Jerusalem Council decree	After some public debate about whether Gentiles were required to follow the Law, the council (presided over by James) issued a formal decree: Gentiles were not required to follow the entire Law, but must still "abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:28-29). Paul and his traveling companions delivered the decree to his churches for their edification (Acts 16:4)	Paul described the same meeting in Gal 2:1–10, but he never mentioned the decree or its food restrictions ; in fact, in his later letters (1 Cor 8 & 10, and Rom 14) he said food sacrificed to idols is a matter of personal conscience .
The Antioch Incident	It's never mentioned in Acts	Some time soon before or after (scholars debate which) the Jerusalem Council, Paul publicly confronted Peter "to his face" in front of the church in Antioch and said he was "self-condemned" and a "hypocrite" for withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentile believers there (Gal 2:11-14).
Paul's relationship with Barnabas	Early in Paul's ministry, Barnabas was his loyal partner and advocate; he introduced Paul to James and the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27); the two traveled together harmoniously throughout chapters 13 and 14 in Acts. They ultimately separated over a disagreement about John Mark's suitability to rejoin them on their upcoming journey (Acts 15:36-41).	Paul wrote that "even Barnabas was led astray" by Peter's "hypocrisy" during the incident at Antioch, thereby admitting that Barnabas sided with Peter against Paul (Gal 2:13). So <i>this</i> was the real reason Paul and Barnabas separated.
Paul's post-conversion Torah observance	Paul took a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18), performed prayers and purification rites in the temple (Acts 21:26), and circumcised a Gentile (Acts 16:3). Many thousands of believers were still "zealous for the Law" decades after the resurrection (Acts 21:17–20)	Paul said the Law is a curse and Christ redeemed us from it (Gal 3:13); the Law enslaves its followers (Gal 4:1–11); Paul counted his own Jewish credentials as "rubbish" (Phil 3:8); living under the Law is incompatible with life in Christ (Gal 2:19)
Paul's circumcision of Timothy	Paul circumcised Timothy (a Gentile) "because of the Jews" in Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:3)	The letters say nothing about this. In fact, Paul said he "did not yield in submission even for a moment" on the issue of circumcision (Gal 2:5). He also called circumcision mutilation (Phil 3:2) and insisted it was meaningless (Gal 5:6).
Paul's message on repentance and forgiveness	Paul's sermons in Acts mention repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Acts 13:36-39, 17:30, 20:21, 26:12-20), which was one of the core teachings of Jerusalem.	Neither repentance nor forgiveness are the focus of Paul's own version of the gospel , as he presented it most fully in both Romans and Galatians. Those letters focus solely on faith in Christ's atoning death and resurrection, not repentance or forgiveness.
Paul's physical presence	Acts portrays Paul as physically imposing and resilient (Acts 8:3, 9:26, 14:19-20, 27:14-44); he was also an eloquent and persuasive public speaker and debater (Acts 13:16-47, 17:22-34, 19:8-10, 21:37-22:29)	In his letters Paul agrees with his apostolic rivals' criticism of him as being feeble and inarticulate (1 Cor 2:1-5, 2 Cor 10:9-10, 2 Cor 11:5-6).
The state of Paul's churches	Acts presents Paul's churches as unified, faithful, and rapidly growing (Acts 14:21-28, 16:5)	The letters show him reacting, often in an agitated state, to significant confusion, discord, and factionalism within many of his churches (1 Thess, Galatians, 1 & 2 Cor).

Luke's Agenda – Why the Differences Exist
What Luke Does:
- Portrays Paul as a larger-than-life figure – he's both physically intimidating and an expert orator who converts countless Jews and Gentiles - Harmonizes his doctrine with Jerusalem – his speeches and sermons in Acts focus on repentance and forgiveness; his roots are in Jerusalem and he has the approval of everyone there - Makes him Torah-observant – he participates in vows and purification rites, circumcises a Gentile, and regularly attends synagogues across the Mediterranean - Creates literary symmetry between Peter (Acts 1–12) and Paul (Acts 13–28) – parallel miracles, speeches/sermons, and imprisonments
What Luke Omits:
- Paul's derisive attitude toward Peter, James, and the other leaders in Jerusalem - The highly defensive nature of his claims about his apostolic origin, status, and independence from Jerusalem - His anti-Torah dogma, which is explicitly presented in both Galatians and Romans - His contempt for the rival "super-apostles" who traveled to his churches to refute his teachings against circumcision and the Law - His public rebuke of Peter in front of the Antioch church

Bottom Line
The Paul of Acts is largely Luke's creation. The real Paul – defensive and combative, anti-Torah, and staunchly independent of Jerusalem – is hiding in plain sight in his own letters.