

## Discovering the Multicultural Paul *How My Specific Cultural Experience Affects My Reading of Paul* | INTRODUCTION BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**E**ach of us inherits a particular form of life, with a particular language, a particular set of conventions, and a particular way of thinking. It turns out, therefore, that each of us looks out on the world through a distinctive pair of lenses. We each see it our own distinctive way, and when we report on what we see, we speak in our own distinctive voice.

To demonstrate how this works, we have asked five people to reflect on how their own experience—their own identity—has affected the way they read Paul. They will all reflect, too, on how they regard this sure impingement of self or of the self's story, on the interpretive process. How might the existence of various perspectives, or prejudices, enrich the Church's conversation about its sacred texts? And what risks go along with it? How, for example, can I keep from being so settled in my own prejudgments that I do not hear the text's summons—to me—to change?

These presentations formed the basis for a lively discussion at the November 2006 meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Study. They are intended to help you think creatively about how you read Paul, and prompt lively conversations with your friends.

**Can we go beyond the particulars of Scripture in order to be biblical?**

## Imitatio Pauli

BY JULIUS NAM

### Paradox

Paul, like Jesus, is an enigma. He is both a bull-headed fundamentalist and a sophisticated liberal. And I love him for it. He confounds attempts at classification because he tries to be all things to all people. He understands the yin and the yang and the value of the paradoxical nature of God and the cosmos. In Paul, I am given permission to leave questions hanging, live with the irreconcilable, not serve the idol of consistency and clarity...and still speak boldly about the things I am not fully certain or confident about.

### Mars Hill

I receive permission to engage in my culture in a positive and respectful manner. Culture war is not one that Paul is really interested in fighting. Rather, culture is a resource. So, following the lead of Paul, I am led to look for evidence and expressions of God in my heritage. Paul forces me to look for the gospel, for Christ, in the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths of Buddha, and the Five Virtues of Confucius. He also challenges me to venture into the dazzling disarray of beliefs, values, and styles represented in MySpace, YouTube, and Google, as well as in ministries as diverse as Amazing Facts, Promise Keepers, Sojourners, and SDA Kinship

For sure, in Paul, there is a clear vision of Christ and there is unimpeded boldness in expressing that vision. At the same time, there is recognition (1) that Christ is and has been active in all cultures and religions throughout history, (2) that he and his vision are only a part of a whole, fulfilling a partial function, and (3) that we all know and prophesy in part, so we must treat one another with faith, hope, and love. He is clearly bold and convicted, but he is also deeply self-aware and humble.

### Creativity

I receive further permission from Paul to use the lessons learned from culture in shaping my theology and providing a contemporary version of the truth. In Paul, I find a wonderfully creative revisioning of the Kingdom of God as taught by Christ, using the resources from his Jewish

and Hellenistic heritage and audience. He is not afraid to redefine, reimagine, and reappropriate Scripture as he knew it, as well as the life and teachings of Jesus.

My sense is that one reason God called Paul for this task is that the disciples who had been with Jesus would forever be captured in the beautiful yet stifling shadow of their time with him. Essentially, Paul was called to take a step beyond Jesus in a way that did not negate Jesus. I'm now urged to go further than Paul in a way that is true to Paul and Jesus. All that was good for Paul and Silas cannot be good enough for me.

So, I ask: Is it possible that we can disagree with the specific conclusions made by Paul in the best of Pauline spirit? Can we go beyond the particulars of Scripture in order to be biblical? Can we reimagine the apocalyptic, following the inspired examples of Daniel, John, and Ellen White?

### Praxis

Which is closer to Paul's heart—the theological articulations or the practical exhortations? I don't know. But what is closer to my heart are the practical, ethical teachings. Some have argued (in fact, a colleague of mine at Loma Linda has "emblazened" in my mind) that the enigmatic yet sublimely beautiful theological discourse in Romans 1–11 was really an elaborate introduction to the practical section that follows in chapters 12–16. In fact, some have even somewhat playfully intimated that the fundraising intent that Paul betrays in chapter 15 was the real purpose of the book!

I'm sure the book had more than one purpose, but it does seem that Romans 12–16 is really the climax of the letter. Or...perhaps this kind of reading is really a function of my pristine Asian mind corrupted by Western dualism. But really, I don't look to Paul as that theological authority that explains the law definitively or that normative standard for orthodoxy on salvation. My reading of Paul leads me to surmise that he would be OK with using a different set of theological reasons to get to the life in the Spirit that is the ultimate desire and passion of his writings.

Along with ancient Asian sages for whom metaphysics takes a backseat to ethics (well, it's this way: ethics is metaphysics), I find that Paul's praxis makes the heart, essence, and totality of his theology.

## Method

Paul's method, for me, is his genius and mark of inspiration—one that I desire to imitate. How he lived the paradoxical nature of life and truth; how he related with Scripture and culture; how he revised Christ and the

gospel; and how, in the midst of it all, he captured the essence of the gospel as a living, breathing, pulsating life of love.

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## Cultural Identity and Pauline Interpretation

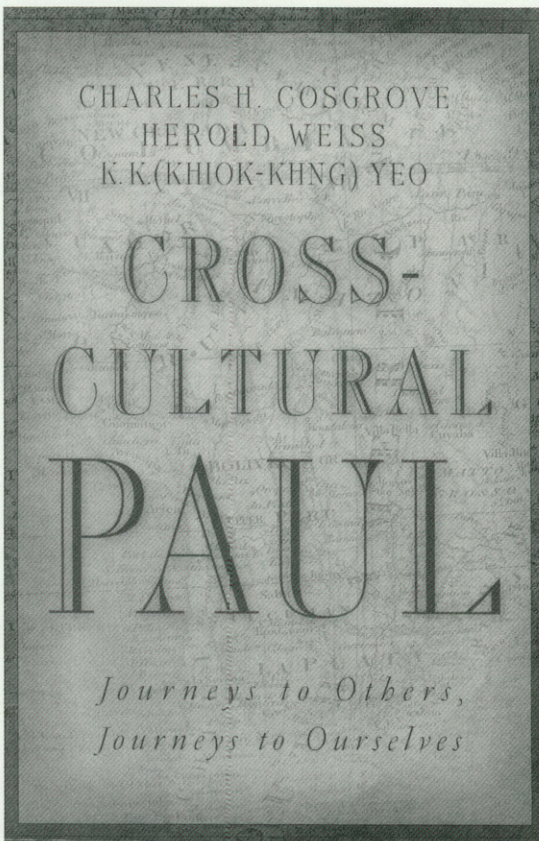
BY HEROLD WEISS

**A**s a *rioplatense* of German ancestry, a Latino who received his higher education and pursued a career in the educational system of the United States, I am a double hybrid whose identity is somewhat ambiguous. The ambiguity of my hybridity has increased because I am a Seventh-day Adventist who grew up in a predominantly Catholic culture and felt comfortable and fulfilled his academic dreams in a Catholic institution.

Reading Paul, "I ask him questions from within different locations. As a student of Paul, I ask, Who was Paul writing to? What were his recipients concerned with? Why was he writing to them? How would his readers have understood what he wrote?"

As a *rioplatense*, I ask, "Which Pauline themes are also central to my Latin culture? What would Paul say to my compatriots and me about our submission to Fate, our constant preoccupation to outwit each other and the laws of the land, our love-hate relationship with death, and our authoritarian and hierarchical social structures?" As a Seventh-day Adventist, I ask, "What does Paul mean by salvation? How does he view himself in God's world? What does he consider to be the purpose of life on earth? What is his moral compass?"

Of course, I never ask all these questions at the same time. At different times, I am particularly concerned with one of these sets of questions. In reference to the second and third sets, however, I can only address them after I have more or less answered the first. Then, I have to ask two crucial questions: "In what way does what Paul says challenge my cultural and religious views?"



**Does Paul  
reveal  
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Does Paul reveal unnecessary burdens in my cultural and religious baggage?" I must also ask, "In what way does what Paul say reflect a blind spot in his own cultural and religious background?"

Placing on the table the cultural locations of both the author and the readers allows us to recognize that there is more than one legitimate interpretation. This does not mean, however, that all interpretations have equal merit. It does mean that one must come up with criteria for their evaluation. I find helpful a set proposed by David Rhoads: literary cogency, historical plausibility, and ethical impact on various contemporary contexts.

In reference to the last point, In what ways may they promote justice, respect, and liberation, and in what ways may they lead to injustice, exploitation, and oppression? I think we would agree that justice, respect, and liberation are biblical standards

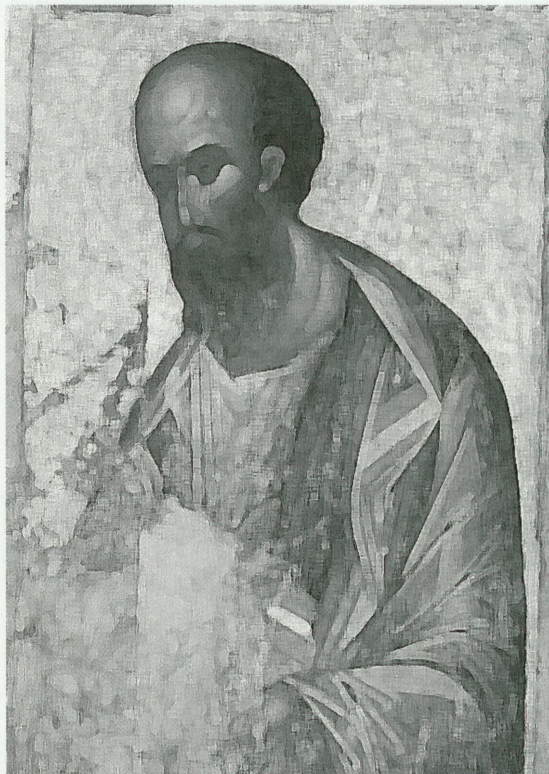
that transcend the cultural limitations of particular biblical authors and readers of the Bible.

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## Reading Paul as a White, Male, American Adventist

BY JOHN BRUNT

**When I went to academy, we put away childish things, and stories were replaced by “key texts.”**



I represent a white, American male perspective. Yet the way I read (or didn't read) Paul as I grew up had more to do with a subset of that culture, my Adventist subculture. Where I grew up—in Glendale, California, in the 1950s—there was no racial or ethnic diversity. My world was divided into two basic groups: Adventists and non-Adventists. I played with non-Adventist children in my neighborhood after school, but I knew they were different. They went to movies, ate meat, and went to football games on Friday night at the public high school down the street. During those games, I could hear the shouts when touchdowns were scored, and I can remember feeling guilty for

wondering which team scored them.

The Bible was central to us, but the way it was used meant that I did not read Paul. During the years from Cradle Roll to junior academy, the Bible was a source of stories—exciting stories—each with a moral to teach us how we ought to live. My life was shaped by these stories, and I am grateful to the many Sabbath School and elementary teachers (mostly female) who taught them to me. But Paul's letters don't have many stories. Therefore, I learned stories about Paul from the book of Acts, but I can never remember reading Paul. I do remember in the seventh grade memorizing the route of all three of Paul's missionary journeys and his trip to Rome. I could recite Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and so forth, in order, but I had no idea what Galatians or Philippians was all about.

When I went to academy, we put away childish things, and stories were replaced by “key texts.” These texts from the Bible supported Adventist doctrines so that we would be ready always to give an answer for the hope in us. The Bible was seen as one piece. It didn't matter whether the key texts came from Ecclesiastes (“the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing”) or Revelation (“the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”), they provided us with the “the truth.”

Quite a few of these texts came from Paul. The most important was Romans 3:31 (“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.”) We also learned texts about the Second Coming from 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15.

But we didn't "read Paul," and I still had no idea what Galatians or Philippians was all about.

Finally, when I went to college, I did "read Paul" for the first time, with great tutors such as Royal Sage, Walter Specht, and Fritz Guy. My Adventist background clearly shaped this reading. I had wonderful, loving Adventist parents and I never felt oppressed by my Adventism. But there was enough legalism in the package that I felt liberated by Paul's emphasis on grace. It had an existential impact that can only come to one who has known enough of legalism to feel the liberating message of grace.

Later, in graduate school, I learned more about Roman civilization and come to see political dimensions in Paul's message that had previously escaped me, and I would read Stendahl and recognize that my understanding of Paul had been read through the individualistic eyes of a Westerner.

I learned about Paul's more communal society and saw the social dimensions of Paul's message.

It was in doing premarital counseling for a couple where she was a white American and he was a Samoan, however, that I first realized how different American individualism is from a more communal culture. Yet even though Paul both lived in and was shaped by a different kind of culture, he offered critique of it as well.

Finally, I have to admit that even my assessment of how my culture has affected my reading of Paul comes from within my culture and is, at least in part, influenced by it. Therefore, I look forward to learning how others from other cultures might critique even this assessment.

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## Reading Paul in Community with Others

BY KENDRA HALOVIK

I realize, as this panel's woman, I should probably immediately jump into my problems with the Pauline tradition's assumptions about my gender. However, when I first encountered Paul, I was far more conscious of my identity as a "righteousness-by-faith" Seventh-day Adventist than my identity as a woman. This consciousness grew in the aftermath of Glacier View, when, as an earliteen, I began reading the works of Paul. I really thought I had solved my denomination's theological crisis when I came upon Galatians 2:21: "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." What could be more clear? We could stop fighting! Desmond Ford could be reinstated.

In those days, I imaged Paul as much like Ford—proclaiming the good news, putting the law in its rightful place, challenging all who wished to add something to the sufficiency of God. Given the amazing grace of God, I was hopeful. Our church could repent, start over, celebrate salvation by grace alone. My identity as a "righteousness-by-faith" Adventist during a particular time and place (the 1980s; Takoma Park, Maryland) shaped my theological thinking for a long time. Paul's writings, especially Romans and Galatians, made up my canon-within-the-canon.

A decade later, I went to graduate school and met people who hated Paul. Not because they were legalistic, law-loving Adventists, but because they were feminists. I was shocked to learn that Paul was a misogynist. But I was even more disturbed by challenges to my assumptions about Paul's soteriology. Some of my peers hated Paul because of the substitutionary atonement theology accredited to him. I heard one graduate student proclaim: "Oh, that's great news—God will kill one child in place of others. What an act of compassion and grace. No thanks." Although I felt I should be wrestling with the gender issues, I was actually more concerned with the picture of God reflected in my understanding of salvation by grace through faith.

James Dunn's short work, the *Justice of God*, helped me read the words of Paul without hearing the voice of Desmond Ford. Paul was not an Adventist challenging the legalists. Paul was a Jew for whom God's law was itself a gift to chosen, elect people. Paul's struggle was not the grace of God in contrast with the law, but the grace of God to include those who did not have the law. In other words, Paul's struggle with legalism was a struggle with his theological commitment to election.

Dunn argued that after Paul wrestled with the intersection of old traditions and new experiences, he embraced

the earth-shattering idea that all people (Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female) are elected for salvation. Paul's inclusive soteriology moved me to agree to participate in Sligo Church's ordination service of three women pastors. As I knelt on the platform that Sabbath afternoon in September 1995, I did so convinced that my local church acted in harmony with Ellen White, Jesus, and Paul.

Several years later, after making a presentation to women in ministry serving in the South Pacific Division, I noticed a young woman, a student at Avondale College, sobbing on the back row of the conference room. I sat with her for a while, wondering what was torturing her. When she could speak, I learned that she had recently decided to drop her theology major and ministry plans because of Paul.

Knowing this decision, someone had encouraged her to attend the women in ministry meetings, and now she was in agony all over again—torn between her sense of God's calling of her and the others in the room, and her desire to be faithful to Scripture. We talked for a long time. During part of our conversation, I compared the undisputed letters with the pastorals. I tried to help her hear Paul arguing with the later Pauline tradition.

Currently, I am not sure that was the best approach. Rather than assume that texts will dictate the contemporary course of action on any given issue and then argue which texts will be given such authority (authentic Paul or the pastorals?), we need to learn how to read all the texts as profound and prejudiced, full of insights and blind spots, the record of real people struggling to act in harmony with their emerging theological convictions. It seems to me that Scripture teaches us more about a history of ideas,

a trajectory, a movement in a direction with twists and turns, corrections and clarifications, than it does any particular moment whose ethics get etched in stone.

Some of my students have no problem seeing the human Paul, the real person, who sometimes spoke with extraordinary insight, and other times exhibited weaknesses. At the beginning of this school term, I asked my students in my New Testament survey class to write their reactions to the opportunity of having lunch with Paul. What did they think that would be like?

One student said it sure wouldn't take Paul long to decide what to get from the menu! Another student admired Paul's sense of knowing what God's plan for him was because she longed for that clarity. Several hinted that they would be intimidated, but would, hopefully, have the courage to ask him questions. One student said that, given his ego, would we really have a conversation, or would he "argue his point until I agreed with him?" My students help me think about the nature of Scripture: this remarkable collection of God-inspired, human-created writings we refer to as "the Word of God."

My journey with Paul parallels my journey with all of Scripture. My personal experiences draw me to specific passages with particular questions. My readings in community with others—literary critics, historians, students, and lay people—provide checks and balances, challenges and new possibilities to hear the texts again and again and again.

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## Not So Hard to Understand

BY KEITH AUGUSTUS BURTON

I wonder how many people are as incensed as I am when they read Ellen White's statement regarding the effect of Noah's curse on successive generations of Ham's sons. These aren't ignorant statements from the pen of the prophet. As a child of nineteenth-century America, she knew exactly how her readers would have interpreted her words. She had probably read Genesis 9:25–27 hundreds of times, yet she still could not break free from the racist interpretive lenses she inherited from her compatriots.

Ellen White is by no means an anomaly. All of us approach the text with spectacles prescribed by experience and culture. Although culturally nuanced readings sometimes amount to autobiographical musings of various social groups, the biases we take to the interpretive process don't always pull us further from the meaning. As is demonstrated by the two-volume project edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (*Reading from My Place*), there are times when one's social perspective can aid in deciphering the author's intended meaning.

## Passive Acceptance

Had I not been invited to participate in this discussion, I probably would have never reflected on my obvious journey in my encounters with Scripture—particularly with Paul. I was raised in a home where the Bible was a central part of our existence. Bible reading was something the entire family did before breakfast and after supper. We were also encouraged to read individually, and each of us looked forward to the Christmas when we would be rewarded with our own hardback illustrated King James Version by Collins publishers.

I'm not sure if it was in that particular Bible, but I remember being drawn to a couple illustrations that had Black Bible characters. As a young man searching for identity, this was important to me. The scenes they depicted involved the baptism of the Ethiopian government official and the runaway slave, Onesimus, returning to his master Philemon. How else would a slave look? Weren't all slaves Black? My reading of the passages in Paul that dealt with slavery were also noncritical. The truth is, I can't even remember paying attention to them. I lived in a world where race permeated every institution. There were no Black pastors, doctors, lawyers, or teachers. My cousin's father was part owner in a business—but that was a junk shop.

## Active Resistance

In 1974, my parents sent me to Jamaica for my six-week summer vacation. This was my reward for progressing so well with my piano lessons. That trip changed my life—forever. I had never been in a Black world before. All of a sudden, I became aware of who I was. I returned to England a different person.

The classical music that had afforded me the opportunity to be selected from among ten siblings to make the precious trip was now detestable to me. I was through with Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky, and I became mesmerized with the rhythms of Bunny, Bob, and Toots. Reggae was my thing, and the writings of Paul were anything but attractive. I didn't want to hear "Slaves

be submissive," it was time for me to "Get up, stand up, stand up for my rights." I didn't want to hear about the "treasure in earthen vessels." I was "a true born African awaiting repatriation."

## Informed Acceptance

Years later, some supernatural events led me to respond to God's call on my life. Even after entering the academic path to ministry, I pur-



**Even after entering the academic path to ministry, I purposed to stay away from certain Pauline passages.**

posed to stay away from certain Pauline passages. I didn't mind the mandates in Ephesians 5, but I had no reason to go to chapter 6. I'm not sure what happened, but all of a sudden I found myself strangely drawn to Paul the person. Actually, I do know what happened, it was the love that my mentor, James H. Melançon, had for Paul. Just like the "Ole Time Religion," if Paul was good enough for Elder Melançon, he had to be good enough for me.

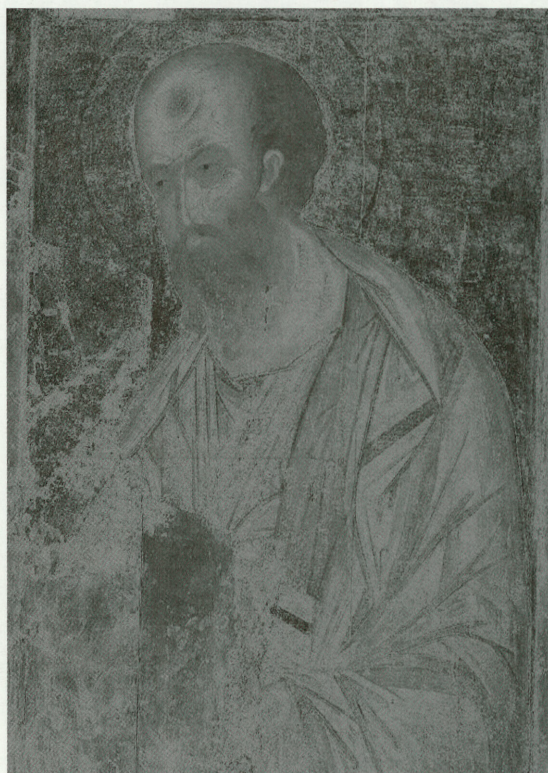
Fully aware of my cognitive dysfunction, I sought to vindicate the Apostle to the Nations from the manipulative grip of those fashioned under the Pauline Mandate. At first, I stayed safe by dealing with his mystical dogma on salvation.

**After seeing Paul's admonition to slaves in its social context, I was led to take another look at his conversation with Philemon about Onesimus.**

That gave me plenty to shout about in my sermons. The "treasure in earthen vessels" was no longer about an escapist's pie in the sky, but the concrete faith that buoyed my ancestors.

The more I studied about Paul, the more I grew to admire the man. He was not an establishment clone, he was a radical subversive who was at odds with the system. At times he got "in the face" of the hypocrites, as in Antioch with Peter. At other times, he exercised diplomacy, as with the opponents in Romans (Rom. 14:1–15:13).

My admiration for Paul even crept into my master's thesis, which focused on the social world behind the church in 1 Peter, but it gave me an opportunity to reexamine the *baustafel* in Colossians and Ephesians. I quickly discovered that when compared to similar statements in



Aristotle and other Greco-Roman codes, Paul's version was unassumingly liberating. When he addressed the economic slavery on which the empire was built, he not only addressed the slaves, but also broke social convention by instructing the masters on how to treat the

slaves and even reminded them that they, too, were slaves (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1).

After seeing Paul's admonition to slaves in its social context, I was led to take another look at his conversation with Philemon about Onesimus. With new lenses, I was able to see that Paul really intended for Onesimus to emancipate the runaway slave (Philem. 13–14), who—according to law—should have been sentenced to death. By evaluating Paul in his social setting, I had no problem seeing what Paul was "really" saying to slaves in 1 Corinthians 7:21: "If you have a chance to get free—go for it!"

### **Conclusion**

Paul's rhetoric resonated with my reason, and I chose freedom over bondage. Not just freedom from the reign of sin in my life, but freedom from an oppressive interpretation of Scripture. Paul is not a misogynous bigot who is insensitive to the rights of women; he is a prophetic voice who calls husbands to love and pamper their wives (Eph. 5:25–29). Paul is not a card-carrying comrade of the Ku Klux Klan who burns crosses on church lawns; he is a promoter of ethnic unity who recognizes the common humanity of all ethnic groups (Gal. 3:28–29). Paul is not a rigid traditionalist who sees everything in black and white; he is a sensitive human who understands that the faith of each individual is between that person and God (Rom. 14:22).

There are still some things in Paul's writings that are difficult to understand, but I'm so glad that Paul himself—the one who looked like an Egyptian—is not beyond understanding. ■

Evangelist and theologian **Keith Augustus Burton** is president of Life Heritage Ministries, which is based in Alabama.

### **For further reading**

Charles H. Cosgrove, Herold Weiss, and K. K. Yao, *Cross-Cultural Paul: Journey to Others, Journey to Ourselves* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).