Explain the contribution to the development and expression of Christianity of one significant figure

Attributed with the titles Apostle to the Gentiles, Pillar of the Church, the First Theologian, Founder of the Church, Second Founder of Christianity and the Greatest Christian Missionary, Paul was indeed one of the most significant and influential figures in Christianity. Paul reflected upon, agitated for and initiated changes that have shaped Christianity, currently the world’s largest religion. The ideas raised by him have responded to the needs of Christian adherents in changing contexts throughout Christianity’s existence, contributing to its expansion and development, through Paul’s perseverance, dedication, inspiration and his life commitment to knowing God.

Paul was born Saul in Tarsus, to a distinguished Jewish family. He possessed Roman citizenship and was aware of Greek culture, being trained in the Jewish Pharisaic tradition. Prior to his conversion on his journey to Damascus, Saul was a vigilant persecutor of the early Christian Church. Having experienced the risen Lord, Paul dedicated his life to serving Christ and began to interpret the early Christian tradition in a new way.

The first significant role Paul fulfilled was at the Council of Jerusalem in 49 CE, where he debated with the Apostles over the requirements of who could become a Christian. The Apostles maintained that only circumcised Jews would be welcomed, and obedience to Jewish dietary and purification laws was demanded, as well as maintaining the Sabbath to be considered a Christian. However, Paul argued that it was not about external rituals, but rather through faith alone; it was about circumcision of the heart, and not the flesh, as expressed in Rom 2:29, “Real circumcision is a matter of the heart- it is spiritual and not literal.” Paul insisted that Gentiles were part of God’s plan of salvation and that the baptised were not required to follow Jewish custom, excluding Gentiles from Jewish rituals, and giving Christianity a separate identity from Judaism. Paul expressed the Christian understanding by God’s free grace of ‘justification through faith’ and that all are equal before God, releasing Christianity from being an exclusive to an inclusive universal Church.

Paul is one of the most significant and influential figures in Christianity, as he moved Christianity from exclusive to inclusive membership by preaching to the Gentiles, as the Apostles were only preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem. One of the core arguments advanced by Paul was that Christianity was a world religion. It was not a Jewish sect but open to everyone: Jews and Gentiles, all of whom were drawn to Jesus of Nazareth’s countercultural teachings of love, forgiveness and salvation for all believers, as highlighted through the Bible extract Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Due to Paul’s courage, wisdom and love of Christ, he not only set in writing Christian beliefs but also established churches in numerous cities of Europe, earning him the title second founder of Christianity and the pillar of the church. Paul embarked on four missionary journeys to shift Christianity from a small exclusive sect in Jerusalem to a worldwide religion that contemporarily numbers two billion adherents. Paul experienced great sufferings including arrests, floggings, shipwrecks and imprisonment, due to his preaching. However, his endurance indicated a person who was overflowing with God’s love, grace and
inspiration. Throughout this journey Paul founded small Christian communities (Churches) in Greece, Turkey, Malta, Cyprus, Syria. As an Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was able to establish a social structure, where he appointed leaders, both female and male, to these communities and encouraged monetary donations to the poor Church communities, thus establishing the Church and ensuring its ongoing propagation. These donations are still carried out within our Church communities, through the collection of money during Masses, and the encouragement of acts of charity.

Paul strengthened these early communities by pastoral visits and by sending written letters, also known as the Epistles. These Pauline letters, including Letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians and Galatians, to name a few, currently constitute part of the Christian scriptures (the Bible), which is the sacred text of Christianity. The Bible has been read for over two millennia at masses and numerous sacraments, and thus, Paul’s writing, inspired by the Holy Spirit will continue to influence Christian thinking for centuries to come. These letters which set out the foundational beliefs of Christianity are flawlessly written, spiritually rich and theologically sound.

He was the first Christian theologian who expressed in writing the Christian beliefs, such as the Holy Trinity with emphasis on the Holy Spirit, Baptism and Eucharist, the virtues, one in the body of Christ, grace, the cosmological Christ and salvation.

Paul transformed the image of God in a radical way. The Jews believed they were the chosen people, whereas Paul argued that anyone could come to Christ. They believed in their superiority, while Paul preached equality. The Jews spoke of a judging God, whereas Paul preached a God of compassion, as stated in Gal 3:28, “Neither Greek nor Jew, neither slave neither free person, there is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ,” insisting on the unity of all, stating that we are one body in Christ (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12), as it is through Christ that we exist. This belief in the equality and unity of all is further expanded in the cosmological Christ, “Through the Son then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to God self” (Col 1:20).

A focus on the Holy Spirit and the free grace and boundless mercy of God emerge from Paul’s letters, insisting in Gal 5:22-23 that the gift of the Holy Spirit offers hope and acceptance to all. Mysticism also emerges from Pauline letters that dictate hope and transformation, as well as the power of God’s love, which is expressed in 1 Cor:13, commonly recited in wedding ceremonies. Paul offers spiritual renewal in Christ that we cannot be deprived of, “For I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:39)

Furthermore, Paul originated the term Christian in Antioch and insisted that wealthy Church communities provide money to support the poorer Churches, expressing the Christian belief of solidarity, social justice and equality. Paul also placed great emphasis on morality (1 Cor:5) and wrote about the Sacraments. His writings, still read today, have transformed saints, such as Saint Augustine, incited revolutions, including that of Martin Luther, and challenged theological scholars like Thomas Aquinas. Paul describes religious fellowship of the believer in Christ through the terms koinonia and Communio in 1 Cor 10:16, with the Vatican 11 acknowledging the theme of ‘a communion of life, charity and truth‘ (Lumen gentium 9) that Paul proclaims. Communion brings out the dimension of life that is enriched both by participation in the mystery of Christ nd by participation in the activities of the community.
Paul’s influence extended therefore not only to the First Council in Jerusalem, but also at the Second Vatican Council 1962-165).

Despite Paul’s extraordinary efforts to establish Christianity as a religion of love and acceptance, the impact of Paul has not always been positive. This is evident through the Reformation, as although Martin Luther used Paul’s justification of faith to rightly criticise the corruption of the Catholic Church of the 1500s, in the hope of reform, it resulted in a split in the Church and the formation of the Protestant Church, contrary to Paul’s teaching on unity and being one body in Christ. Other areas where Paul’s writings have been used to incite hatred include his reference in Rom 1:26-27 where we read, “They were consumed with passion for one another,” and homosexuality is expressed in 1 Cor 6:9, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?... male prostitutes, sodomites.”

Overall, much can be proclaimed about the inheritance of Paul’s writings and philosophy, shaping the foundations of the Christian religious tradition and keeping it alive with passion, energising it with spirit for several millennia. Paul’s significance in this predominant religion is demonstrated throughout his challenging of the understanding of God, his foundational theology, his moral exhortations, his acceptance of all people, and his belief in the free grace of God. Paul’s letters will continue to be read and to challenge and transform believers, as his influence is outstretched contemporarily in our theology and in Churches, schools and religious orders names after him, such as the Sisters of St Paul, cathedrals and churches dedicated to him, and even a city in Brazil, San Paulo, named after him. Ultimately, Paul is an important figure in Christianity because he lived out God’s will, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20). These letters which set out the foundational beliefs of Christianity are flawlessly written, spiritually rich and theologically sound. Paul was the first Christian theologian who expressed in writing the Christian beliefs, such as the Holy Trinity with emphasis on the Holy Spirit, Baptism and Eucharist, the virtues, one in the body of Christ, grace, the cosmological Christ and salvation.