The sixteenth century was a Pauline age. Of course, this statement fits nicely with all the other overarching and hugely synthetic statements about the sixteenth century, or the age of the Reformation, or the early modern period. The sixteenth century was a political age. The sixteenth century was a revolutionary age. The sixteenth century was a conservative age. The sixteenth century was an age of the nation state. The sixteenth century was an age of the rise of the peasants, or the ascent of the laity. All of these statements are equally revealing and concealing, equally helpful and obfuscating, equally effective and outrageous.

What this project attempts is to explore Paul’s influence, and its various manifestations, in the early modern period. Such an exploration must go beyond simply counting citations, a seductive approach that ultimately reveals nothing. Was Paul important in the thought patterns of the sixteenth century? Absolutely. The turn toward Paul as especially relevant to the theological questions of the day preceded the Reformation proper, and certainly did not slow down in the sixteenth century.

1 My research has turned up 69 commentaries on Romans published in the sixteenth century in German libraries alone. When put together with the 28 commentaries on I and II Corinthians, 24 on Galatians that were frequently set with Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, 30 commentaries on I and II Timothy and 30 commentaries on Hebrews, one can begin to get the sense of how important Paul was to the sixteenth century. Further, these totals avoid counting the various editions by the same author, or the printings of the same text by different printing houses. Finally, the total does not include the extremely popular collections of homilies by John Chrysostom, or other ancient commentaries such as those by Origen. See Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts.

Reformed, Lutheran, Catholic, Humanistic, and Radical theologians all paid homage to Paul’s corpus through their commenting, use of his letters for ammunition in debate, and the way that they adopted ideas traceable to his epistles for their church orders, for their worship, and for the regulation of the civic and family lives. It is not hard to make the argument for considering Paul in the sixteenth century.

That Paul was a dominant source for the thought of the sixteenth century is evident enough. How he was interpreted is much more difficult to map. Here, our modern tendencies have inclined us towards a set of assumptions which closer examination and comparison demonstrate to be false. There was not one “Paul” in the sixteenth century, but several. Thus, naming a particular thinker a “Pauline theologian” is no more helpful than to call someone a biblical theologian. Further, the label Pauline often carries a confessional bias: Calvin is a “Pauline” theologian because he presents doctrines the analyst accepts as Paul’s message.

This does not represent a straw man that we are creating to destroy. Excellent contemporary historical and theological scholarship of the sixteenth century suggests more or less explicitly that we know who Paul was for the Reformation, and thus can speak of Luther’s discovery of Paul, or Calvin’s, or Melanchthon’s. But the diversity of Pauls in the sixteenth century is one of the hallmarks of this volume. To illustrate that point, let us look briefly at three different theologians presented here.

Johann Staupitz, Desiderius Erasmus and John Calvin all took up Paul’s doctrine and used it as a major factor in their own theological efforts. For Staupitz, Paul was the critic of medieval popular piety. Staupitz’ Paul demanded interior alteration, through the dialectic of self-denial and Christ’s mercy. Staupitz presented Paul as the interior almost mystical doctor, as Jared Wicks makes clear in his article. Riemer Faber notes that for Erasmus, Paul condemned the arid nature of scholastic theologizing in favor of the reform of the individual soul through the acceptance of the philosophi Christi. In this persuasion to morality, and general mistrust of dialecticism, Erasmus’ Paul began himself to take on the character of a true Renaissance man, both in his excellence of literary styling, and in his concern for moral reform. Barbara Pitkin demonstrates that for John Calvin, Paul opened the scriptures through a dependence on grace. This mastery of the scripture and alignment with the later Augustine transformed Paul into the chief theologian of