



Texts in Context

Apologizing for Preaching Paul¹

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Given the controversy that the apostle Paul has engendered throughout Christian history, I offer in this essay a brief apology for preaching from Paul's letters. I use the term apology in the sense of its Greek antecedent *apologia*—an explanation of one's actions and beliefs.

Ministers have inevitably posed a pressing question to me: Why preach from Paul? Many ministers assume that Paul is difficult to understand, overly opinionated, and supportive of, if not directly responsible for, various kinds of oppression in the church. Consequently, some preachers prefer not to drag the baggage surrounding Paul into their pulpits.

These contemporary assumptions about Paul, though understandable, might be inaccurate or at least ill-conceived. Some of the baggage that we think belongs to Paul might actually have other people's names on it, maybe even our names. There are some obstacles, real and perceived, when preaching from the Pauline letters, which I will address momentarily. First, let me offer three reasons why preachers should employ those letters in their proclamation.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

Paul's ministry and letters were cross-cultural

Paul believed that the return of Jesus Christ was imminent. In the waning days prior to that return, he devoted himself to creating multiethnic communities

¹This essay is adapted from my book *Preaching Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

There are clearly obstacles to hearing and preaching Paul in our contemporary world. But there are strong reasons for doing so as well. Paul was neither an authoritarian tyrant nor a faultless saint, and faithful interpreters will work between these realities to hear and proclaim Paul's strong witness to the gospel.

that worshiped Christ: the church or *ekklēsia*. Before encountering Christ, Paul was a Jew bent on cleansing Israel from its Gentile domination. Israel was meant to have but one ruler, the one God. After encountering Christ, Paul was a Jew who spent the remainder of his life committed to race relations. He struggled passionately to bring harmony among Jews and Gentiles under the banner of the one God and that God's Messiah.

For centuries, many persons have read Paul through the lens of the sixteenth-century religious reformer Martin Luther. Those interpreters influenced by Luther have argued that Paul's primary concern was "justification by faith." This doctrine claims that belief in Jesus Christ (and not the observance of the law) restores the individual's broken relationship with God. Interpreted through the lens of justification by faith, Paul's letters seem to focus on how the individual is saved from a sinful existence.

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Recently, many interpretations of Paul's letters have deemphasized justification by faith. Instead, these readings have stressed the social, communal realities in his letters. For instance, some Pauline scholars have noted that the doctrine of justification by faith was not an end for Paul but a means to an end.² A major focus of Paul's preaching was that the "Christ event" (that is, the life, death, resurrection, and impending return of Christ) could bring Jews and Gentiles together in unimaginable ways. In their faith in Christ, Jews and Gentiles could overcome the social hostility that had separated them, thus allowing them to form multiethnic religious communities.

Paul traveled thousands of miles via land and sea. He also spent considerable time during his ministry in the urban centers of the Mediterranean world, which teemed with diverse persons, customs, and religions. In service of the gospel, he constantly crossed geographical and cultural boundaries. A cross-cultural, global perspective is deeply inscribed in Paul's letters.³

Preachers who responsibly interpret Paul's letters will be invited and challenged to proclaim a gospel with relevance beyond its own cultural borders. Paul knew that a gospel that could not travel was provincial and hardly a witness to the universal God. Living as we do in a global community, preachers might learn much from Paul, an early Christian leader for whom multiculturalism was second nature.

²For example, John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³For example, Rom 1:14–17; 1 Cor 1:23–31, 9:19–23; 2 Cor 8–9 (where Paul urges Gentile Christians to provide funds for impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem); and Gal 3:26–29. Race relations between Jews and Gentiles is a major issue in Galatians. For further discussion, consult Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

Paul was zealously committed to community formation

A corollary of Paul's cross-cultural ministry was his zealous commitment to the formation of the *ekklēsia*. Participants in the *ekklēsia* would gather in the homes of fellow believers for worship, edification, and the sharing of ritual meals. A church was a community of persons called together by the gospel.

Additionally, Paul's frequent use of the terms "in Christ" or "in the Lord" indicates the communal nature of the church. These terms occur well over a hundred times in his letters. These phrases possibly connoted the ethical responsibilities of communal life under the lordship of Christ.

When one joined the *ekklēsia* and began living "in Christ," one did not simply enter into an individual relationship with Christ. One also joined a new community, even a new family. Paul's use of kinship language ("brothers" and "sisters") to refer to fellow Christians indicates that the *ekklēsia* provided one with a new sense of identity.

Preachers who responsibly interpret Paul's letters will be invited and challenged to proclaim a gospel with relevance for communal as well as individual existence. For too long, an excessively vertical ("It's just me and Jesus") attitude has typified much of American Christianity. In Paul's letters, we frequently encounter ethical admonitions concerning communal life. These admonitions were not exercises in self-righteous pleading. They were constant reminders that people's vertical love for God cannot be separated from their horizontal love for their neighbors.

Furthermore, Paul's belief that even the creation was being redeemed might compel contemporary Christians to expand their concept of salvation beyond the scope of human beings (Rom 8:18–25). In light of our growing ecological crises (for example, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico), the church needs to lead the way in demonstrating how persons can live in community with the entire creation and its many forms of life.

Paul stressed the link between behavior and belief

As noted, ethical exhortations abound in Paul's letters. Considering no area off-limits for discussion, Paul instructed his converts on topics ranging from conduct in worship to sexual behavior. As a pastor and practical theologian, he regarded behavior and belief as mutually reinforcing. Pauline ethics are embodied theology, the articulation of foundational theological convictions through lived experience.

Earlier scholarship contended that Paul's moral instructions were simply pragmatic and thus less important than his theological conceptualizations. More recently, scholars have argued that Paul's ethical reflections provide indispensable insights into his theology. Concerning Paul's ethics, Brian Blount remarks, "*Theology enables ethics*. Ethics establishes theology in the living reality of a community's loving and liberating existence."⁴

New Testament scholars often declare that in Paul's letters the indicative and

⁴Brian K. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 126 (emphasis in the original).

the imperative are inextricably related. In grammar, the indicative is the mood used to describe events as they actually are. The imperative is the mood for commands, describing what ought to be done. Thus, the actuality of the Christ event (the indicative) places upon the followers of Christ certain moral obligations (the imperative). Preachers who responsibly interpret Paul's letters will be invited and challenged to (re)introduce imperatives into their proclamation.

Contemporary homiletics has often discouraged preachers from the use of words such as "must," "ought," and "should," warning that such words might appear morally heavy-handed and authoritarian. James Thompson convincingly argues that contemporary preaching could use a substantive dose of clear, didactic, moral imperatives. In this age of religious pluralism, Thompson contends that many Christians—not to mention those outside the church—are unclear about behaviors and teachings that are distinctively Christian.⁵ If our preaching took Paul more seriously, we might reclaim the value of catechesis—clear, moral instructions for those following in the way of Christ.

THE OBSTACLES

Paul and Oppressive Structures

An honest assessment of preaching from the Pauline letters must also face the challenges such preaching poses. Paul aroused considerable opposition in his ministry, and persons in his own congregations often sharply disagreed with him. In the twenty centuries after Paul's ministry, the opposition to and disagreements with him have not lessened but have intensified.

Many groups severely criticize Paul for providing the justification for the oppression of marginalized persons. Some feel that his theological legacy is forever sullied by his capitulation to a brutal ancient slave system, his patriarchal oppression of women, and his denouncing of homosexual activity. In Christianity's struggles to confront the pressing social questions of the day—whether it be slavery, the role of women in society, or the presence of gay and lesbian persons in the church—the church has constantly turned to the Pauline letters for guidance (or some might say misguidance).

I cannot deny the role of the Bible in general and the Pauline letters in particular in the systematic oppression of marginalized groups. As a descendant of Africans criminally enslaved by Christian slave masters, I am touched profoundly by issues of oppression. Theologically, I am a liberationist. I have a vested interest in promoting practices and beliefs that sponsor life-giving emancipation. Moreover, I am compelled to denounce as sinful those practices and beliefs that impede people's journeys to their God-intended wholeness.

The church grossly misrepresents the in-breaking, inclusive reign of God when it discriminates against persons on the basis of social identities such as eth-

⁵James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 53–60.

nicity, gender, sexual orientation, class status, and physical and mental abilities. In God's commonwealth, there are no second-class citizens. Having admitted the regrettable role of Paul's letters in oppression and having enunciated my theological disposition for liberation, I also declare that Paul might not be chiefly responsible for the oppressions perpetrated in his name. Some explanations are in order.

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I subscribe to the scholarly consensus that seven New Testament letters were authentically written (or dictated) by Paul. In canonical order, those letters include: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. I consider the remaining six letters, often referred to as "inauthentic" or "deutero-Pauline" (that is, secondarily Pauline), to have been written by followers of Paul either during Paul's ministry or after his death. In canonical order, the deutero-Pauline letters include: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

In the New Testament, the sexism is most acute and the support of slavery most adamant in letters such as Ephesians, Colossians, and the so-called pastoral letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. In these letters, Paul's associates resolved, in the direction of being more oppressive, social issues that were ambiguous and unresolved for Paul. Depending upon how one reads the evidence, one could even argue that the stance toward women and slaves articulated in the inauthentic Pauline letters is an oppressive reaction to Paul's more liberating action.

If one brackets out the inauthentic Pauline letters, the portfolio of Paul's social practices and beliefs is complex but not at all totalitarian. Approaches to Paul slandering him as an authoritarian tyrant or lauding him as a faultless saint might not have considered all the evidence.

Summarizing the Issues

My reading of Paul's letters on certain key theological, social, and ethical issues reveals the following summary. Obviously, each point could be expanded considerably. I present these points as a prelude to the complexity of Paul:

- Paul generally opposed division and domination in the church based on social class (Gal 3:26–29). For example, he strongly criticized the socially elite Corinthians who were flaunting their economic means before fellow Christians who were economically disadvantaged (1 Cor 11:17–34).

Nevertheless, Paul was no strict egalitarian. A commitment to community did not negate for him the necessity for order and positions of leadership. Paul believed that Christ had commissioned him as an apostle, whose task was to create and lead communities devoted to Christ.

- Paul's stance on ancient slavery was ambiguous. In line with his theological

principle that social class should no longer be a means of domination, he opposed slavery and its violence. Slavery, however, was an integral feature of the first-century social landscape. Thus, the well-to-do Christians who often provided their homes in which the *ekklēsia* convened probably possessed slaves. Some of those slaves might have been Christians.

By condoning slavery, Paul would have violated his own belief that Christ removed social class as an instrument of human domination. By opposing slavery, Paul would have jeopardized relationships with persons whose support was crucial for the concrete existence of the *ekklēsia*. The complexity of this situation might explain the vagueness of Paul's statements about slavery in 1 Cor 7 and Philemon.

- Paul welcomed and celebrated women's roles and leadership in the *ekklēsia*. His letters identify at least six women who functioned in significant leadership roles.⁶ More than likely, Paul depended on the financial largesse of various well-to-do women for the sustenance of his churches. Furthermore, he presupposed that women would be active in crucial ministries of the church such as preaching (1 Cor 11:1–16).

Yet, much like slavery, patriarchy—the assumed headship of men—was a prevalent feature of Paul's social landscape. On two deplorable occasions (1 Cor 11:1–16 and 14:34–35), Paul retreated to a domineering patriarchal perspective. On those occasions, he betrayed his more usual countercultural practices that reflected his positive views of women and their leadership.

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- Paul believed that sexual activity was an interpersonal but not private affair. Since bodies were gifts from God and the location of God's redemptive activity among Christians, Christians' uses of their bodies were matters of theological and ecclesial concern. Though celibate, Paul appreciated people's preference for marrying and engaging in sexual activity (1 Cor 7). Like many moralists of his day, Paul viewed homosexual activity as unnatural and as evidence of humanity's denial of God (Rom 1:24–27).⁷

I disagree with Paul's notion that homosexual activity is categorically an indication of human sinfulness. Regardless of one's views on this issue, I con-

⁶In an excellent study, Wendy Cotter discusses these six women leaders: Apphia (Phil 2); Chloe (1 Cor 1:11); Prisca (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–4); Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2); and Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2). "Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?" *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994) 350–372.

⁷In Rom 1, Paul emphasizes sexual practices. The contemporary concept of "sexual orientation" or "sexual identity" would have been foreign to Paul.

tend that the responsible use of Paul's letters in the current debates concerning homosexuality must consider issues such as: the similarities and differences of Paul's views and contemporary Christian views on the role of sexuality, as well as the impact of studies in human biology and genetics.

Whether we disagree or agree with Paul's stance on homosexuality, it might be problematic to regard Paul as the arch advocate of homophobia or the ultimate and only judge about godly manifestations of our sexuality.

Whether or not readers find the above synopsis persuasive, its aim is to demonstrate the complexity of Paul's ministerial practices and theological positions. Paul was not an oppressive, uptight ideologue. Neither was he an unblemished embodiment of his noblest theological truths.

Lest we become self-righteous, let us remember that when we read Paul's letters we are committing a crime of sorts. In certain countries, it is a crime to read people's mail without their permission. Paul was writing letters to his congregations, expecting the letters to be read in those congregations. Never once in those letters did he ask or insist that Christians from other generations read his mail as authoritative texts.

These are decisions that the church has made and continues to make when it reads Paul's letters as Scripture. I am not suggesting that the decision to read Paul's letters this way is incorrect. I am suggesting that Paul might remind us that we created some of the problems we have with him by our decisions to regard his mail as a part of the Bible.

Though Paul belonged to a different culture and time, he, like each of us, was an intricate mixture of consistency and contradiction, of noble strengths and ignoble weaknesses. Each of us knows the frustration of having people rush to premature judgments about our character. In our dealings with Paul, let us not do to him what we would not want done to us. If we give Paul a chance, we might be pleasantly surprised.

A WORD ON BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

I have taken the liberty to criticize and disagree with Paul. Such action might appear arrogant at best and heretical at worst to certain readers. Some might raise this question, "By what authority do you muster the audacity to argue with the Bible?" The audacity to argue with the Bible is my working definition of biblical authority. To say that the Bible has authority in my life is to say that it is a text with which I must struggle, and not always agree.

As I—and the communities to which I belong—interpret the Bible, I will respect its history, and I want the Bible to respect my history. Likewise, I acknowledge the real possibility that interaction with the Bible might positively alter my future. However, the Bible must also acknowledge the real possibility that my interaction with it might positively alter its future. Many Christians assume that the Bible is supposed to hold us accountable to live the gospel. Is it not possible that

God also expects us to hold the Bible accountable—accountable to being, through our interpretations of it, an ever more genuine witness to the gospel?

For me, a central truth of the gospel is that God has prepared a glorious future for the creation. As Paul declares, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). In our struggles to offer new readings of Paul’s letters, I trust that God will create something new in each one of us and, in turn, in our preaching ministries. ⊕

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