

Why bother with Paul today? Women, slaves, social structures...

Why bother with reading the apostle Paul today? On the one hand. Paul is our earliest theologian and the writer – or attributed writer – of many of the New Testament books. On the other hand, he comes from a clearly different time and context and some of what he says is confusing and unhelpful; so much so that people can ask ‘what planet is Paul on? Why should we bother with him?’¹

The fact that Paul is on a Jewish / Greek / Roman planet (or confluence of planets) should not, in itself, disqualify him for our attention. After all, Micah was on a pre-exilic Hebrew planet and yet we still uphold his ‘do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God’ principles. The questions we bring to Paul’s writings are the same questions we bring to any other part of Scripture: what did he actually say, what would his original hearers / readers have made of it in their contexts, what might this be saying to us in our very different contexts? Is this a timeless principle – as valid in our day as in Paul’s – or is this specific advice for a specific time and place and people? And of course when we answer those questions we find ourselves moving on to others: do I like what Paul is saying? And, if I believe him to be setting out timeless principles, do I really want to follow them? It’s important that these latter questions be kept in their proper place: so often people do the exegesis (what is Paul actually saying) having already made up their minds that they disagree with him. We’ll try not to do that here.

So what is Paul – from the Jewish / Greek / Roman confluence of planets – saying about specific issues relating to women and to social structures (including slavery)? For it is on topics like these, touching as they do our own lives, where he has frequently been criticised.

Over the years, Paul has acquired a reputation for being something of a misogynist – and most people who feel that way about him will tell you that he said ‘It is well for a man not to touch a woman.’ (1 Cor 7:1b, NRSV) Except that he didn’t ‘say’ this, in the sense of it being his opinion. We need to remember that in Paul’s letters we are eavesdropping on half of a conversation – there is another half going on, some of which we can deduce from what Paul says. Here, he is responding to a list of questions the Corinthians have sent him: ‘concerning the matters about which you wrote’. Several times in 1 Corinthians Paul quotes a slogan popular amongst the community he is addressing, in order to challenge either it or the conclusions they are drawing from it.² This is what is happening here – and the anti-sex slogan comes from the Corinthians. It seems that some amongst the church in Corinth were equating piety with abstaining from sex: celibacy was seen as spiritual because it symbolised freedom from the crude world of the material, and sex, even between Christian couples, was seen as incompatible with life in the new creation. Abstinence and celibacy were being imposed upon all – and it is this that Paul opposes when he writes ‘each man should have [ie have sexually] his own wife and each woman her own husband’. Where we would take issue with Paul is over his seeing this solely as a remedy for ‘sexual immorality’ and for his speaking of sex in terms of obligation rather than love. What is striking, however, is the emphasis on mutuality: in the midst of a patriarchal culture which presumed a husband’s authority over his wife Paul argues for a mutual submission. Rather than demeaning women or sex, Paul is actually arguing against those who considered sexual relations as inappropriate

¹ This paper deals with Paul’s writings in those letters indisputably accepted as his, and not with those considered possibly or certainly to have been the product of later authors.

² Richard B Hays gives a number of examples on p138. ‘Paul on the relation between men and women’, *A Feminist Companion to Paul* 137-47. Ed Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff. Pilgrim Press edition. T&T Clark International. 2004. Cleveland Ohio.

for Christians.³ His reason for advising those who were currently unmarried to remain in that state if they could do so (1 Cor 7:8-9) is not due to his rejecting sex or marriage – even though Paul himself appears to be unmarried and feels called to celibacy, he recognises that not everyone has the same calling (1 Cor 7:7) – but to his eschatological view: why marry, when Jesus' return was imminent?

Apart from questions relating to sex and marriage, how did Paul view women, and their roles in the worship and life of the Christian communities he watched over? For it is in these areas where he has also come in for criticism, of the 'why bother?' variety, with many pointing to his discussion of head-coverings (or hair styles – the translation is unclear) in worship in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. As one commentator has observed, 'Paul's comments in these verses are as obscure as any he makes. So convoluted is Paul's argument and so enigmatic are the terms he uses that it is impossible to determine exactly what activity lies behind these comments, why it is taking place, and what Paul objects to about it.'⁴ He is criticising some behaviour in a worship context which seems to involve the wearing (or not wearing) of veils, or possibly hairstyles. Although Paul is careful to present the issue in terms of both men and women it is clear that the problem involves the women, who are apparently praying and prophesying in church with either uncovered heads (unveiled) or wearing their hair loose and flowing rather than tied up neatly on top of the head. I am inclined to follow Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza here in considering the issue to involve hair styles rather than head coverings, since loose and dishevelled hair was a mark of a number of pagan cults of the time, from which Paul wanted to distinguish the worship within the Christian community.⁵ What is clear is that Paul's reaction to what was going on was culturally grounded: respectable women in his day wore their hair up and covered.⁶ There isn't time here to go into the convoluted theological arguments Paul uses in an attempt to justify his views ('Here, regrettably, Paul gets himself into a theological quagmire' says another commentator)⁷ but some things are plain:

- Paul clearly endorses the ministry of women who pray and prophesy in worship; the only question is over the appropriate headdress or hairstyle they should wear while doing this.
- The passage doesn't require subordination of women (even though some of Paul's arguments presuppose a hierarchical ordering of God, Christ, men, and women), but a symbolic distinction between the sexes.
- The patriarchal order of some of his argument is set against the mutual interdependence of men and women 'in the Lord'.

So let's get this clear: Paul is comfortable with women's roles in worship: he expects women to pray and prophesy in the assembly. What then are we to make of another key passage, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 ('women should keep silent in churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says')? There are a number of approaches to this, which relate it only to a particular group of women (either particularly disruptive ones who were creating disorder, or to wives, with single women presumably being allowed to

³ Hays, *ibid.*, 142.

⁴ Jouette M Bassler, '1 Corinthians' *The Women's Bible Commentary* 321-329, at 326. Edd Carol A Newsome & Sharon H Ringe. SPCK. London. Westminster/John Knox Press. 1992

⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza *In Memory of Her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*. SCM Press. London. 1983. 226-229.

⁶ Sandra Hack Polaski, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul*. Chalice Press. St Louis Missouri, 2005. 54

⁷ Richard B Hays *First Corinthians: Interpretation Commentary* John Knox Press. Louisville. 1997. 182-192 at 186.

speak). The scholarly consensus, however, is that these two verses are an interpolation. That is, Paul did *not* write this, but it is a former marginal note, possibly by the later Pauline interpreters who produced the Pastoral epistles, which has been introduced into the text.⁸ Not only do these two verses appear in some manuscripts at the end of the chapter instead of as 34-35, and the thread of the discussion runs better if they are omitted, the instruction for women to keep silent in church contradicts both Paul's acceptance of women's speaking in chapter 11 and what we know (from his letters and from Acts) of the relationships Paul actually had with women in the churches.

Paul refers in his letters, and sends greetings to, a number of women who were key members of local churches and ministry colleagues of his: Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians), Apphia (Philemon), Phoebe (mentioned in Romans as a deacon of the church at Cenchræe, 'a benefactor of many and of myself as well'), Junia, an apostle – a term which for Paul meant a certain amount of religious authority – and other women in Romans 16, Prisca (Priscilla) – mentioned in Romans together with (and named before) her husband Aquila, and noted in Acts 18 as the teacher of Apollos; these are by no means the only women named by Paul. It is clear that many women – 'a remarkable number ... given the physical and social constraints of the time'⁹ – were active in ministry amongst the early churches. They functioned as teachers, took leadership roles in worship, assisted financially, hosted churches. They did this as individuals, or as part of a couple or as members of extended families. Paul plainly knows of their work and commends it. This rounds out our picture of Paul as someone who is supportive of the ministry of women – someone, in fact, who might be relatively comfortable in one of our churches today (provided that everyone was appropriately attired!).

But there's one text we have not yet discussed, in which Paul comments on men and women, and indeed on other social and religious differences: Galatians 3:27-8:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ Jesus have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

This, incidentally, is regarded as another of those things which are not original to Paul; it is likely a liturgical formula – probably from baptism – that Paul quotes in his argument with the Galatians.¹⁰ What is Paul saying here in quoting this? Is he expressing some eschatological hope, to be achieved in the future when God would bring about a reordering of society, or is this something that is true here and now (or at least 'there and then') within the Christian community?¹¹ Most discussions have opted for the latter: what happens in and through baptism is for Paul a real change. Of course the racial/religious, economic and gender distinctions still persisted in the larger world in which the Christians lived, but they no longer determined who one is before God, and within the community all were one in Christ Jesus. This is why Paul uses this to support his argument against those who would force Gentile Galatian men who had become Christians into being circumcised. In Christ (after baptism into Christ) the old distinctions between Jew and Greek no longer applied. One did not have

⁸ Polaski, *op. cit.*, 59. Hays, *1 Corinthians* 246-49. See also Brendan Byrne, *SJ Paul and the Christian Woman*. St Paul Publications. Homebush NSW. 1988 62-65. Schüssler Fiorenza, *op. cit.* 230-31 accepts the passage as genuinely Paul but relating solely to wives.

⁹ Polaski, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65. See also Carolyn Osiek, 'Galatians' in *The Women's Bible Commentary* 333-337, at 335 for a fuller discussion of the options.

to be Jewish – or become Jewish via circumcision and observing the other requirements of the law – in order to be put into right relationship with God.

So what might this have meant for the Pauline communities? For it is clear that, as well as having both men and women as members and as leaders, they contained both Jewish and Gentile Christians, and people from several different strata of society including slaves. What this meant, it seems, is that there were frequent tensions over how all these different groups should act towards one another. That, at least, is not a completely unfamiliar dynamic in our own churches.

Tensions between religious insiders and religious outsiders abound in Paul's letters, and we should note here that in spite of his use of the expressions 'Jew' and 'Greek' he is not talking about ethnicity as we would understand it, but about those who identified with a traditional Jewish understanding of the people of God and those who had come to be Christians by a different route.¹² In dealing with these tensions Paul comes back again and again to the Christ who established the community and who holds it together: 'for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.

Research into the composition of the Pauline communities has shown that they were a socially mixed bunch. Those who became Christians came from most sections of Greco-Roman society, missing only the extremes of top and bottom: no landed aristocrats and senators and no hired menials and agricultural slaves.¹³ Household slaves and minor office-bearers were included, as were business people (Lydia, for example). Such a mixture of economic and social status led to problems, as we see from Paul's conversation with the Corinthians over how they met to eat the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34). The liturgy was connected to a regular meal, and it appears that some were eating and drinking to excess while others were going hungry: the wealthier members of the congregation were receiving larger helpings and special dishes. Paul's solution was a pragmatic one: those who wanted (and could afford) more and better food should eat at home before the service. Interestingly he doesn't say that everyone should receive the same food. In trying to preserve unity within a diverse community he's making a compromise: he acknowledges the class differences within the congregation but is trying to minimise their affect on the liturgical and social gathering. He would probably give similar advice to a modern congregation navigating the choppy waters of who brings what to a parish potluck meal.

There is one minefield that we (in 21stC Aotearoa New Zealand at least) do not have to negotiate, and that is slavery. To say that the Roman empire was built on slavery is a little like saying that Everest is a very large mountain. Slavery was an integral part of how Greco-Roman society functioned, and Paul was a product of that context. Paul's admonitions to slaves in 1 Corinthians 7 (as well as the household codes of later writers) were used in the 19th century to justify slavery.¹⁴ That is unfortunate – but again we must ask: what did Paul actually say, what would his original hearers / readers have made of it in their contexts, what might this be saying to us in our very different contexts?

¹² As Paul is not talking about ethnicity, seeking to use Gal 3:28 in relation to our Three Tikanga church in this Province is, I consider, going too far.

¹³ Charles B Cousar, *The Letters of Paul*. Abingdon Press. Nashville 1996., 66-71

¹⁴ Wayne A Meeks. 'The "Haustafeln" and American Slavery: a hermeneutical challenge' in *Theology & Ethics in Paul and his interpreters*. Edd Eugene H Lovering, Jr. & Jerry L Sumney.. Abingdon Press. Nashville. 1996, 232-53, at 234-5.

Paul's counsel to slaves in 1 Corinthians 7 is to remain in the state in which they were when they became Christians, intended as setting out an appropriate Christian attitude towards social status. (He gives parallel advice in respect of being married or unmarried, circumcised or uncircumcised, 1 Cor 7:8-24.) But here our quest for what Paul actually said is made more problematic by one of those occasional translation difficulties: 'Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever' *or* 'avail yourself of the opportunity' – the translation can go either way, as footnotes in many versions make clear. Was Paul encouraging slaves to take an opportunity of becoming free if one was presented to them, or to remain as slaves even if offered manumission? The scholarly debate is moving towards 'use freedom'.¹⁵

The Letter to Philemon throws some light on how life 'in Christ' might be lived in the midst of a slave-owning society. It's about the treatment to be given to a law-breaking slave, Onesimus (who has now become a Christian), by his master Philemon (also a Christian). At the root of all this is how fellow Christians are to relate to one another and what 'there is no longer slave or free ... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' might look like in practice. Paul sends Onesimus back, commending him to Philemon 'no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother. ... I am writing to you knowing that you will do even more than I say'. (Philem 16, 21). Paul does not instruct, or even request, Philemon to free Onesimus – and this has frustrated many, who wish that he had been more explicit. Perhaps Paul's lack of a specific command relates to his wish that Philemon's 'good deed might be voluntary and not something forced' (14). Certainly his describing this slave as a beloved brother was a strong hint, especially since the letter was not a private note, but one designed to be read out in the house church of which Philemon was a leader. Martin has commented, 'The truth is that Paul's advocacy of the slave's case was genuinely revolutionary and marked the opening of a new chapter in social relationships. The letter speaks about how the members of Christ's church are to relate to one another and treat one another. Hence the letter has this timeless significance ...'¹⁶

Paul frequently uses the image of slavery as a metaphor for the life of a Christian. He often describes himself as 'a slave of Jesus Christ' (eg Rom 1:1, Phil 1:2), and he quotes the hymn in which Christ 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' [Phil 2:7]. For Paul, all Christians were theologically slaves, 'bought with a price' [1 Cor 7:23]. As Briggs has noted, 'On the one hand ... when everyone is reduced to slavery before God, as owned either by sin or righteousness, then the social import of such a statement would be leveling and egalitarian. On the other hand, when salvation itself is seen as a process of domination, then the critique of social arrangements, resulting from processes of domination is made ... more difficult.'¹⁷

Is Paul, then, a social conservative, arguing in favour of the status quo to which his immersion in his own cultural context had so accustomed him? If we believe this, whether we 'bother' with Paul or not may say as much about our own social and cultural predispositions as about Paul's. Paul was a product of his time – he lived on that Jewish / Greek / Roman planet that is so different from our own setting. Those who criticise Paul for being soft on slavery (if

¹⁵ Sheila Briggs, 'Paul on Bondage and Freedom in Imperial Roman Society' in *Paul and Politics*. Ed Richard A Horsley. Trinity Press International. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. 2000. 110-123, at 111. But contrast the earlier Leander Keck, *Paul and his Letters Proclamation Commentary*. Fortress Press. Philadelphia. 2nd edn 1998, 91 who prefers the option 'choose rather to make good use of your servitude'. Keck's main point is that attempts to change one's social status make that status more important than it ought to be.

¹⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon Interpretation Commentary* John Knox Press. Louisville. 1991. 132-145 at 133.

¹⁷ *Op. Cit.*, 118.

indeed he was), or for not more overtly condemning inequalities in society or more explicitly commending the leadership of women are in fact asking him to leap out of his context and into our own. To decide not to read Paul or be guided by him because his background is so different from ours cheats us of some huge insights. The first lies in what Paul was doing: giving advice or directives to those early and diverse Christian communities that were trying to work out how to live together. Paul's responses to these new situations are – if you will allow me to be wildly anachronistic for a moment – classically Anglican. He's pragmatic, frequently steering a middle course between extreme positions, and incarnational in the sense of offering himself as a model of how to act. Even when we acknowledge that the situations Paul met are different from the questions that trouble us – and therefore many of his answers might not apply (and notice that I said 'might not' rather than 'do not' apply) – we can learn from his approach.

The second set of insights relates to what Paul's original hearers / readers would have made of his advice, for he is frequently more radical than appears from several centuries' distance. His commending a former slave to his owner as a beloved brother is a case in point, as is his acceptance of and respect for women as colleagues in ministry. He declares the church to be a baptised community in which distinctions of gender, class and religious origin no longer determine who we are before God, and before each other.

But there's something even more important. Leander Keck has noted that what can make us see Paul as socially conservative (and write him off on those grounds if we are see ourselves as not conservative) is our loss of his 'eschatological horizon'.¹⁸ Paul believed that Jesus' return – the 'day of the Lord' (1 Thess 5:2) was imminent, and that a key priority was to prepare for this, and to preach the good news to as many as possible. When he advises Christians to remain in the state in which they were when Christ called them he is not arguing against all social change, asking people to stay as they are regardless of how long his society continues. Paul is not sanctifying the status quo (slavery, patriarchy and social inequality) as a divinely ordained order but saying that these things are destined to pass away in the near future: God will soon change them. As another commentator has noted, 'to work for the abolition of slavery in such circumstances would have been like tinkering with the engine of a sinking ship.'¹⁹ What Paul has in fact done – and this is why taking him seriously is so important – is deprive the status quo of its divine sanction.²⁰ Paul hails from a very different time and context from ours but he has, in a sense, freed us from being bound to either his context or our own. He has thus opened the way for Christians in our own age to go out and change the world – since we have now seemingly stopped expecting God to come very soon and change it for us.

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¹⁸ Leander Keck, *Paul and his Letters* 93.

¹⁹ John Ziesler. *Pauline Christianity*. The Oxford Bible Series. Oxford University Press. Oxford. Rev ed 1990. 125.

²⁰ Keck, *op. cit.* 93.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Loose and dishevelled hair was a mark of pagan cults of the time, from which Paul wanted to distinguish the worship within the Christian community – what parallel might there be in our church today? Any suggestions?

- 2
 - a) On a continuum that runs from social conservative to social Radical – where do you place Paul?

 - b) What's your reasoning for placing him where you have?

 - c) To what extent have you asked Paul to leap out of his context and into your own?

- 3 Referring to slavery, it's been argued that Paul deprived the status quo of its divine sanction. What might he withdraw divine sanction from today? Or – what would he write to your congregation about, urging you to go out and change?