

The Puzzle of Paul

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Do you find the Apostle Paul's contradictions puzzling? How can Paul say in one place that women must keep silent and have no authority within the church (1 Timothy 2), but in another place, praise the leadership of a woman "deacon" and an "apostle" (Romans 16)? Or what about the places where Paul seems perfectly comfortable with the practice of slavery (Colossians 3, Ephesians 6, Titus 2), but in his letter to Philemon he all but twists Philemon's arm to persuade the Christian slave owner to free his runaway Christian slave, Onesimus? Or have you found it strange that there is no mention in Acts of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament— How could someone write the story of Paul's life without referring to any of his letters or citing at least some of their content?

This is a vexing puzzle, but there is a way to make sense of what seem to be contradictions. Join me and my facilitators, including my wife, Debbie, Wednesday nights this Easter, to put the puzzle together: April 12-May 10, 7-8pm, Trinity Cathedral Conference Rm A/B.

Session # 1—Introduction to the Puzzle of Paul

First, let's recall a class done at Trinity Cathedral in February 2020, focused on a book by Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle Against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

That book addresses the radical declaration of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:27-28: "**As many of you as were baptized into Christ 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.**"

In a way, this class will be a sequel to that earlier class. This class will examine the fading of this original vision of radical egalitarianism, anti-patriarchy, and anti-hierarchy in the generations that followed Paul. Later generations continued to produce 'letters' in the name of Paul, but they progressively lost the original radical vision. Reflection question: how have

we done over the past two thousand years in reclaiming and realizing Paul's original vision? Don't we still have a long way to go yet?

Session #2—The Four 'Pauls' in the New Testament, including the "Household Codes" in the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Letters

- News flash: Paul did not write all of the letters in the New Testament that bear his name. Of the 13 letters attributed to Paul (about half the New Testament!), we can only be confident that he wrote 7. After Paul was martyred, Christians who revered him wrote letters in his name for many years, seeking to keep his authority alive, but in fact advancing new ideas and new understandings of the Christian faith.

We will need to discuss briefly the phenomenon of "pseudonymity" ('writing under a false name') in antiquity. ("Anonymity" was also common.) Pseudonymity was not necessarily a sneaky or underhanded practice. Rather, it was a common way for a writer to honor and to capitalize upon the high regard with which a figure of an earlier generation was held. It turns out that there are four different versions of 'Paul' in the New Testament, which we will sketch *very* briefly.

- For the purposes of this class, the major innovation introduced by the authors of the pseudonymous letters of Paul was to advocate that Christians should live by "household codes" that describe the proper attitude and behavior of husband & wife, father & child, and master & slave. The radical, egalitarian, anti-patriarchal, anti-hierarchical Paul of the 7 indisputable letters never breathes a word about such household codes. However, the 'Paul' of the pseudonymous letters invokes a household code three times, and in other ways as well abandons the liberating vision of the authentic, historical Paul.

Session #3—'Paul' versus 'Paul' on Gender Roles in the Ekklesia

Session #4—'Paul' versus 'Paul' on Slavery in the Ekklesia

Session #5—'Paul' versus 'Paul' on the Fate of Israel

Recommended Resources

Books:

Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle Against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon* (New York: HarperOne, 2009)

Bernard Brandon Scott, *The Real Paul: Recovering his Radical Challenge* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2015)

Websites:

Elli Elliott, "Which Letters Did Paul Write?," <https://biblesr.org/thesearch/which-letters-did-paul-write?> (Bible Search & Rescue is reliable resource for Bible study created by biblical scholars)

Katy E. Valentine, "Slavery in the New Testament," <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/slavery-in-the-new-testament/> (Bible Odyssey is another trustworthy academic resource providing accessible treatments of an array of biblical topics)

Biblical Archaeology Society, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/> (another fine resource, but this one accompanies a print magazine and therefore requires a modest subscription for full access)

Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/> (A reliable resource offering many translations of the Bible, including the new NRSVue)