

***The Enigma of Paul:
Why Did the Early Church's Great Liberator
Get a Reputation as an Authoritarian?***

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I write this on January 25—appropriately enough, for, according to the church calendar, this is the anniversary of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Whether the date is right or wrong, we, of course, have no way of knowing.

No biblical writer do we know more directly from his own writings than Paul. In those letters that are genuinely his, Paul's personality comes across with unmistakable vividness. He regularly dictated his letters. As he dictated, his thoughts raced ahead of his words, and we may wonder at times how his amanuenses managed to keep up with him.

In his letters, we are immediately struck by the range of his friendships and the warmth of his affection. I once counted the names of about 70 people who are immortalized simply because they are mentioned as Paul's friends. Not only was he devoted to them, willing, as he said, "to spend and be spent" for their sakes, they showed an equal devotion to him. He paid special tribute to two of them, a married couple, who risked their lives for him—Priscilla and Aquila of Corinth (Romans 16:3-4).

With his genius for friendship, he combined a passion for liberty—inward, spiritual liberty. Christ, for him, was the great liberator; Paul urged his converts to stand fast in the liberty with which Christ had set them free. When they sought his advice, he gave it. When a saying of Jesus was available as an answer to one of their questions, that put an end to all controversy. Jesus was his Lord and their Lord alike. But where no such authoritative ruling could be cited, Paul expressed his own judgment: He thought they would be well advised to follow it, but he would not impose it; if they preferred another way, that was up to them. "I am speaking to sensible people," he would say, "judge my words for yourselves" (1 Corinthians 10:15).

How is it that such a friendly person, the great libertarian of the early Church, should have gained the reputation of a rigid moralist, a spiritual dictator and a male chauvinist who believed in putting women in their place and keeping them there?

His alleged misogyny is an incredible feature in the popular mythology of Paul. It was, after all,

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he who stated the principle that "in Christ Jesus" there was "neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free person, neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:26-28). And he suited his action to his words. He was warmly appreciative of the women who, in various places, participated with him in his missionary activity. Two of them in the church of Philippi deserve special mention: Euodia and Syntyche "contended side by side with me in the work of the Gospel," he says (Philippians 4:3); we may be sure that their "contending" did not take the form of making tea or discharging similar ancillary ministries! If, having regard to contemporary

cultural practices, he tells the women at Corinth to veil their heads when they pray or prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:5-10), the veil is to be a sign of their "authority"—their authority to play a responsible part in the services of the church.

Paul combined Jewish ancestry and Roman citizenship; inevitably his writings reflect both his heritage and environment. But what is striking is his ability to pioneer new lines of thought and action at variance with his heritage and environment. It is this that has made him a man for all times. Our mainstream churches, as they inch along toward a worthier appreciation of women's contribution to religious life and enterprise, have a way to go before they catch up with Paul.

From the second century, Paul's memory was venerated in the Church and his writings canonized. But this did not mean that his teachings were understood. It has been said that in the second century there was only one man who understood Paul, and even in his understanding he misunderstood him. Paul's refusal to make room for the element of law was unintelligible to those Church leaders who took it for granted that Christian life must be subject to rules and regulations; they could not believe that Paul really meant what he said. For Paul, there could be no peaceful coexistence between rules and regulations, on the one hand, and the liberty of the Spirit, on the other.

However, the apostle who had been criticized in his lifetime by moralists for being too libertarian by half became highly esteemed by his successors as a rigid moralist himself. How did this distorted picture of Paul's teaching arise and impose itself?

The most authentic picture of Paul's teaching is contained in his principal letters, particularly the letters to the Galatians, to the Corinthians, to the Romans and to the Philippians. However, many people know Paul better from the Acts of the Apostles than from his own letters. But Luke, the writer of Acts, gives a different picture of Paul from that given in Paul's own writings. That is largely because Paul was Luke's hero; but Paul was no hero in his own eyes. In Acts, Paul is always sure of himself; he always triumphs. In his letters, however, Paul is conscious of his own weakness; he is often beset by conflicting emotions—"fightings without and fears within" (2 Corinthians 7:5). And at times, even in his letters, Paul can assert his authority—not his personal authority, but the authority vested in him as Christ's apostle to the gentile world. This is the side of him that is chiefly depicted in Acts.

But the depiction in Acts is not responsible for the distorted popular view of Paul as a rigid authoritarian. There is a small body of literature associated with Paul that presents, as his, certain attributes and features found repeatedly in later manuals of Church order or canon law. These are the letters known as the Pastoral Epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. The relation of these three letters to the other Pauline letters is disputed. One suggestion is that after Paul's death one or two of his disciples gathered together some remnants of his correspondence and notes and, in order that none should be lost, arranged them in the literary context of these three letters. Another view is that these letters are later compositions falsely attributed to Paul.

In these letters, and especially in 1 Timothy, Paul does wear a more authoritarian aspect than elsewhere, and this may help to account for his authoritarian reputation. Consider a passage like this: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (1 Timothy 2:11-12). This teaching expands a passage in 1 Corinthians (14:33-34), which is itself textually doubtful; that is, the passage in Corinthians may itself be a later interpolation, not genuinely Paul. In any event, it

F.F. Bruce, "The Enigma of Paul: why did the early church's great liberator get a reputation as an authoritarian?" *Bible Review* 4 (Aug. 1988): 32-33.

is difficult to square the passage from 1 Timothy with the undoubtedly genuine Pauline affirmation that in Christ there is neither male nor female. But if the passage from Timothy (or from 1 Corinthians) is post-Pauline, there is no need to try to square the passages with each other.

Even in the early Church, some of Paul's letters proved difficult to understand. We should not be surprised if this is still true. But there is one rule of thumb that may safely be used in interpreting Paul today, or in applying his teaching to our own situation. It is this: In view of Paul's passionate concern for spiritual liberty, any interpretation or application that promotes liberty is more likely to be right than one that curtails liberty.

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Prepared for the Web in May 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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