

Paul of Tarsus

(This sermon, presented by Ian Bogue at St Andrews on 11 March 2012 and again on 25 June 2017, was accompanied by a Powerpoint slideshow showing a timeline and context diagrams. It makes most sense when these are viewed first.)

“The First Paul: Reclaiming the radical visionary behind the church’s conservative icon” by Marcus Borg

Paul is second only to Jesus as the most important person in the origins of Christianity. Yet he is not universally well regarded, even among Christians. Some find him appealing, and others find him appalling; some aren’t sure what to think of him, and others know little about him.

When we know and try to live by Christ’s teachings about love, tolerance, acceptance and forgiveness, it is sometimes disturbing and puzzling when people who claim also to be followers of Jesus promote bigotry, intolerance, non-acceptance and even hatred towards others, quoting scripture to support their views as if the writer’s attitudes themselves were God-given. I witnessed this at the 2006 General Assembly. And where do a number of these teachings come from? A significant number are from writings attributed to Paul.

Yet Saul of Tarsus, the apostle who never knew Jesus the man and who Luke says never saw the risen Christ in the way the gospel record says Thomas and the other disciples did, but saw the light in his conversion on the road to Damascus; this Saul become Paul, was the one who worked hardest to take the new way, the way of Jesus, to all manner of people who were not Jews, to women, to slaves and to minorities. Did the same Paul condemn homosexuals, promote the subjugation of women to men, defend the right to keep slaves, condemn Jews for killing Jesus? Well, without our current better scientific understanding of genetic makeup and of the sliding scale of female to male characteristics in different individuals, Paul did follow the thinking of his day that homosexuality was not normal or natural. But to find his teaching on slavery, racial and gender bias, we need to look at his time and his writings.

TIMELINE

On slavery Philemon is leaned on very heavily by the real Paul to pardon, free and accept as a Christian brother, his runaway slave Onesimus, because all in Christ are equal before God.

The pseudo-Paul who wrote Ephesians and Colossians told masters to treat their slaves justly and fairly and told slaves to obey their masters just as they obeyed Christ.

The reactionary non-Paul writer of Titus followed the Roman line: no mention here of any two-way responsibility, let alone equality – just an instruction to Christian slaves to be completely submissive and faithful.

On gender equality Paul in 1 Corinthians and Romans takes equality of men and women in Christ for granted and he accepts and encourages women in leadership in their fellowships.

Conservative pseudo-Paul accepts and upholds his society’s ordering of slaves, children, women and men in an ascending hierarchy. “Wives, be subject to your husbands.”

The reactionary writer of 1Timothy, about 40 years after Paul's death, says "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man." He goes on to blame Eve for the fall from grace as justification for his opinion.

The teachings of Paul himself, the real one, seem to me to be very consistent with the teaching of Jesus.

CONTEXT

This hierarchy of contexts also helps to explain the different messages of the letters. Paul's seven letters, written only about 20 years after Jesus' death on the cross, are from a zealous follower of Jesus who is consistent and courageous and not willing to conform to the old mores of the Jewish priests, let alone the social structure of Imperial Rome.

As time passed, some leaders and writers in the movement were willing to rock the boat a little less, and like conservative Muslims today, clung to the patriarchal order which suited their lifestyle better.

And a few years later still, 80 or more years after the death of Jesus, and 30-50 years after the Romans had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, the writers of the letters made out to have been written by Paul were accepting the prevailing social order of the Empire.

From my other reading and from good preachers, I have for many years been aware of the uncertain authorship of some New Testament letters and of differences between Luke's and Paul's versions of aspects of Paul's life and teaching. Marcus Borg's book and the range of mainstream textual scholarship on which he draws have helped me to see pattern, sense and consistency in the teaching of Paul, and to see how consistent it is with the teaching of Jesus. I have referred to only a little of Paul's message today, in this attempt to clarify his actual authorship and his context.