

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 22 July 2018 Pentecost 9 First century Social Media

Readings for the Gathering

The Epistle

Philippians 1: 1-14

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Paul's Chains Advance the Gospel

12 Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Contemporary reading

The Search for the Historical Paul: What letters did he really write?

John Dominic Crossan

John Dominic Crossan writes about the authenticity of letters apparently written by the apostle Paul

There is also a strong (but not massive) consensus among much of modern scholarship that a further three of those 10 letters were not written by Paul. In other words, we have seven letters certainly from the historical Paul (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon), three others probably not from him (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians) and a final three certainly not from him (1-2 Timothy, Titus). Those are ... historical conclusions and not dogmatic presumptions.

Well and good, but, even if correct, so what? And why should anyone care? It is not just that we have factual and fictional letters of 'Paul' or that those 13 letters are mixed between a Paul and a Pseudo-Paul. It is not just that, after Paul's death, followers imagined him in new situations and had him respond to new problems—as if in a seamless if fictional continuity from past into present and future. The problem is that those post-Pauline or Pseudo-Pauline letters are primarily counter-Pauline and anti-Pauline. What happens across those three sets of letters is that the radical Paul of the authentic seven letters (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon) is slowly but steadily morphed into the conservative Paul of the probably inauthentic threesome (Ephesians Colossians, 2 Thessalonians) and finally into the reactionary Paul of those certainly inauthentic ones (1-2 Timothy, Titus). In other words, the radical Paul is being deradicalized, sanitized and Romanized. His radical views on, for example, slavery and patriarchy, are being retrofitted into Roman cultural expectations and Roman social presuppositions.

...What is at stake in that sad progression from Paul to anti-Paul? Why is it of importance that—at least with regard to slavery—radical Christian liberty is being changed back into normal Roman slavery. It means this: Jewish Christianity is becoming Roman Christianity. And this: Constantine here we come!

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-dominic-crossan/apostle-paul-letters_b_890387.html

Watch, then, how it works in terms of slavery (I leave patriarchy for my next blog in this series on Paul):

Paul the apostle – the man who began by persecuting the Jesus followers then joined them through a sudden and spectacular conversion, became an itinerant tentmaker, church planter and missionary around the Mediterranean Sea in the first century. He travelled extensively sometimes through extreme danger and risk. When away from the churches he had planted, he wrote to them to admonish, encourage, teach and support.

Perhaps you can imagine Paul sitting or squatting to write or maybe pacing his cell as a friend scribed the letter for him. Plenty of time to write, no TV in Roman prisons, nor flush toilets I suspect. Though Romans were known for their bathing and toileting facilities I don't know if they spent much time providing them for prisoners.

Letters were the social media of the first century, just as they were up to a couple of decades ago. Like our emails, texts and tweets, these letters give us hot, straight off-the-press news. Despite being arranged in the Second Testament after the Gospels, the letters were in fact written first. The earliest Gospel has been dated to only around 70 years after the birth of Jesus, while the seven letters attributed to Paul are dated approximately 50 years after his birth – that is two whole decades earlier than the Gospels. And, the Pauline letters were written only about 20 years after Jesus' death. They therefore were definitely written while those who walked and talked and lived and worked with Jesus were still alive.

There are more ways in which our social media and the letters to the churches are similar. Just as someone else can send a text from your phone or send you an email pretending it is from your bank, not all the letters we have in the Bible are written by the person whose name is in the opening greeting. Why is that and does it matter, Crossan asks? He thinks it does.

Let's recap quickly on the contemporary reading: As Crossan notes there are 13 books of letters associated with his name, nine to churches and four to other people, colleagues and protégés. Of the nine letters to churches, three are disputed as being of Paul's hand. Romans, yes, the two letters to the church in Corinth, yes and the letter to the church in Galatia, yes, also the letter to the church at Philippi and his first letter to the church in Thessalonica. However, it is thought that he did *not* write the letters to the churches at Ephesus or Colossae nor did he write the second letter to the Thessalonica church.

Pauline letters to churches:

- Epistle to the Romans
- First Epistle to the Corinthians
- Second Epistle to the Corinthians
- Epistle to the Galatians
- Epistle to the Ephesians*
- Epistle to the Philippians
- Epistle to the Colossians*
- First Epistle to the Thessalonians
- Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*

[Disputed letters marked with asterisk (*).]

Pauline Letters to Persons

The last four Pauline letters in the New Testament are to individuals:

- First Epistle to Timothy*
- Second Epistle to Timothy*
- Epistle to Titus*
- Epistle to Philemon

Of these letters to other people, only the letter to Philemon is thought to be by Paul's own hand.

It was not uncommon in those times for a follower of a great person to write further works in their style. This was not necessarily regarded as misrepresentation or plagiarism as we might regard it today. But, as you heard earlier, Crossan makes the point that these books which cannot be authentically regarded as Paul's works do, however, write in a fashion *counter* to the original work of Paul – in fact, he claims, they first are counter to Paul and then eventually quite anti-Paul. He illustrates this by using the changing view of slavery between the Pauline letters and the pseudo Pauline letters: He writes:

The radical and historical Paul sent back the now-converted slave Onesimus to his owner and told him that a Christian could not own a Christian for how could Christians be equal and unequal to one another at the same time? He reminds him "to do your duty," to free Onesimus, and to consider

him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother — especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” This is found in the letter of Paul to (Philemon 1:8,16), the only personal letter which is thought to be authentic.

Next, the later, conservative counter-Paul that is, writers who followed Paul, using his name takes Christian owners with Christian slaves absolutely for granted, addresses both classes and reminds each of its mutual obligations. “Slaves obey ... fearing the Lord” and “Masters treat your slaves justly ... you also have a Master in heaven” (Colossians 3:22-4:1 & Ephesians 6:5-9). Christian-on-Christian slavery is back but now in kinder, gentler mode!

Finally, the still later and reactionary anti-Paul writers who are thought to definitely not be the original Paul at all never mentions mutual duties, addresses only the master, and says to “tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and ... to be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour” (Titus 2:9-10).

The same trending thought patterns can be traced through these three sets of books - the original Paul, the counter Paul and the Anti Paul for other controversial subjects such as patriarch – Paul’s opinion of and treatment of women, and for homosexuality. The letters written to Timothy for example have the famous passages where women are urged to keep quiet in church, for example “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” ; The first letter to Timothy chapter 2 verse 12.

So, there is a need when using the Bible to get yourself a basic understanding of this extra information which has come into popular knowledge since some of us were in Sunday school. Not only do we need to be careful to read the letters to churches as letter, we need to be informed as to who probably wrote those letters and when.

Reading a letter as a letter is important. These letters are not carefully thought out systematic theology, they are a mentor writing sometimes under very uncomfortable circumstances – for instance from prison, exhorting and encouraging his congregations. Just like a telephone call we are only hearing one side of this conversation. Paul is writing into a context we can only guess at. What was the topic of the arguments he is naming? Why are women asked to cover their heads – of what importance was that in the first century church? Why might women be being asked to keep quiet in church? Were there other reasons than prejudice and patriarchy?

It is important too who wrote the letter. The original Paul the apostle had won his credentials. He had done the hard yards. He was a qualified Jewish lawyer, he did not have a vested interest in telling his congregations what they wanted to hear as he supported himself through his tent making profession. He had risked his life and eventually he would die for his faith. His word then has more authority for us than the words of his followers using his name.

I hope this may rehabilitate Paul a little for some of you. He was a man of his times, but he was key in helping the early Church think through the amazing and confusing events within Jesus life and death. He could see that the kingdom of God which Jesus promoted was a challenge to the imperial Rome and he carried on the fight. Like Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King whom we referenced last week, Paul fought against the rottenness of so much of our political life; he advocated for the outcast and those suffering injustice; he bravely with others acted in subversive ways against the occupiers of his society. We should allow his words to convict and inspire us, even while making sure we are true to our own twenty first century understandings.

We learn from this that when words are written in the Bible, they may have differing significance and importance from each other. Conversations happen in the Bible between good and bad people, between what is imagined to be divine and between humans. Not everything which is said is the “word of God”. Not all actions in the Bible would be condoned by the God most people want to imagine – just, firm but kind. We need to read and listen with a discriminating ear and a discerning eye.

Without totally stripping the Bible of any of its authority we need to discern in our time what, within these letters and the covers of this revered book, still applies to us. Take the issue of women being told to cover their head. It is thought by scholars that this was an issue which arose as women of all classes joined the Jesus followers. This included prostitutes who did not cover their hair as respectable matrons did. In the early days of the church, there grew a desire to conform more and more to roman society and to appear as a respectable organisation which all men and women would want to join. So, if the women were more modestly attired than might benefit the churches' reputation. Even a moderate feminist stance today would ask that this kind of prohibition would apply to men and women, and even then we would dispute that being Christina meant we needed to throw out all individual expressionism. But equally we would hope that leaders within the church would deny themselves such individual leeway that they abused and defrauded others – it becomes a disciplinary matter in many organisations if a leader brings that organisation into dispute. That phrase is used in codes of conduct in many places. It's just that these days you don't bring the church into disrepute by not covering your hair. We still operate on that same underlying principle however, just through different specifics.

Because of the overly-large claims made for the Bible in the past some of which many of us encountered when we were young and impressionable, I can understand reaction against taking the Bible as a rule of life and faith. But the life of faith is not meant to be easy. In our working lives, we study and learn and gain qualifications. If being a Jesus follower is a core part of our lives then it is important to time spent finding out the new information. It is important we are humble enough to admit there might be something to learn from words written over 200 years ago, even when those words initially repel and daunt us. Wisdom requires more than 140 characters and more time than it takes to tweet and re tweet or to text and email. Let's not let our post-internet brains sell us short and leave us only able to understand memes.¹ As the old hymn says: "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word!". Listen to the first verse of that hymn as we end:

We limit not the truth of God
To our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect,
Crude, partial and confined.
Now let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from His Word.

May we be as open minded as we like to be thought we are

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¹ an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations.