

*Introduction*

A good friend and former elder in a conservative evangelical church recently recounted some of his spiritual journey. When he turned to the Apostle Paul, he said: “Paul, damn him!...”, and continued. In broad strokes, the Apostle Paul has been widely held to have been a profoundly social conservative, a misogynist, and an anti-Semite – or to have, with the Gospel of John, laid the groundwork for a pernicious anti-Semitism that has plagued Western history with the Holocaust its capstone.

While this is a common enough complaint about the Apostle, it is by no means the final word. If you were to visit “The Paul Page” on the Internet<sup>1</sup>, you would find hundreds of essays and bibliographies listed, “dedicated”, the site is subtitled, to “the new perspective on Paul”. In broad strokes, “the new perspective” is an expression coined by New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn that has launched for three decades a new look at Paul with reference to his own Jewishness, and that of his fellow Jews, and more recently, with reference to Paul’s citizenship in the Roman Empire, backdrop to Christian missionary expansion in Paul’s lifetime.

Historian C. J. Cadoux, in an Epilogue to his huge study of the first three centuries of the Christian church (*The Early Church and the World* (1925 & 1955) ), says of the early church era: “... we certainly have a moral reformatory movement on a scale and with a potency unparalleled at any other epoch before or since... the achievements of the early Church can defy comparison with those of any other moral or religious movement known to history (p. 611).” This movement had its primary champion in the Apostle Paul.

Paul can be read – selectively – as anti-Jewish, as can Jesus, certainly in particular in John’s Gospel. Paul can be read – selectively – as misogynist, as can Jesus. Paul can be read – selectively – as otherworldly *religious* and a-political, and therefore socially conservative, as can Jesus.

United Church minister Greta Vosper does read Jesus and Paul in the above way, as does atheism popularizer Richard Dawkins, and as do many others.

All I am suggesting this morning is another way to read Paul – and Jesus! – that is not anti-Jewish, anti-woman, and anti-progressive (to use an undefined, anachronistic term). It is a way in fact that points in the direction of the conclusions of C.J. Cadoux. I want to draw on several sources who read Paul positively in the context of various power arrangements in Paul’s time, and who read Paul as deconstructionist and vision builder in the context of Roman Empire.

Last June, on the supposed 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apostle’s birth, CBC IDEAS did a two-part series entitled “Man of the Roads”. Journalist Cindy Bisailon travelled the roads of Saint Paul to produce the compelling documentary. It can be downloaded still<sup>2</sup>. Just “Google” “Man of the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thepaulpage.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/man-of-the-roads/index.html>

Roads” – CBC IDEAS, or ask me for the address. This documentary pointed likewise in the direction of “the new perspective” readings, in particular with reference to Empire.

*Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?*

Jewish-feminist Pauline scholar Pamela Eisenbaum asked the question directly, “Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?”, in an article now accessible on the Internet<sup>3</sup>. She wrote:

What’s a nice Jewish feminist doing studying the apostle Paul? After all, from a Jewish perspective, Paul is a heretic who had a demented view of Judaism. From a feminist perspective, Paul is an ally of Christian conservatives who wish to keep women in a subordinate position to men.

Through her research, she became convinced that the Apostle Paul was one of the first in Western history to address the issues of multiculturalism. She also became convinced that Paul’s view of Judaism and of women can be summed up in the dictum found in Galatians 3:28: “*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.* [NRSV]”

While she admits that Paul’s writings seem at times to lead to anti-Semitism and misogyny, and that they can be variously interpreted, she believes “that Paul assumed human difference is a God-given part of creation, and more importantly, that it is an essential aspect of Paul’s utopian vision.” Rather than breaking down differences such as between Jew and Gentile, Paul instead wants to build family out of precisely those differences. In the end, Paul believed that “in Christ” all the nations would in fact become one family. She concludes:

In sum, I do not believe the dictum in Gal. 3:28 as used by Paul was meant to articulate the destruction of human categories of existence so that people might share the same human essence. Rather, he articulated the construction of new human social relations based on the model of family. Gal. 3:28 encapsulates the message that people who are different can, if they so choose, come to understand themselves as meaningfully related to each other, committed to their well being, and part of a shared world.

This is a radical multicultural vision still being worked on 21 centuries later! By extension, this vision extends to all other areas of what theologian Walter Wink calls “the domination system”, by which political oppression is maintained. This is the ultimate contrary of social conservatism of which Paul has so often been accused.

A further aspect of this is the way by which traditional household codes in Paul are radicalized through the language of “put on/clothe yourselves with”, in Greek *enduo*, which usually is completed with “the Lord Jesus Christ”, or descriptors that evoke the way of Christ. Paul addresses various ancient power imbalances, namely: male over female; Gentile over Jew; free over slave; parent over child; and in Romans 13, state over citizen. In all these texts, there is a call to *enduo* the Lord Jesus Christ. This means a radical nonviolent subversion of all dominating power arrangements. The best study on this still is Walter Wink’s *Engaging the*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.crosscurrents.org/eisenbaum.htm>

*Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. The very language of *enduo* is present in the Galatians 3 passage as well. It is a radical vision of the subversion of the politics of oppression.

### *Paul and Empire*

As mentioned, in the past 30 years of New Testament studies, there has also been an increasing amount of work done on the New Testament in the context of empire. This is viewed as extension of “the new perspective” movement on reading Paul. Richard Horsley is in the forefront of these inquiries, and critiques “the new perspective” precisely for its acquiescence that Paul was offering an alternative *religion* to that of Judaism, albeit imbued with Judaism, rather than an alternative *empire* to that of Rome. At the beginning of the book he edited, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, he writes:

Christianity was a product of empire. In one of the great ironies of history, what became the established religion of empire started as an anti-imperial movement (p. 1).

In four parts, various writers investigate Paul’s fervent radicalism in response to Empire. Over against (Part I) “The Gospel of Imperial Salvation”, where the imperial cult was the “very form by which imperial power relations were constituted (p. 4).”, Paul taught that Jesus Christ is Lord. Over against (Part II) “Patronage, Priesthoods, and Power” that were hierarchical and oppressive to the core, and normative in the Roman Empire, Paul taught “patterns of horizontal reciprocal socio-economic relations with which the Jesus Movement(s) began (p. 5).” Part III, “Paul’s Counter-Imperial Gospel” as well had less to do with justification through faith as Augustine and Luther understood this, or a new religion offered – Christianity – over against an old – Judaism, but “Paul’s gospel stands counter primarily to the Roman imperial order (p. 7)”. Finally, Paul’s missionary enterprise was directed to nothing other than (Part IV) “Building an Alternative Society”. Horsley writes that “It is simply anachronistic to think that Paul was founding a religion called Christianity that broke away from a religion called Judaism (p. 8).” Instead, “in his mission Paul was building an international alternative society (the ‘assembly’) based on local egalitarian communities (‘assemblies’) (p. 8).”

Rather than summarize these four parts, which would be very lengthy. I decided I’d follow the thought of a much shorter essay by New Testament scholar N.T. Wright that covers the same material. Wright by many is considered the world’s leading New Testament scholar. The essay is entitled “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire”, and is available online<sup>4</sup>.

Wright begins by explaining that the issue in the title of his talk is at the cutting edge of contemporary studies of Paul.

I would highlight, rather, the study of the interface and conflict between Paul’s gospel, the message about the crucified Jesus, and the world in which his entire ministry was conducted, the world in which Caesar not only held sway but exercised power through his divine claim. What happens when we line up Paul’s gospel with Caesar’s empire?

Wright begins by discussing Horsley’s edited book already alluded to, that he considers a major contribution to this new discussion of the Apostle Paul. I’ll cite one paragraph at length:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/wright.htm>

The book thus invites us to approach what has been called Paul's theology, and to find in it, not simply a few social or political "implications", to be left safely to the final chapters of a lengthy theological tome, but a major challenge to precisely that imperial cult and ideology which was part of the air Paul and his converts breathed. His missionary work, it appears (I am here summing up in my own way what I take to be the book's central thrust), must be conceived not simply in terms of a traveling evangelist offering people a new religious experience, but of an ambassador for a king-in-waiting, establishing cells of people loyal to this new king, and ordering their lives according to his story, his symbols, and his praxis, and their minds according to his truth. This could only be construed as deeply counter-imperial, as subversive to the whole edifice of the Roman Empire; and there is in fact plenty of evidence that Paul intended it to be so construed, and that when he ended up in prison as a result of his work he took it as a sign that he had been doing his job properly.

Wright discusses four specific issues in Paul's teaching *vis à vis* Empire.

*First* is the word "gospel", which had two meanings for Paul: one with reference to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy; the other with reference to the Roman Empire. Wright explains:

It is important to stress, as Paul would do himself were he not so muzzled by his interpreters, that when he referred to "the gospel" he was not talking about a scheme of soteriology [salvation]. Nor was he offering people a new way of being what we would call "religious". Despite the way Protestantism has used the phrase (making it denote, as it never does in Paul, the doctrine of justification by faith), for Paul "the gospel" is the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah and the world's Lord. It is, in other words, the thoroughly Jewish, and indeed Isaianic, message which challenges the royal and imperial messages in Paul's world. ... Practically, this means that Paul, in announcing the gospel, was more like a royal herald than a religious preacher or theological teacher.

This was direct challenge to Caesar.

*Second*, the content of the gospel. Paul thought of Christ as Messiah in fulfilment of Jewish hope.

Caesar demanded worship as well as "secular" obedience; not just taxes, but sacrifices. He was well on the way to becoming the supreme divinity in the Greco-Roman world, maintaining his vast empire not simply by force, though there was of course plenty of that, but by the development of a flourishing religion that seemed to be trumping most others either by absorption or by greater attraction. Caesar, by being a servant of the state, had provided justice and peace to the whole world. He was therefore to be hailed as Lord, and trusted as Savior. This is the world in which Paul announced that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was Savior and Lord.

This was radical challenge to Caesar's claim. And, in Paul's use of the language of Philippians 2, Paul posited the divine Jesus against the pretensions to divinity of Caesar. This was social subversion and political sedition. It was also ultimately suicide, since Paul was executed by Emperor Nero in A.D. 64.

*Third*, God's justice is revealed in the "gospel" Paul proclaimed. Paul uses a distinct Greek word, here that is socially radical to the core: *dikaiosyne*. "The Greek terms for 'righteousness/justice! justification' derive from the same lexical root (*dik* stem), as does the corresponding Hebrew terminology (*sdq* root). They are part and parcel of the same basic concept (Christopher Marshall in "Paul and Christian Social Responsibility")." The original reader was taken to an understanding of justice where

The basic idea behind the biblical notion of righteousness is 'doing what is right', living in a condition of 'all-rightness', maintaining right relationships, both with God and with other members of the community. To be righteous is to do justice, that is, to bring about harmony and well-being in *all* one's relationships, both individual and communal, and especially by defending the oppressed. Righteousness and justice are relational categories before they are moral or legal ones. So when the biblical writers ascribe righteousness to God (as Paul does in Romans), they are referring primarily to God's faithfulness in his relationships with people, and to God's actions in the world to secure justice for the oppressed. The righteousness of God is essentially the saving action of a faithful, covenant-keeping God on behalf of those in need (*ibid*).

This kind of "justice" is hardly *status quo* justice! "What is right", for instance, in the case of slave-owner Philemon, when Paul urged him to treat runaway slave Onesimus as a brother, took about 1800 years to work itself out into a Christian-led abolitionist movement in Britain and America! One can also say that this kind of justice finally worked itself out with reference to religious tolerance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with Anabaptists in the vanguard. This kind of justice also emerged powerfully amongst a few evangelical women leaders in the American 19<sup>th</sup> century, that eventually led to the suffragette movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and ultimately to the women's liberation movement in the 1960's.

This kind of justice is above all aggressively *restorative*, because God is that way. The "gospel" of this justice is something to crow about, unlike Caesar's false justice that was violent to the core. I shall return to this kind of justice-reading of Paul.

*Fourth*, and finally, without going into detail, the Apostle Paul in the third chapter of Philippians gives a coded challenge to Empire, in which he claims that "Jesus is Lord, and Caesar isn't. Caesar's empire, of which Philippi is a colonial outpost, is the parody; Jesus' empire, of which the Philippian church is a colonial outpost, is the reality."

Two massive studies of New Testament ethics have emerged in the past dozen years, the more recent by American Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley, the other by American New Testament theologian Richard Hays. Swartley's is entitled *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*. The other is entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation*. They both read Paul in the same direction I have presented today.

What I have said about Paul until now has been both a negative and a positive. On the negative pole, I have drawn on a Jewish-feminist Pauline scholar to challenge a widely held view that Paul was misogynist and anti-Semitic. Instead, Paul was radically egalitarian and profoundly

inclusive of Jews, of women, and of slaves and all God's people in a new vision of family in *Christ* designed to encompass the globe. Sadly, it has often been the Church in its definitive break with Judaism in the late second century, and in its fourth-century post-Constantinian embrace of Empire that has perpetuated Empire values to this day. An outstanding study by Alistair Kee testifies to this reversal of Jesus' and Paul's vision for the new communities in Christ. It is entitled *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*. Kee writes:

But there is one conquest made by Constantine, the effect of which still continues to the present day, his most surprising yet least acknowledged... He conquered the Christian church. The conquest was complete, extending over doctrine, liturgy, art and architecture, comity, ethos and ethics. And this is the greatest irony, that Constantine achieved by kindness what his predecessors had not been able to achieve by force. Without a threat or a blow, and all unsuspecting, the Christians were led into captivity and their religion transformed into a new imperial cult.... But this achievement, unheralded then, unrecognized now, represents Constantine's greatest conquest, the one which has persisted largely unchallenged through the centuries in Europe and wherever European Christianity has spread (p. 154).

The writer adds that "the reign of Constantine is a fundamental turning-point in the history of Europe, and not only Europe. From that time the imperial ideology, with all its implications for the accumulation of wealth and the exercise of power over the weak, was given religious legitimation by the church (Kee, 1982, p. 168)." The *persecuted* Church too easily became the *persecuting* Church in its response to pagans, Jews, other outsiders, and eventually criminals.

As to Empire, Paul was radically deconstructionist in counter posing Jesus as Saviour and Lord over against all imperial pretension. This of course has profound implications for today, which amongst many others Richard Horsley presents in *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*.

### *Justice*

One example of that in the area of justice is Christopher Marshall's *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*. The entire theological treatment, drawing significantly upon Paul, points away from all forms of violent retribution of criminal, towards peacemaking and restoration.

In the second part of his book Marshall considers "The Arena of Saving Justice", with a look at Paul and Jesus, seeing in Paul *Justice As the Heart of the Gospel, Divine Justice as Restorative Justice, Justification by Faith as Restorative Justice*, and the work of Christ (atonement) as *Redemptive Solidarity, Not Penal Substitution* (all section titles in the book). With this last heading Marshall challenges directly a reading of Paul about the longstanding dominance of atonement as "satisfaction" and "penal substitution", both retributive constructs, which historian Timothy Gorringer in a study of the impact of such understanding upon the development of western criminal law declares to be a "mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood (*God's Just Vengeance* (Cambridge, 1996) )". I contributed to a book of essays entitle *Stricken By God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* that likewise presents this reading of atonement. Marshall writes: "The logic of the cross actually confounds the principle of retributive justice, for salvation is achieved not by the offender compensating for

his crimes by suffering, but by the victim, the one offended against, suffering vicariously on behalf of the offended - a radical inversion of the *lex talionis* [law of retribution] (pp. 65 & 66).” Finally, he sees Jesus as embodiment of God’s justice, and his way as non-retaliation.

With the fourth Section, “Vengeance is Mine”, Marshall looks at divine and human justice, including the issue of “Final Punishment”, the doctrine of hell. His overall conclusion is, “Restoration, not retribution, is the hallmark of God’s justice and is God’s final word in history (p. 199).” Of hell itself, based on the biblical material, he says: “Maybe a humble agnosticism is the wisest option (p. 196).”

The fifth Section, “Justice That Kills”, spends fifty pages on the issue of capital punishment. It should be no surprise that Marshall finds no biblical mandate for the death penalty. “Capital punishment is incompatible with a gospel of redemption and reconciliation (p. 253).”, he sums up.

Marshall draws heavily on Paul’s understanding of justice throughout his superb book. My whole inspiration for “doing justice” in the criminal justice work I do likewise draws heavily on Paul.

### *Conclusion*

If one wants to read the Apostle Paul negatively, accusing him of misogyny, anti-Semitism, and reprehensible social conservatism, one may. The burden of this brief presentation is that one need not. On the contrary, one may read Paul as a passionate radical committed to an egalitarian anti-imperial vision of humanity as one family in Christ. Paul’s towering radicalism was not only imbued with *agape* love (I Cor. 13), it was enormously revolutionary in impact in the context of Roman Empire.

“It is an irony of history”, claims Religious Studies professor James Williams, “that the very source that first disclosed the viewpoint and plight of the victim is pilloried in the name of various forms of [biblical] criticism... However, it is in the Western world that the affirmation of ‘otherness,’ especially as known through the victim, has emerged. And its roots sink deeply into the Bible as transmitted in the Jewish and Christian traditions... the standpoint of the victim is [the West’s] unique and chief biblical inheritance. It can be appropriated creatively and ethically only if the *inner dynamic* of the biblical texts and traditions is understood and appreciated. The Bible is the first and main source for women’s rights, racial justice, and any kind of moral transformation. The Bible is also the only creative basis for interrogating the tradition and the biblical texts (“King as Servant, Sacrifice as Service: Gospel Transformations”, in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, Telford: Pandora Press U.S. , pp. 195 & 196).”

Many in similar vein suggest that Paul’s radicalism was unequalled in scope and achievement.