

## You Asked for It: What about the Apostle Paul?

A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
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Texts: Selected Pauline writings

Homosexuality. Fundamentalism and progressive theology. Politics from the pulpit. Immigration reform. Offering charity or seeking justice. Church unity. Radical love. Images of God. You certainly do not want your preachers to become slackers this summer! Those are some of the topics you've requested for the annual summer sermon series, *You Asked for It*. And here at the outset I want to take a deep breath and then say "bravo!" for your courage. You could have suggested "baseball" –but no! you asked that we consider complex and challenging matters about which we won't always agree. Hmmmm....sounds like life. My colleagues and I are grateful to serve in a congregation that seeks to integrate a lively Christian faith with the real world in its startling array of joys and sorrows, promise and perils, homeruns and strike-outs (I still wish someone would have chosen baseball!). Preaching is never a solitary activity: it's true one person does the talking, but a sermon is developed from a rich stew of conversation with other people, with the culture and the world around, with the Biblical text, and with God. And we pray always that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our collective hearts will be acceptable to the One who rules over all.

And so, to today's topic! The person who chose it framed his question this way: *Some of us have problems with Paul the sociologist versus Paul the theologian*. He urged slaves to be obedient to their masters. He commanded women to keep silent in church. His writings are among the ones most frequently cited against homosexuality. *What are we to make of Paul in this day and age?*

It's a little ironic for a woman to preach on the apostle Paul (on

Father's Day, no less!)? Recall that this is the author of the text that would keep women out of the ranks of ordained leadership in the Presbyterian Church for 1,956 years. *As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent....For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. [I Corinthians 14:34-35]*

And then there's this admonition, quoted by slave owners to placate their slaves and, no doubt, to promote their own peace of mind: *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm..... [Ephesians 6:5-7a]*

In his sweeping overview of the sinful human condition, the apostle offers the following as evidence: *For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, and were consumed with passion for one another. Curiously, when these verses are wielded against gays and lesbians, you hardly ever hear the very next ones, containing a laundry list of lawlessness from which no one is exempt: They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [Romans 1:26-31] Whew!*

One approach to answering the question about Paul is simply to accept his teachings, regardless of their offense to our post-modern sensibilities. In this interpretive model, the Church receives Paul's writing as the inspired Word of God to which we must conform our practices and behaviors. Paul is pre-eminent.

Another approach is to dismiss the body of his writings as irrelevant for our time-- so far removed from the first-century Mediterranean world. Social and political evolution over two millennia has elevated the concept of human rights, making civil rights crucial and eliminating gender inequality (at least in theory). Paul is passe'.

Neither of these approaches is ultimately satisfying, nor-- I would add—faithful to a Reformed theological understanding of Scripture that affirms its unique and authoritative status as our infallible guide for faith and practice, while simultaneously acknowledging its human authorship and fallible perspective. Let me say that another way: the Bible witnesses to God's Word; it does not contain God's words. Men (and possibly women) wrote the histories, narratives, poems and prayers, instruction and insight we respect as divinely-inspired guidance for what we should believe and do. If we banish Paul to the sociological garbage dump, we silence a major voice, a creative and dynamic pioneer in early Christianity. Paul is the undisputed author of seven New Testament letters—and his name appears on six more, though they were probably written by others. Fully one-half of the book of Acts is devoted to his amazing career. We really can't just slap him away like an annoying mosquito. On the other hand, universalizing his teachings that so often appear to address very particular issues facing the Church at a specific historical junction, seems irresponsible, and may very well obscure the good news embedded there.

So we take yet another approach to mine the spiritual treasures of Pauline theology, an approach which invites us to look at the times in which Paul worked and the social and religious context in which he wrote. We do so not as an intellectual exercise, an "interesting" exploration to fill a summer Sunday, but as part of our quest to find God's Word operative even now to heal and redeem humanity.

We meet Paul first in the book of Acts, as “Saul”—persecutor of the church, described as *“ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison” [Acts 8:3]*. His conversion – on the road to Damascus—has become a benchmark for transformation upon encountering the living Christ. Literally knocked off his horse and blinded by the light, his life does a one-eighty. He joins the disciples and very soon is launched on the first of several extensive journeys that will establish the Church throughout the Mediterranean world all the way to Rome. Paul’s summarizes the essential gospel and his mission in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15: *Now I would remind you brothers and sisters, of the good news that I have proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved. . . .for I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters. . . .then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*

To say that “grace” is the dominant theme in Paul’s writing is an understatement. Grace--the free gift from God--does what the law could never do—reconcile us to God, setting us free from bondage to sin, and granting us new life. Grace became decisively demonstrated in the death and particularly in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is accessible to us through faith. It was Paul’s persistent theme of grace that first captured Martin Luther and ignited the Protestant Reformation, breaking with the Roman church’s emphasis on obedience to the law and good works as the path to salvation.

Surely the grace he experienced personally provided the anchor, the center that held him through a life of adventure

that included a great deal of suffering, chronicled perhaps by one of Paul's followers: *Countless floggings, a stoning, three times shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness...in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty...and besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. [II Corinthians 11:24-28]* Paul himself spoke of a "thorn in the flesh"—perhaps a physical ailment from which he was never freed even after repeated requests to God for healing. And though at times Paul seems to possess a fragile ego that he continually buoys up with reminders of his commitment and accomplishments, he is absolutely candid about his own fallibility. In his letter to the Romans, for example, he wonders at his own inner conflicts: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Who will rescue me from this body of death?* He is clear-eyed about the human condition and our inability to save ourselves. Yet grace abounds. First and last, Paul anchored his life on the unshakeable conviction: *Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Though his theological writing is unsurpassed in the New Testament, the apostle seemed to have a pastor's heart which shines through in his letters. He names many names, commending them for work they have done or support they have given. He organized a massive stewardship program among the older, established churches to contribute to the new break-out congregations in Macedonia. Some of his teachings are clearly in response to questions that arose in the congregations about practice and polity. Never is this more evident than in the letters to the Corinthian churches; the churches in this cosmopolitan trading center argued about everything from ordination standards to how communion would be served (hmmmmmmmm). To this contentious bunch, Paul penned these unforgettable words to remind them of what

finally matters. *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. . . .love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boast or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. [1 Corinthians 13]*

Paul is referred to as “the apostle to the Gentiles” because he expanded Christianity’s boundaries, literally away from its geographic center in Jerusalem, but also from its identity as a primarily Jewish sect. One of the first conflicts in the new church was the process through which a person became a member. Some communities believed it was necessary to practice the rules and observances of Judaism; men would undergo circumcision, women would cover their heads in worship, and all would be subject to Torah law. Paul openly opposed the apostle Peter on this matter, and the issue was debated and discussed at various council meetings (apparently some things never change!). But here again, Paul believed a larger issue was at stake—the means by which human beings are brought into relationship with God. For him, there was only one answer, one framework: For by grace are you saved, through faith. Paul stuck to his ground, writing to the church in Galatia, *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith made effective through love,”* [Galatians 5:6] and reaches the soaring conclusion, *“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.”* [Galatians 3:28] That viewpoint prevailed officially, yet it would be many more centuries before the Church would demonstrate that unity in its institutional life or champion it as a social value.

So back to the question that prompted this sermon request. What about Paul as a role model and guide for us today? How can we reconcile his powerful vision of the Kingdom of God, the rule of grace, uniting and restoring the whole creation, with his limited, restrictive practice? It seems contradictory unless we know that Paul also held the prevalent view among

the early church that the return of Christ was immanent. The Kingdom of God that had been initiated by Jesus Christ would be ushered in fully by his triumphal return. The dominance of the imperial Roman government would be broken and Christ would establish God's rule of peace and justice and harmony "on earth as it is in heaven." Given this perspective, one can understand why Paul would seem relatively unconcerned with changing the social order. Christ would do that right soon, and human divisions would end. In the meantime, he likens the sufferings of the present time to labor pains that will ultimately bring forth the Kingdom. Take heart; he says: For in hope we were saved. [Romans 7:17-24] If Paul had known that God's timeline stretched much further in human history than he had imagined, I think he might have—I think he would have—been more insistent about exhibiting the gracious Rule of God in the social realm. Instead, that task would fall to succeeding generations, including the present one.

It's ironic that Paul's words would be delivered by a woman this morning, speaking aloud in church. Or is it? You decide. In Christ there is neither male nor female [Galatians 3:28]...for freedom Christ has set us free...[Galatians 5:1] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus [Romans 8:1] The word of the Lord....thanks be to God!

I'm going to let the apostle have the last word this morning as we affirm our faith, using his powerful statement of the infallible love of God. Please stand if you are able. [Romans 8:35, 37-39]

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