

Liberating Paul:
Pauline “Evangelization” in the Shadow of Empire

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We gather in a paradoxical time. This is a year, the *Anno Paolino*, in which Paul is more the focus of global attention than has long been the case. Yet it is also true that the apostle has become a liability, an embarrassment, a hazard, for many in our churches and in wider society, for reasons that are easy to name.

From the slave trade in the North Atlantic to racial apartheid in South Africa; from the repression of women to violence against homosexual persons; from the Holocaust of Nazi Europe to the “counter-insurgency” wars in Central America—and the ongoing “war against the poor” being waged today through the insidious interaction of economic policies, political exploitation, and military force—again and again the legacy of Paul has been woven into the fabric of violence in our world.ⁱ

“Be subject to the governing authorities.” “Remain in the condition in which you were called.” “Wives, be subject to your husbands.” “Slaves, obey your masters.”
“The one who resists the authorities resists God.”ⁱⁱ

It is Paul’s voice that has sounded repeatedly to promote the status quo, to legitimize the subordination of some to others, and to suppress all dissent in the name of absolute obedience to authorities, whether political or ecclesiastical. They are Paul’s words with which we are exhorted

again and again to lift our eyes from present injustices as if they were of no consequence and to focus our energies on the promise of a blessed afterlife alone.

The toxic aspect of Paul's legacy, the ways in which Paul has been made an instrument of death, destruction, and oppression, is rightly the object of theological reflection today. For many people, in our various churches and in our universities and seminaries, the case is clear: Paul's voice is one we would do well to ignore or to oppose. The predominance that Paul's voice continues to enjoy in our churches may be an important reason that so many people consider the churches no longer relevant, unwelcoming, even dangerous places.

Two personal anecdotes may illustrate the point. Several years ago, I was asked to give a guest lecture at a local Christian university. As I prepared to speak, a young woman approached me and asked whether I would be speaking about the apostle Paul, and what I would say about him. I offered her my outline and asked her what her concern was. She said that she had just left a relationship with a violent boyfriend, who had insisted that she had to do whatever he said, because the apostle Paul insisted that women must be subordinate to men. Her psychologist had urged her, for her own psychological health, to avoid any conversation in which the apostle Paul was mentioned.

Her case is not unusual. In the 1980s in the United States, two clinical social workers published research showing that one of the most important predictors that a woman was in imminent danger of violence from her domestic partner was that he had begun to quote New Testament passages that insisted on the woman's subordination to the man. Those passages appear under Paul's name.ⁱⁱⁱ

A second anecdote, on a larger scale: from March 2003, the week the U.S. began the war against Iraq with the bombing of Baghdad. That week I was in the hometown of the famous 19th-

century American author Mark Twain, best known today for his humorous writings but world-renowned in his own day as one of the founders of the Anti-Imperialist League and a stalwart opponent of U.S. wars of imperialism. He had written a satirical essay, *The War Prayer*, in which a mysterious stranger explains to a congregation that their fervent prayers for the victory of “their” troops in war are also prayers that innocent men, women, and children be killed and maimed and made refugees in another land. There were different versions of *The War Prayer* on sale everywhere in Hannibal but no one I spoke with knew what the book was about. Meanwhile churches advertised prayer services to “pray for our troops” without a hint of irony. As one pastor explained, “it is the Christian’s duty in a time of war to support the president”; he cited Romans 13. I was impressed that in Mark Twain’s own hometown—a community that survived by trading off his literary legacy—his anti-war and anti-imperialist writings had not touched the community’s minds, and that Paul’s words, which had nothing to do with war, had decisively shaped the imagination in a very narrow way.^{iv}

I began my 1994 book *Liberating Paul* with a catalogue of injuries to innocent people in which Paul has been made a spiritual “accessory.”^v In the years since then, the available illustrations have only grown, and I am sure that any of us could add items to such an indictment. My purpose in that book was, first, to draw the attention of the academy and the church alike to the harm that has been inflicted in Paul’s name as a priority for our sustained reflection—not simply an incidental or marginal concern; second, to show that recent scholarship offered the elements of a very different understanding of Paul; and third, to challenge church and academy alike to wrestle with the legacy of Paul openly, honestly, and in a spirit of engagement with vulnerable and oppressed people in our own time.

That does not mean that we simply seek to defend Paul's honor against all charges. Here a word about the title of my earlier book is in order. In English, *Liberating Paul* is a pun. Its Italian translation (by Editrice Missionaria Italiana), *Liberare Paolo*, and its Portuguese translation (by Paulus, São Paulo), *Libertando Paolo*, get at one meaning of the phrase. But the English phrase can also mean *Paolo che libera* or *Paolo que livra*. My purpose in that early book was not just to ask whether *we* might liberate *Paul*, but also whether *Paul*, understood in the light of contemporary scholarship, might open our eyes—in the academy, in the church, in the wider society—to a more just vision of life together. But one of the most important lessons from the history of the church's interpretation of Paul is that we cannot hide behind Paul's authority as if our own interpretations were innocent and transparent to his purposes. We must take responsibility for ourselves.

Developments since *Liberating Paul*

I wish to mark three important developments since the publication of *Liberating Paul*. First, beginning earlier with Dieter Georgi's little book *Theocracy* and gaining wider currency with Richard Horsley's book *Paul and Empire*, the subject of Paul's place in and attitude toward the Roman Empire—and how we might interpret Paul with an eye toward the circumstances of contemporary imperialism as well—has found a place in scholarship. In the Society of Biblical Literature, the "Paul and Politics" group continues to explore the politics of Paul's world and the politics of contemporary interpretation.^{vi}

Second, not least in the context of those discussions of "Paul and politics," feminist and liberationist scholars have repeatedly warned against any attempt to "rehabilitate" Paul that simply repeats patriarchal patterns. If all the wider public hears in our scholarship is the message that "Paul isn't so bad after all," we will in effect have saved Paul's reputation at the expense of those who

have been injured or degraded in his name—one of the foremost symptoms of patriarchy. I think those warnings are of utmost importance especially as they are directed to my own work.^{vii}

Third, in the last two decades some of the most intriguing writing on Paul has come from outside the company of biblical scholars. If, according to Acts, Paul was abandoned by the philosophers who had no use for his talk of “resurrection,” leaving only a handful of faithful followers,^{viii} today it is a handful of philosophers—self-declared atheists and “dialectical materialists” who have no interest in Paul’s talk of “resurrection”—who have made public calls for renewed attention to Paul as “our contemporary,” a “radical” and “revolutionary” thinker far beyond what they consider the dim religious perception of the churches. I am not convinced they have taken Paul’s radicalism seriously enough; but it is equally true that the church has rarely taken their plea for a truly radical, “religionless” appreciation of Paul seriously enough.^{ix}

I use that term as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer used it in the last year of his life in speaking of the need for a “religionless Christianity” that would rise above the most self-justifying impulses of the surrounding culture. In the United States, one of the most important voices calling for my own church to renounce the impulses to institutional and national self-justification has been that of William Stringfellow. Behind them both stand Israel’s prophets, who repeatedly criticized their thoroughly religious nation for its arrogance and injustice.^x I use the term because I do not believe that Paul intended to establish a new religion, or that we should describe him as a “convert” from Judaism to something called “Christianity.” Nor do I think it is appropriate to refer to him as a “pastor” or a “missionary” (to judge by the relatively short time he spent in the assemblies he founded!). He was an “apostle,” one sent to proclaim the advent of a new lord and what we might provocatively call a “change of regimes,” bearing in mind that the language of *euangelion* and *euangelizesthai* bears political connotations. But what, then, was he doing

when he called a new assembly (an *ekklesia*) into being? His letters suggest that his foremost concern in the formation of assemblies was to make present the body of Christ.

Habeas corpus Christi

It is an old principle of law in the Anglo-American tradition that no king or court has the sovereign right to seize bodies and confine them without offering a justification before common law. The people have a right to demand of the rulers and of the courts: *habeas corpus*, “produce the body.”

Paul’s apostolate was, I suggest, an effort to *habere corpus Christi*, to “produce the body of Christ” in the world. If we listen to the language he used in referring to the life of the assembly and to the apostolic task in relation to the body of Christ, I think we hear an important vocation for the church today. The marks of that vocation are to keep present the memory of the character of Jesus’ death, both as torture and execution inflicted upon him and as obedience to God; to practice a mutualism that begins with obligation to the “have-nots”; and to resist and repudiate any ideological claim that would legitimize inequality and injustice as the fulfillment of human history.

(1) The gathering of the assembly was intended to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). This was the Lord whose shameful death “in the form of a slave” was a mark of his obedience to God (Phil. 2:6-8). Crucifixion was one of the ways the Roman Empire inscribed onto some human bodies its absolute power over them. Distinguishing slave bodies from free—bodies that could be whipped, cut, pierced, and crucified with impunity from bodies that could not be so treated—was of crucial importance to the Roman slave economy. But Paul refused just this crucial distinction. The *ekklesia* for Paul was not a community of the “free,” the safe, the citizens, but a community that refused that imperial distinction and took on the form of the slave. One joined this “body” by being baptized into the death of the crucified (Rom. 6:1-11).

In our day, the world's most militarily powerful nation has claimed impunity from international law. The United States has claimed that international standards concerning torture do not apply whenever it says they do not, and with regard to any bodies it declares are "enemy combatants"; that *habeas corpus* does not apply whenever the government says it does not apply. A new administration is in place, but that administration has resisted calls for criminal investigation of torture and has defended the preceding administration's policies in U.S. court. The new administration has called for closing Guantanamo Bay, but not for closing the prisons at Baghram or Abu Ghraib. Under the new administration, the CIA has declared it will close down "black sites" where torture was conducted—but these are sites that the CIA has long insisted did not exist. The U.S. Army school that trained the chief abusers of human rights throughout the Western Hemisphere continues in operation. My point is that the burden of international law regarding torture cannot be left to depend on the good graces of one president or another.

As William Cavanaugh has argued, out of the experience of the church in Chile under Pinochet, and as church campaigns to "restore historical memory" in Guatemala and elsewhere have shown, to produce the body of Christ, *habere corpus Christi*, in a world that tortures requires always making common cause with those who are tortured and refusing to forget those who have been "disappeared" (*desaparecidos*).^{xi} A church that ignores the tortured no longer "carries about the dying of Jesus."

(2) Paul insisted that far more important than the growth and increased prosperity of the Corinthian church was its foundation, its calling as a community of the "weak," the "low and despised," "those that are nothing" as God's way of shaming the powerful (1 Cor. 1:26-31). Whenever the assembly gathered to eat bread and drink wine but some were still hungry after the assembly had dispersed, "it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat" (1 Cor. 11:20-21). What the

assembly owed to the poor in its midst, to the poor around them, and to the poor in other cities—even in distant lands—was a debt, not to the powerful but to the weak, determined by need, “that there might be equality.” This (as Lawrence Welborn has argued)^{xiii} is an economics of mutuality “more radical than Marx,” fundamentally opposed not only to the patronage and benefaction codes of the Roman world but fundamentally at odds with the logic of capitalism in our own day. Drawing on the teachings of Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino has written compellingly of the difference between a civilization of capitalism as a civilization of greed and a civilization of poverty as a civilization of solidarity. The church, he insists, is always the second if it is true to its vocation. A church that accepts the logic of “the market” but despises the needs of actual people has lost touch with its vocation.^{xiiii}

(3) Paul argued in Romans that present circumstances—the present disposition of power and wealth, the apparent demise of some nations and peoples and the apparent triumph of others—cannot be read as the expression of justice or of God’s will. The argument of the letter turns on the revelation of a “mystery”: that God has *suppressed* the course of history to *prevent* the natural unfolding of present disparities. The future, he states, will be something very different precisely because (as he says in Galatians) the present is an “evil age.” Whatever we may think of the “mythological” aspects of Paul’s apocalyptic thought, this fundamental distinction of present and future, this fundamental refusal to recognize the present as the inevitable and proper climax of human history, is of undeniable importance to his apostolate.^{xiv}

Alain Badiou has commented on a peculiar irony in the present moment: that with the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the “Iron Curtain,” it suddenly became necessary for rich and powerful nations to build new walls, quite literally, to keep Mexicans and Guatemalans out of the United States, to contain Palestinians, to separate armed Shiites from armed Sunnis in Iraq. Instead of

speaking of the “first (developed) world” and the “second” and “third (undeveloped) world,” Badiou insists that “there is only one world” where the enrichment of some depends on the impoverishment of others. A church today that cannot speak with similar clarity; a church that cannot practice an obstinacy similar to Paul’s; a church that acquiesces in claims that the present order is inevitable and (by implication) that the rich and the poor have simply received what they deserve—that is a church that cannot lay claim to the legacy of Paul.

Especially in the current economic turmoil no one seems quite sure what alternative to recommend, beyond the modest claim (of the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre) that “another world is possible.” But Paul, too, was tongue-tied and declared at last (Rom. 11:25) that what he was talking about was a “mystery,” not a matter of observation. If we stand in a similar situation—if our present looks as unpromising as his—then perhaps that shows that we really are his contemporaries. Perhaps that means we should lift our eyes toward the horizon that he saw:

“Let love be genuine . . . rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. . . . Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly . . . You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”^{xv}

This is a *public* ethic, not one meant just for religious application inside “the church.” In that sense, too, we are Paul’s contemporaries; we cannot limit our efforts or our vision to the scope of what our societies declare to be “religion.” “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an

echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of [those who . . .] are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all.^{xvi} The tasks of bringing forth the body of Christ, of refusing to let the dying of that body slip into convenient oblivion, of refusing to let that body be divided into worthy and unworthy members, of giving voice to the Spirit's groaning as we yearn for "the freedom of the glory of the children of God," these tasks are fundamental to a Pauline sense of the church's vocation.^{xvii}

Notes

ⁱ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *The War against the Poor*, 73-88, depending in part on Dom Helder Camara, *The Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971). See Neil Elliott, *Liberare Paolo*, chap. 1.

ⁱⁱ Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 24 (NRSV: on the translation see *Liberating Paul*, 32-40); Eph. 5:22 and parallels; 6:5 and parallels; Rom. 13:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence against Wives* (New York: Free Press, 1979), chap. 3; see also Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

^{iv} See *The Arrogance of Nations*, 5-6.

^v See *Liberating Paul*, chap. 1.

^{vi} Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

^{vii} Here especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work is important: see *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) and *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

^{viii} Acts 17:16-34.

^{ix} My reference is of course to the works of Agamben, Badiou, Taubes, Žižek, and Jennings (cited in the first paper); on Paul's radicalism see my essay "Ideological Constraint and the Christ Event" in *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical* (ed. Douglas Harink; Eugene, Or.: Cascade, 2009).

^x Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (enlarged edition ed. Eberhardt Bethge; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 278-81; the most accessible anthology of Stringfellow's works is Bill Wylie-Kellerman, ed., *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

^{xi} William Cavanaugh, *The Eucharist and Torture* (London: Blackwell, 1998). The Guatemalan Church was responsible for the campaign for Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI) (see www.fhrg.org/remhi).

^{xii} Lawrence Welborn, *That There May Be Equality: Pauline Radicalism and Marxism* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

^{xiii} Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008).

^{xiv} In *The Arrogance of Nations* I discuss Paul's apocalyptic statements as efforts to achieve "ideological closure," gestures of refusal of Roman imperial claims regarding the present: chap. 5 and Epilogue.

^{xv} Rom. 12:9-13, 16; 13:11-12 (NRSV).

^{xvi} *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Second Vatican Council, 1965), 1.

^{xvii} Rom. 8:19-21 (NRSV).