

“Recalculating”

A meditation based on Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; 1 Timothy 1:8-11;

Philemon; and Philippians 4:4-8

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Sharon R. Graff

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There we were—John and I—in a foreign country last year, collecting our travel maps and computer-generated driving instructions in front of the rental car company desk at the Shannon Airport in Ireland. The friendly salesperson asked if we would like a GPS. I can honestly tell you that our decision to pay the extra fees for that GPS was one that saved our marriage! For the next two weeks—while I drove and John navigated—instead of yelling at each other about which way to head on those unfamiliar roads, or which exit to take on those interminable roundabouts, we could direct our collective irritation in unison toward that little device! With amusing regularity, she—yes, the GPS was a she, with a friendly and efficient-sounding female British accent—she would regularly be baffled by our choice of turns. When we failed to follow her direction—either by design or by mistake—her response was always the same: “recalculating... recalculating... recalculating...”

A few weeks ago, while sitting in a seminar in Portland, Oregon, listening to Professors John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg try their best to redeem the Apostle Paul, I began to think that what we Christians need when it comes to making peace with Paul is to do a little recalculating of our own! We have read Paul at his worst—anti-gay, anti-woman, pro-slavery—and, assuming this comes from Paul himself, have thrown the book down in disgust. We have agreed that Paul ruined the simple gospel preached by Jesus—love God and love your neighbor

as you love yourself—ruined it with his own complicated layers of unintelligible doctrine...and in response, we ignore the apostle's teaching. Paul has become the apostle we progressive Christians love to hate—the one whose bigoted words we abhor, and whose words on love and inclusivity and egalitarianism somehow get lost in the shuffle of our own short-sightedness. I cannot honestly say that I have changed my outlook or attitude toward Paul—I, too, have been disgusted by him for so long and it is difficult to change old habits—but I can admit with some level of conviction that perhaps I, like you, have sold Paul short.

Take, for example, the readings of this morning. Scholarship is in agreement that not all these readings are from the original pen of the real Paul. There are, within the New Testament writings, at least three distinct Pauls.

The reading from Colossians—the “slaves obey your master” verse—was one of the verses used during Civil War years to advocate for slavery. It was written by someone who lived a generation or so after the death of Paul and who was trying to accommodate the teachings of Paul to the conventional practices of the latter first century. Borg and Crossan refer to this author as the “conservative Paul”...clearly he or she was not the original apostle.

The two readings from the first letter to Timothy—used in our generation to beat women into submission and GLBT folk back into the closet—originate from a writer near the end of the first or early into the second century, writing long after Paul had died. This author was, as Borg and Crossan suggest, a “reactionary Paul.” That is, he or she was writing in the name of Paul, developing the message of the original Paul, but also countering it at important points. Most biblical scholars today—across the theological spectrum—agree that the letters written by this author (including the letters to Timothy) are decidedly not Pauline because their styles of writing and divisive content run counter to that of the apostle. So, within the letters that make up the New Testament, we have the conservative Paul and the reactionary Paul,

neither of whom were actually Paul the Apostle. Perhaps our recalculating can take into consideration that many of the detestable passages attributed to Paul are, in fact, no more than later attempts by someone who was afraid, someone other than Paul, someone who tried to rewrite the Christian gospel in their own narrow image. And if we cannot excuse this brother or sister in Christ, perhaps, at least, we can better understand their motives.

Finally or, perhaps we ought to say, “firstly,” we have the real apostle—Paul who was struck blind while on his way to persecute more Christians in Damascus. Paul, whose return to seeing was accompanied by a spiritual sight which allowed him also to see Jesus as the Christ; Paul whose return to sight opened his eyes to see Onesimus the slave as a new brother in Christ, and to see the good, the pure, the true and honorable in all, because, in point of fact, God had stooped to see the same in him. This is the Paul that scholars Borg and Crossan refer to as “the First Paul” or “the Radical Paul” because his writings are, for the most part, clearly aligned with the radical teachings of Jesus. This is the Paul who speaks against slavery and for egalitarian Christian communities. This is the Paul who writes enthusiastically of Onesimus the runaway slave as a “child,” as one who has become like Paul’s own heartbeat, and as one who “is no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” This is the Paul, who appeals to Philemon, the slave owner, as another “brother in Christ”—equal to Onesimus the slave... radical equality! This is the Paul that bases his appeal for the freedom of Onesimus, not on obligation or coercion, but on love.

Borg and Crossan agree that to understand letters written to someone other than us in a century that is not ours, we’d best turn the letter into a story. The story behind the letter to Philemon is this: Paul is imprisoned in Ephesus, serving time in the jail of the governor for some serious offense. Philemon is a slave owner and Onesimus, the slave who flees to Paul for protection because Paul is in a powerful position over Philemon. The episodic question

addressed in this brief letter is simple: can a Christian master keep a Christian slave? Basically, this should be the shortest letter, six words at most: "Dear Philemon, Free Onesimus. From Paul." But it takes Paul 25 verses because this is a teaching opportunity that the apostle will not ignore. Philemon's entire household is watching what their master will do about this fugitive Onesimus. Yes, Onesimus has apparently become Christian, but he is still a slave. According to Roman law, his running away could cost him his life. Paul is transparent in his desire that not only will Philemon spare the life of Onesimus, but that Philemon will do the freeing freely and receive his former slave as the brother in Christ he has become. Because of his apostolic authority over Philemon, Paul could force him to free Onesimus, but here Paul chooses the more persuasive path. To force the issue would deny Philemon the chance to practice (and strengthen) his own Christian faith. So, as Borg and Crossan taught me last month, "what we have here [in this little letter to a slave owner] is a masterpiece of what the Romans call rhetoric, and we might call manipulation!...What we have here is a revelation of Paul's character and a glimpse into the heart of Pauline theology that insists on faith-with-works...Paul is persuading Philemon to do something he ought to know to do on his own...the point Paul makes is clear: a Christian master cannot hold a Christian slave, because how can you be equal and unequal at the same time?"

Listen again to Paul's words, and imagine how you would feel if you were the owner of the slave in the story...

"To Philemon, our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ..." Do you see that already Philemon is accepted as an equal, and Apphia—a woman—as Paul's sister in faith? This certainly does not sound like the purported Paul we read at the beginning of this morning's service.

He continues: "When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward Jesus..." Paul is laying it on thick, positively gushing as he writes of and to Philemon, "I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother..." Keep it coming, Paul! I believe Philemon's defenses are weakening. This is like praising a person's generosity before hitting them up for a loan.

Then, abruptly and tersely, Paul, who is himself doing his duty sitting in prison, requires Philemon to face his own duty, that is, to do something much more radical than either to forgive Onesimus or to give him to Paul as his legal protector, but for Philemon to receive Onesimus back freely. Hear this radical request in Paul's own words: "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become...I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you...so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother, both in flesh and in the Lord...So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me..." Paul concludes his pointed and radical request that Philemon abolish the slavery of Onesimus by offering to pay for any inconvenience or debt incurred by this incident out of his personal funds, and says, "Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say."

As Borg and Crossan write in their book, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*, "this letter's conclusion, like its opening, reiterates that the entire affair of Philemon and Onesimus is personal, but not private; Philemon [is reminded] that [this] is a public matter, and everyone is watching what he will do..." History has deprived us of knowing the end of this story of Philemon and Onesimus. We have no assurance that Philemon followed Paul's radical advice and freed Onesimus freely, though the anti-slavery writing of the later, conservative Paul that Kerry read this morning, suggests to us that by the

generation or so after Paul died, the Roman establishment of slavery was being threatened by this upstart Christian egalitarian religion. And so, in reaction to the radical Paul we see in this story, we are left with the words in Colossians used tragically through the centuries to defend the horrors of slavery: “slaves obey your earthly masters in everything...”

By the end of the first century, so threatening was this Christian ideal of equality—an ideal practiced by Jesus and preached by the Apostle Paul—so threatening was it that the reactionary author writing in the name of Paul would flatly state, “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.” These destructive words are found in the little letter to Titus, written in reaction to the words of the radical Paul to free Onesimus freely. Written, in effect, to sanction hierarchy by not even addressing slaves directly. Written to insist that they all return to Roman normalcy of masters over slaves by commanding slave owners to assert their God-given authority.

My friends in Christ, those who argue that these words defending slavery are every bit as authentic as those we read in Philemon advocating for its abolishment...well they, are, I believe, getting their exercise by jumping to conclusions. It is a stretch for anyone to accept that these later-written words are original issue from Paul’s pen to our ears. So do we discount these writings that are obviously not from the original—or “radical”—Paul? No, but neither do we elevate them to the authoritative place of the radical Jesus or the radical Paul who followed in his footsteps. As part of being biblically literate—as opposed to being a biblical literalist—we must realize that the bigoted teachings on slavery from Colossians and Titus did not derive from the Radical, or First, or Authentic Paul, who was an Apostle of Jesus. This Paul—this Radical Paul—was and is radical because in the midst of the Roman Empire that claimed hierarchy as a

right by building its imperial strength on the backs of slaves, this Radical Paul claimed a reality diametrically different. "I appeal to you," says the Radical Paul, "not with power over you, but on the basis of love...take Onesimus the runaway slave, the slave you could rightly have put to death, take him back forever, no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother...welcome him as you would welcome me...and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit..."

Recalculating... Turning direction... You see, today we are invited to recalculate our own biases about the Apostle Paul. By exploring the teaching on slavery of the three major authors of the New Testament letters—the Radical or Authentic Paul, and the Conservative and Reactionary Authors writing long after Paul was dead—I hope we can begin to see that Paul, as Borg and Crossan declare, Paul is more appealing than appalling. This recalculating may take us some time...after all, Paul is the Apostle we have loved to hate. Remember, that Paul is also the Apostle who authentically and earnestly admonished, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, think about these things..." I dare us, scripture challenges us, and God invites us to do the same for and with the Radical Paul.

Amen and Blessed Be