

## Paul as Pastor

I want to focus on Paul's ability to be a pastor to his communities. This is a fascinating topic to explore because I think it's been overlooked. By & large in the history of interpretation, Paul has been explored primarily for theological reasons. People have been attracted to his theological ideas, the depth of his understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ. & that's all essential & well & good.

But there is another side to Paul & that has to do with his pastoral ability. & in dealing with this topic we'll be able to approach both the question of how he treated his communities & then also how he worked with his colleagues & co-workers, including the many women who were among his companions.

There is an unusual combination of images in 1 Thess 2:1-12:

*But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour & toil, brothers & sisters; we worked night & day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, & God also, how pure, upright, & blameless our conduct was towards you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging & encouraging you & pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom & glory.*

What is remarkable about this passage is that in just a few verses, Paul combines both feminine & masculine imagery to describe his pastoral practice. With the Thessalonians, Paul is on the one hand, as gentle as a nursing mother caring for her children & he's like a disciplining father who exhorts, encourages & also insists that you conduct yourselves as worthy of the God who calls you. In other words, Paul presents himself in relationship to his communities as a good parent. Someone concerned about & interested in the well-being of his community.

This is not the only passage in Paul where he compares himself to a good parent. In **1 Cor 4:15-16** – another community he was very fond of – Paul writes:

*For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.*

How does he relate to the Corinthian community? He says “*I really became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel*” & then he calls them to imitate him. & the imitation is not an act of arrogance. It is an imitation based on the fact that Paul believes that his life is in conformity to that of Jesus. Elsewhere he would use the phrase “*imitate me as I imitate Christ.*” & that's what this is about. He views

himself as a father to this community.

Elsewhere in the same letter he reminded them that when he first came to the Corinthians, they were like little infants. He said, *I had to feed you on milk first*, just as babies cannot go to solid food right away. But later on, when they were worthy of receiving a more adult message, then Paul would feed them much more challenging information.

Going back to Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians, In 1 Thess 2 Paul has a few other things to indicate about his pastoral practice. One is, look at the repetition of the phrase "you know" or "you yourselves know" or "as you know." That phrase is repeated many times in the first part of the letter. I suppose one could take a cynical viewpoint & say that in a sense Paul could be using this phrase ironically & saying "oh as you know", & really he means "as you should know & I wish you did know!" But the context leads me to believe that it's intended literally as it is.

*You yourselves know, brothers & sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered & been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know... (1 Thess 2:1-2)*

In other words, I think Paul uses this expression to remind his hearers that they already know something that he is simply reminding them of. It's really good pastoral practice. In a sense he affirms that they already have the basics & yet the point of his writing the letter was to give them more advice, to treat them like a mother & a father simultaneously & to encourage them to stay on the right path. This is good pastoral practice.

I once came across a Baptist billboard in the Southern USA with this wonderful affirming message: *"God loves you just the way you are. But he loves you too much to leave you that way!"* - that's really Paul's attitude. Paul is saying I accept you for who you are. You are my communities. I have treated you like a parent. But like any good parent, I think you need to do more. You need to encourage & exhort one another. Again, I think this is just good pastoral practice.

This is exactly the context of the Thessalonian community. 1 Thess shows us that one of the problems there was a lack of hope, because people had thought that with the death of friends, they were going to miss out on the resurrection & that perhaps they had been abandoned.

Or in another instance, Paul seems to have a concern to address the issue that some thought they were already leading the resurrected life & so there was nothing more to come. & Paul had to address that issue & say *"No! We are not leading the already resurrected life. There is more to come & you have to keep your expectations firm."* In either case, what Paul is doing is both providing some

comfort & yet also certainly encouraging them, exhorting them & even, in some ways, cajoling them to do better & do more.

Another aspect of Paul as a pastor is to see how he worked with his colleagues. He had an enormous number of colleagues around him & among them were many different women. One place we see evidence of the breadth of the number of colleagues that he had, is found at the end of the letter to the Romans in Rom 16.

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, & help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many & of myself as well. Greet Prisca & Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, & who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus & Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, & they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, & my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena & Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; & greet his mother - a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, & the brothers & sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus & his sister, & Olympas, & all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (Rom 16:1-16)*

This is quite a passage – firstly because it can be tricky to try to get through all the names without tripping over them! But look at the number of people & notice that many of these names are feminine, such as Tryphaena & Tryphosa, Junia, Mary, Prisca & Phoebe & so on. Others are male names. Clearly Paul had an enormous number of both men & women companions.

Prisca & Aquila were a married couple Paul met in Corinth & he spent a lot of time with them exercising their trade, so making tents, perhaps for the Isthmian Games that took place there on a regular basis, where tents would be needed for the athletes & the visitors.

But also a very prominent person in this instance is Phoebe. Phoebe is a member of the church at Cenchreae & clearly, she must have been the head of a house church. But what's interesting in this passage is that she is actually given a title that is used elsewhere of a formal ministry. She is called "a minister of the church at Cenchreae" & she is also called "a benefactor." The word for "minister" in the Greek is *diakonos* - "deacon". What's interesting about this word in Greek is that

it is not the feminine form of the word. She is called rather by the masculine form of the word, although she is clearly a woman both by the name & Paul calls her “our sister.” But the fact she is called a “*deacon*” in the formal sense has raised the issue of: what is her role?

As the roles of ministry develop in the Pauline churches, they become more hierarchically oriented. They became more institutionalised. & eventually there became the separation of bishops (*episcopoi*), priests or elders (*presbyteroi*) & deacons (*diakonoi*). These became separate ministries later in the church & led to formally ordained positions in ministry.

We don't know for a fact that at the time Paul was writing the letter to the Romans, that this is an ordained ministry as such. That word perhaps would be anachronistic. What is important however is to say that it is a formal word for ministry. It is some sort of formal service to the church. Therefore, by Paul acknowledging that Phoebe our sister is a minister of the church at Cenchreae, he seems to be noting that she has a formal position of both authority & ministry in that community. She is also known as a “*benefactor*”, which would indicate she may well have been the head of a rather wealthy household - not unusual for some of Paul's communities, although clearly many of the members of the community would have also been poor. Scholars think that, by & large, the message of the gospel was received primarily among the poor in Paul's day, rather than among the rich.

I use this example of Phoebe here to point out that there were women who had a prominent role in Paul's communities. Certainly, Phoebe is one of them but there are perhaps others as well. Unfortunately, in this list from Rom 16, many of the names listed are only recorded here in the NT & are not found elsewhere. Therefore, we don't know as much about them & their actual positions in the communities of Paul, as we would like.

This leads me to address another question. If Paul had women colleagues as well as men colleagues (e.g. Timothy, Titus, Silvanus, Barnabas & others), then what was Paul's view about women? I raise this question here especially in the context of Paul's pastoral practice, because this is another burning issue for our modern time. Given the fact that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, men really had the most dominant roles especially in authority, it's a valid question to raise. Because only in modern times has the whole question of the equality of women & men really been raised.

First we need to be reminded of the fact that Paul recognised that in Jesus Christ all human reality had changed. For example, in Gal 3:27-29 Paul writes:

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male &*

*female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. & if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

This passage is very important to set the context for an understanding of Paul's view of women, because what it says is that in Christ men & women are equal. In the same way there is no more distinction between Jew or Gentile, Jew or Greek, or a slave or a free person. Paul will make the point when he writes to Philemon that he is to take back his runaway slave Onesimus as a brother because he has been converted to the Lord. Here we see in Gal 3 Paul's overarching approach to humanity. Men & women have equal identity in Christ Jesus because being in Christ clothes us with a new identity. It bestows upon us a new identity. Therefore, all are equal in Jesus Christ.

But how have some got the idea that Paul was a bit of a misogynist, someone who hated women? Some of this comes from an over-reading of some of the passages in which Paul speaks of the limited roles that women should have in certain circumstances. One of the most famous ones is in the letter to the Ephesians 5:21-30 - which may or may not stem from the hand of Paul himself - but certainly is within the Pauline tradition.

*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church & gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind - yes, so that she may be holy & without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes & tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body.*

This passage causes many modern hearers to cringe. All we seem to hear is "wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord." & sometimes in church you get the husbands poking the wives & saying: "see, I told you so. You're supposed to be subordinate to me!" Unfortunately, this is a misreading & a mishearing of this passage.

First of all note that the first admonition is in v.21 "*be subordinate/subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" The same verb is used multiple times in this reading. It's not simply about the subordination of wives to husbands!

Secondly, the passage is not really a commentary on the role of women in marriage as compared to that of men. The passage is all about a theology of the

church, an ecclesiology, an understanding of how the church relates. The church is in a relationship with Christ & Christ is like the bridegroom & the church is like a bride. So marriage is only used as a metaphor here, an analogy for comparison purposes.

Thirdly the more difficult words are really addressed to the husband because the admonition is “*husbands love your wives even as Christ loves the church & handed himself over for her, to sanctify her*” & so on. In other words, the husband is challenged to love his wife & not only that, but later in the passage it is repeated “*love your wife as your very own body*”, which means to love with everything that you have. & keep in mind that Paul thought that love was the highest virtue. In a sense love is the more demanding challenge here rather than subordination. In either case, however, subordination is to one another. Both have a mission to serve one another.

This is only one of many passages that cause modern hearers some anxiety. But I think it is unfair to accuse Paul of being a misogynist. He did not hate women. There were many women in his communities who were his colleagues & co-workers & some of them were even heads of households. Acts mentions Lydia the purple dye dealer from Philippi who was the head of a household, probably a wealthy woman & so on.

In pastoral practice Paul had the ability to be both stern & rather demanding, he had high ideals to which he wanted his communities to live up to. But he also had a real pastoral side to him, an adaptability, a flexibility. & this was exercised both in terms of his colleagues with whom he worked & the communities whom he served & to whom he preached.

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