

**The Samaritan Institute  
at  
The Sunshine Cathedral**

**\*The Apostle Paul:  
Friend or Foe?**

**A Six Week Course**

**\*Course curriculum designed and prepared by  
The Reverend Dr. Durrell Watkins**

*"Here at the Sunshine Cathedral, we are  
seekers and students of Truth, empowered  
by Spirit, sharing the Light with the World"*

**Sunshine Cathedral  
is  
A Metropolitan Community Church  
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## **The Apostle Paul: Friend or Foe?**

In this class we will examine some of the writings of the Apostle Paul and explore how he has been misunderstood and misrepresented, and how he may actually be a very empowering resource for Progressive Christians today. The only text book needed is a bible.

Letters written by the Apostle Paul (Pauline Literature):

- 1 Thessalonians – 50 CE
- Galatians – 50 CE
- 1 Corinthians – 55 CE
- 2 Corinthians – 55 CE
- Romans – 55 CE
- Philippians – 55-60 CE
- Philemon – 60 CE

St. Paul's execution (62-67 CE)...for this class, we'll say 64 CE

Letters once believed to be written by the Apostle Paul (Deutero-Pauline Literature):

- Ephesians – 90 CE
- Colossians – 55-90 CE (some scholars still believe Paul wrote Colossians; others believe it is a later work modeled on Ephesians; for this class we are placing Colossians in the Deutero-Pauline category)
- 2 Thessalonians – 75-90 CE
- 1 Timothy – 100-150 CE (second century!)
- 2 Timothy – 100-150 CE
- Titus – 100-150

The New Testament Book of Hebrews has been attributed by some to St. Paul, but of all the books thought to be Pauline (or even Deutero-Pauline), Hebrews is the one that doesn't claim to be authored by Paul.

For the purposes of this class, we will consider 1 Thess., Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon to be authentic, Pauline literature.

We will share the consensus of contemporary scholarship that Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and probably Colossians are all written after Paul's lifetime by people using his name as a Pseudonym. We will also consider Hebrews to be written totally anonymously and to not be part of Paul's writings.

For this class, therefore, we will discuss passages from the 7 undisputed letters of Paul: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1&2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon.

# LESSON1

## 1 Thessalonians

Paul's letters are the OLDEST Christian texts we have available to us. Each of his actual letters (the 7 he is most likely to have written) all predate the earliest gospel, by as much as 10-20 years (Mark was probably written around 70 CE and is thought to be the first of the four canonical gospels)!

Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to be influenced by the Jesus Movement.

Paul and John seem to be influenced by the Christ Cult.

That is, the synoptics focus more on the life, teachings, and example of Jesus and how followers of Jesus are to negotiate living in a pluralistic (and sometimes hostile) world.

John also tells stories about Jesus' life (perhaps more embellished than the other gospels) but his intent seems to highlight the divine nature of Jesus (and perhaps, as some contemporary scholars suggest, to highlight the divine spark that resides within ALL of God's children).

Paul never met Jesus and seems to have very little interest in his actual exploits. His experience is of the living Christ, that is, the Christ experienced beyond Golgotha. Paul's experience and emphasis is on the Resurrected Christ and his focus is more on the metaphysical nature of Jesus and how the spirit of Christ is available to empower, enrich, comfort, and guide the "body of Christ;" the body politic made up of Christian believers/seekers. Paul's writings, therefore, are far more "doctrinal" (more intent on teaching a certain ideology/theology/philosophy) than our other biblical writings.

Paul is writing 1 Thess. in response to a mostly favorable report he has received from Timothy who has visited the Thessalonian church and returned to Paul in Corinth.

Writing in the 50s, Paul was part of Temple Judaism. The institutional church did not yet exist, nor did rabbinical/Talmudic Judaism as we know it today. Paul was part of a Judaism that is no longer with us, and was part of a movement within that Jewish world that believed (as other movements did), that the long awaited Messiah had come. This is important information, because the truth is Paul was neither a Jew nor a Christian as we understand those terms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He was, of course, Jewish, but in a time when Judaism looked very different than it

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does today. And, he was a devotee of Jesus (or, at least the Risen Christ), but not part of the institutional church as we know it today. Keep these facts in mind when reading Paul's letters (and notice how they differ from the Gospels which are written AFTER the destruction of the Temple).

Paul uses both Greek and Judaic terminology in his letter. He calls Jesus "Lord" (implying cosmic power, as the Emperor was thought to have). In Paul's understanding of a flat world in a three tiered universe, Jesus has been "raised" (Resurrected/Ascended...perhaps the same concept to Paul) to the presence of God in (or above) the sky. So, Jesus as "Lord" in the sky suggests he is sovereign over the world (now that the world has executed him).

Paul also calls Jesus "Christ" (the Greek form of Messiah, implying the fulfillment of the hope that God would send a deliverer). Paul is better than most at using words and images that would appeal to different groups and actually bring them together in conversation.

Jesus' apostles had been chosen by him. Paul claims to be an apostle but claims he was chosen by the Resurrected Lord in a vision (compare Paul's "visions" to Mark's empty tomb to Matthew/Luke/John having an embodied/resurrected Jesus interact with people...notice how at different times and different places people understood resurrection differently). Of course, the other apostles don't necessarily believe that Paul has been chosen by Jesus after his execution but Paul insists he is the real deal. Paul is a change agent, challenging Judaism, the established Jesus movements, and the Empire all at once!

Paul, as many people in antiquity, believes in diabolical forces at work to impeded good people from prospering (2.18).

Paul also thought the parousia was eminent and that he would somehow have a special privilege or honor in that event (2.19-20).

What about Paul's belief in the parousia?

In a Question & Answer column in the Sun Burst (the Sunshine Cathedral newsletter), this issue was addressed:

### **July 20, 2008 – Where Do We Go After Death?**

**Question:** What is your understanding of where we "go" after death? When someone dies, invariably people will say, he or she is now in

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heaven, but then what is the reference to the second coming of Christ when the dead will rise?

**Answer:** I know that energy can't be destroyed, it only changes form; so, I assume the energy of consciousness is also never-ending. As a person of faith, I trust that life is somehow never-ending. Beyond that, I probably don't know anymore than you do.

During Jesus' execution, a fellow "rebel" who is being killed next to him reportedly says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Realm," and Jesus responds, "...today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23.42-43). Luke also has Jesus telling a parable about a poor man who suffered in life but who, after death, was "carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham" (Luke 16.22).

Luke is writing at least 50 years (and some scholars think as many as 90 years) after the crucifixion of Jesus. The Apostle Paul, only about 25 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, writes, "...we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep; for the Lord...will come down from the heavens, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are...left, will be caught up together in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4.15-17).

Luke's idea seems to be that consciousness survives death immediately, while Paul, at least in his early writings, suggests that maybe those who die are simply resting and will be raised back to life later.

Paul believed that Jesus would return to earthly life in his lifetime. So, the resting period, in Paul's mind, wouldn't have been a long one. Decades later, when Luke is writing, no such "second coming" had occurred, and so Luke may be rethinking the issue. In any case, Paul and Luke have different ideas of how consciousness survives death; what they both believe is that consciousness does somehow survive death.

Paul and Luke are each making his best guess, but what happens beyond this life is a mystery to us until we experience it. What the writers are saying is that the value of our lives is not limited to our earthly years, but as far as what is next, we may just have to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5.7). What we can trust is that life is good and sacred and that its importance is not limited to the years we spend on this earth. That's pretty "heavenly" regardless of how it plays out.

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Sex???

1 Thess. 4.3b-5

Sex is not only permissible/moral within “marriage” (covenantal fidelity), it is something one should expect! Some apparently were arguing that a “life in Christ” precluded expression of sexuality. Paul (of all people) disagrees.

In Corinthians, Paul frowns on exploitative sex with prostitutes, and in Romans, he disapproves of sex connected to idolatry, but in Thessalonians he actually advocates for sexual sharing within a covenantal relationship.

“Marriage,” for Paul, isn’t just about procreation or even about satisfying biological urges, it is about sharing one’s whole self in a caring and mutually respectful way; such “marital relations” are not only acceptable but are part of the holiness to which we are called.

{This is an important point in response to those who argue same-gender love is somehow disordered because it is not procreative. Remember, women who have had hysterectomies, women beyond menopause, people who take birth control, men with low sperm counts, and many others enjoy sexual intimacy for reasons other than procreation. Sex has always been about more than just making babies}

Church Order

5.12-22

Notice a key theological instruction: TEST EVERYTHING...keep [only] what is good! (5.21)

What have you read/heard in this section of the class that has offered hope, encouragement, food for thought, or a new way of thinking about Paul?

For next week: Read Galatians (or some part of it) and bring questions that come up from your reading.

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## LESSON 2

### Galatians

1.1, 3 – Father = Patron

Mediator/Broker...one who puts others in contact with the Patron!

Patrons form fictive kinships with their clients.

Grace and peace = grace (Greek) and peace (Jewish)...Paul is multicultural.

4 - In a collective, what one does one does for all...whatever Jesus did or God did to or through Jesus was done for the Whole.

In Greek culture, warriors would “give themselves” to standing guard over the city, and if they died defending the city, they died “for” the city. This understanding of one who lives totally for the collective (and if dies in service to the collective therefore has died “for” the collective) seems to be the cultural understanding Paul is applying to Jesus.

6-9 – What gospel is so objectionable? Perhaps someone is suggesting that people must fully convert to Judaism before they can follow the Jesus Way. Paul vehemently disagrees with this supposition (and later even points out that Titus was never Judaized).

Notice the belief in curses as a way of protecting intellectual property!

11-12 – Paul claims that what he knows, he knows from an ASC (Altered State of Consciousness) experience! His “secret” (sounds a little Gnostic?) knowledge about God and God’s messiah comes from mystical (secret/private) experience. Something not known to the masses has been “revealed” to him (or so he claims).

13-14 – His zealous compliance with the status quo led to abuse; deviating from the norm has offered him freedom and insight.

15-17 – part of the “system” before; now is less impressed with institutional authority. He was “called” (destined) to do a new thing for people outside the system. He sees himself as a change agent!

2.1 – Another ASC experience that directs him to visit with other leaders.

3-4 – false brothers (people who disagree with him!)

7 – gentiles (the “peoples” or “uncircumcised”)...circumsized (ritualistically removed foreskins) and uncircumsized (gentiles, the “foreskins”) Male circumcision (or lack of it) was culturally defining.

9 – a “cease-fire” is negotiated between those who feel called to minister to the no-foreskins and those called to minister to the foreskins (sounds a little crude, but there it is).

11 – “in his face” – an idiom suggesting an opponent has attacked and the “victim” has stood up to the attacker but perhaps did not prevail (Paul must think the “cease-fire” has been broken...Peter has broken table fellowship with the “gentiles” which Paul finds unacceptable)

15 – Jews by nature (physis)...customary...what happened customarily/habitually was “natural”...Jew by tradition/practice/self-identity (not a Christian...there was no such thing!), but one who believes Jesus was the Messiah and that he somehow did not stay dead! (v. 16)

16 – Justified by law = being found acceptable to God by adherence to laws/traditions. Justified by faith = being found acceptable by God by trusting in God (who “raised” Jesus from the dead). *Died for nothing?* See note for 1.4

3.2 – “spirit”...have rules ever enlivened you? Or did trust/hope/confidence enliven you? Paul is appealing their charismatic, or ASC experiences.

3 – having experienced being enlivened, why would you settle for mere conformity?

6 – Abraham’s righteousness was from trusting God (not obeying institutional rules).  
Righteousness = right relationship

7 – “descendants” of Abraham who follow his example of trusting God (this would include people from other traditions and might exclude those from his tradition, according to Paul’s argument). Paul is also suggesting that trusting God must include trusting that God has raised Jesus to life.

13-14 – Jesus was cursed by law (Dt. 27.26; 21.23). So, law has limitations, but God doesn’t. Trusting in God’s limitlessness is the key to justification (acceptability) or righteousness (right relationship with God).

18 – God’s promise predates the Law

22 – promise given to those who believe (in God’s act of raising Jesus).

28 – Says it all (we are all unified and equal)

4.6-7 = Abba “Father” (in this case probably doesn’t mean Daddy, but is a title referring to a Patron...see earlier note). Spirit of messiah is experienced in gatherings (ASC), so they know he is risen to life in God and so they can believe in God’s life-giving/renewing power and this experience validates that all who are having it are children of God (acceptable to God, in relationship to God, are clients of the divine Patron).

9 – known by God (acceptable to)

10 – astrology

21 – son of a slave was born son of one free through promise (surrogacy)...sexist and racist allegory but he is trying to make the case that one can be “child of the tradition” without being enslaved by the tradition

5.1 – FREEDOM

14 = law summed up by LOVE

22-23 = against these there is no law!

6.7 – Cause/Effect

17 – scars

What have you read/heard in this section of the class that has offered hope, encouragement, food for thought, or a new way of thinking about Paul?

For next week: Read 1&2 Corinthians (or some part of them) and bring questions that come up from your reading.

## LESSON 3

### 1 & 2 Corinthians

Paul visited Corinth about 50 CE and stayed about 18 months. He then left for Ephesus and from Ephesus corresponded with the Corinthians. Most of 1 Corinthians is a response to letters he has received from Corinth.

Corinth was an urban, thriving city and a multi-national port. It was thoroughly “Greek” in its culture and it had many Temples featuring the deities of ancient Greece and Asia. Isis, Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon, Demeter, and Serapis were just a few of the gods worshiped in Corinth.

Corinth was full of philosophers, merchants, travelers, performers, and Roman political officials.

Corinth was also famous for its prostitution, making it known as the city of sex and pleasure. The Temple of Aphrodite Pandemos (“Goddess of Love for all the People”) overlooked the city from a massive acropolis as if to smile upon all the sexual activity below.

This city and its customs were very new to Paul and he was ill prepared for the culture shock. The Greek congregation that formed there (more as a Christ Cult than a Jesus Movement) was clearly influenced by Corinthian party life. What attracted this group to “Christ” was very different than what had attracted earlier groups. These Greeks seemed to view Christ as a “new god” in this city of many gods, and they were eager to hear the message of “freedom” from their pasts and to experience the gifts of the spiritual realm over which this new god presided. They delighted in public displays of having contacted this “spirit” and being filled with its manifestations.

This viewing Christ as a deity and spiritual practices as sensual experiences disturbed Paul. He was clearly unprepared for the Corinthians. The Corinthians had interpreted the Christ Myth differently than Paul intended (and were apparently influenced by teachers other than Paul).

So what we see, especially in 1 Corinthians is Paul trying to establish some conservatism in behavior and an understanding of Christ more in line with his own. He wants them to not get drunk at religious festivals, to avoid seemingly incestuous relationships, and to refrain from visiting prostitutes. He also wants people to view their Charismatic experiences

as private, devotional practices rather than public displays of getting spiritually “high.”

The Corinthians had brought clichés from their culture into the church, and Paul sarcastically challenges those clichés: We are rulers (4.8), All things are lawful (6.12/10.23), It is well for a man not to touch a woman (7.1), Food will not bring us close to God (8.8), Food is meant for the stomach, not the stomach for food (6.13), We all possess knowledge (8.1), There is no resurrection of the dead (5.12), etc.

What troubles Paul is that his audience is Greek, and he is Jewish. The Corinthians like showing off their spiritual gifts, competing for superiority of spiritual knowledge and gifts, and enjoying differences of opinion and philosophical arguments. These would have been acceptable (even desirable in some cases) to the Greek mind; but to Paul’s Jewish sensibilities these attitudes were disturbing. His writing to the Corinthians is a clash of cultures.

When Paul calls the death and resurrection “bodily” events, he means that they really happened. He may not be arguing for physical resurrection, but for the *reality* of resurrection. Just as when he uses “body” language for the church, the “body of Christ” (body politic), he is saying that the body of Christ is real, and so how we treat the bodies that make up The Body is important. Still, the language is symbolic and refers to what is “real” and not necessarily to what is literally factual (a group is not a literal body, but the “body” of believers is a real phenomenon to be treated with dignity).

Many of his arguments are trying to compete with Greek ideals using Jewish scriptures (and often new interpretations of them) and trying to make the Corinthian church a bit more Jewish in how it felt. He is arguing like a Greek philosopher, but his arguments are meant to de-Greek their thinking in some ways. This is why Paul sometimes seems to contradict himself, back peddle, make circular arguments, and get a little frustrated and even angry. He is trying to out-Greek the Greeks in order to make them more Jewish. Basically he is trying to gain control over a group that has evolved beyond his control. How successful he was is a matter for debate. Still, we see Paul’s sense of urgency and his passion in the letters to the Corinthians. These letters (along with Romans, Galatians, and Philipians) make up the most well known and widely used portions of the Pauline corpus.

Read and discuss: 1.1-3; 18-25; 2.6; 5.1; 9; 6.9; 12; 7.1-7; 25-26; chapter 8; 11.3-16; 23-34; chapter 12; chapter 13; 14.1-5; 15.12-19; 44

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What have you read/heard in this section of the class that has offered hope, encouragement, food for thought, or a new way of thinking about Paul?

Next week: Romans

## LESSON 4

### Romans

When/How Jesus becomes Christ (1.4...compare to Matthew/Luke, John...see also 6.9)

Paul seems to have Jesus becoming the Christ at his Resurrection (by which he may mean Ascension). Mark has Jesus becoming Christ at his baptism. Matthew & Luke have Jesus becoming (or at least being destined to become) Christ at conception, and John places the Christ event "in the beginning." Notice how theological concepts continue to evolve...don't they still?

The Gospel (1.16)

Idolatry, not sexual orientation as we understand it today (1.18-2.1) is the problem Paul is addressing. Paul, oddly, seems to believe that as a punishment for worshiping incorrectly, God confuses people by changing their nature (he seems to presume that people who are engaged in homosexual acts are actually heterosexual and God has made them act against their nature as a punishment for their idolatry...we probably disagree with Paul's assessment!).

Justification apart from Law (3.21-31)

Abrahamic argument (4.1-12)...Paul has brought up Abraham in previous letters, hasn't he?

Power of Hope (5.5)

Resurrection linked to freedom (7.1-6)

No condemnation (8.1)

Children of God (8.14-17)

Allegorical reading of scripture (chapter 9)

Righteousness based on faith (9.30-33)

Salvation of the Other (11.11-24)

The body of Christ (12.3-21)

Fulfillment of the Law (13.8)

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Matters of Conscience 14.13-23)

Woman Minister (16.1-2)

What have you read/heard in this section of the class that has offered hope, encouragement, food for thought, or a new way of thinking about Paul?

For next week: Read Philippians

## LESSON 5

### Philippians

#### Chapter 1

#### 1 - Paul & Timothy

6 – day of Christ (parousia, return, day of the Lord)...ps, it didn't happen (or did it? Acts 2...spiritual return would very much be in line with Paul's theory of spiritual resurrection!)

7 – defense and confirmation (why?)

13 – “in Christ” (in the community of Christ)

14 – political activism/risk

21- life is Christ and death is gain (why? Is there a Gnostic influence in this philosophy?)

23 – I long to depart this life (depression? Exhaustion? Or Gnostic theology?)

29-30 – glorifying suffering? (is this a coping technique, or again, a Gnostic theology?)

#### Chapter 2

5 – Mind of Christ (not historical Jesus, but Christ Event...Christ Cult...that is, Paul isn't saying to imitate the historical Jesus, but venerate the Cosmic Christ which is present in every person who makes up the Christ Community; so, serve Christ by serving one another)

Mind/Soul/Psyche...Psychics? Have the Christ Consciousness as is fitting for the “psychics” (those who are mentally/spiritually connected) of the community, those who are in Communion (community/union). Very mystical/charismatic/esoteric tone...

6-11 – Ancient Hymn that Paul is quoting. Which community composed this hymn? Was it a community that had Gnostic tendencies?

“form of God” (In Judaic thought, God does not have form...we are to have no image of the divine!)

Emptied himself (of divine light, a Gnostic concept)...human “likeness” (this doesn't sound like the Christ that is as fully human as divine that

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later councils would codify)... “human in *appearance*” (sounds much more like Greek paganism where gods would take human or animal form, “appearing” as something other than their “real” divine selves)...God greatly exalted him (remember Caesar’s ascension/resurrection?)...confess that Jesus Christ (the anointed, the messiah) is “Lord” (who is the “Lord” of the Empire?, if Jesus is Lord of our lives then Caesar isn’t. That’s quite subversive isn’t it?!), to the glory of God the Parent/Patron (remember the divine son/Emperor language of the times)?

Paul is using some Judaic ideas (messiah) and blending them with Gnostic (spirit over flesh, heavenly over earthly, light/energy over matter) and pagan (gods appearing in non-divine forms, language of the Roman imperial cult). How does this awareness challenge us? Excite us? Disturb us? Comfort us? Intrigue us?

13 – Obedience? A cultural norm of the time? Is that a relevant image for our time?

“Work out your salvation (wholeness/spiritual-mental-physical-social health/well-being/spiritual maturity/understanding of your relationship to the Whole) with fear and trembling” (sounds compatible with Greek philosophical understandings, certainly not the doctrinal/dogmatic rigidity of later Christianity...but, then, how does that square with “obedience”?)

19-24 – what is this relationship with Timothy about? Are there any erotic possibilities?

### Chapter 3

2 – Such language! (dogs, evil-workers, mutilation...those who insist on men removing foreskins in order for them to be accepted into the Christ community)

3 – We are the circumcision (what an image!...probably meant to suggest right relationship with God depends not on legalism or ritual, but on faith...our worshiping in community is our sign of righteousness, not whether or not the men of our community have removed a piece of skin)

4-9 – Defensive (reminding people of his credentials)

13 – prize is ahead, not behind us; wholeness/maturity isn’t a magic moment, but a growth process that even Paul feels will continue throughout his life.

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15 – he is suspicious of people who think they've "arrived"

17 – imitate me (in knowing there is always more growth to experience? Or in the Gnostic view that the body is inferior and "spirit" is the more worthy goal?)

18 – enemies of the cross (cross killed the body of Jesus, who was raised, according to Paul, in "spirit"...this seems to validate for him the inferiority of the body and the superiority of the spirit)

19 – they worship physical comforts (annoying to someone with such a low regard for physicality)

20 – "but our citizenship is in heaven (above, in the air, in the spirit, in the cosmos, beyond physicality)

21 – Change the "lowly (inferior) body to conform to a "glorified" body (of light)...

#### Chapter 4

2- some kind of madness/confusion/drama/conflict

4-7 – (advice for deportment and prayer): Rejoice, be kind, try to avoid anxiety, affirm blessings, give thanks, embrace peace.

8 – Positive thinking – Positive feeling – Positive experience

11 – Believes himself to be self-sufficient (the goal of spirituality is empowerment)

12 – blessed regardless of conditions! (power to choose one's own attitude)

13 – grace offers the strength and comfort needed for any situation

17 – grace of participating in circulation of divine supply, blessing that comes from being generous

19 – Sees God as Source of Good...Source may flow through any number of channels, but the channel isn't the source.

23 – grace be with your "spirit"

What have you read/heard in this section of the class that has offered hope, encouragement, food for thought, or a new way of thinking about Paul?

For next week: Read Philemon

## LESSON 6

### Philemon

In the Christ Community, there was to be no distinction between male/female, Greek /Hebrew, rich/poor, slave/free (Gal. 3.28). Class, gender, and ethnic distinctions were not supposed to be part of establishing a hierarchy “in Christ.” This is something Paul has personally taught.

However, a decade after he wrote to the Galatians, Paul now runs into a situation with a person named Onesimus. Onesimus is a slave of Philemon, the leader of a house church in Colossae. Paul knows Philemon, and has even worshiped in his church. Now, Onesimus has run away from Colossae to Ephesus and has joined the Pauline community there. What is Paul to do?

In the Roman world (and Paul is a Roman citizen), slavery is an accepted institution and there are laws that govern the treatment of slaves. Paul, by Roman law, could be seen to be harboring a fugitive, and therefore Paul could be held legally and financially responsible for the loss of Philemon's slave. Is Paul in this moment a citizen of the Commonwealth of God, or of the Roman Empire? Is he an apostle, or a Roman? He has said that everyone, without exception is welcome to join the fictive kinships that make up the church family, and yet, when one runs away from a slave-holder to enjoy the protection of the church family, what should be done? Obey the law of the land or follow the conviction that all people have sacred value and each person is entitled to a life of dignity?

Paul devises a compromise that he believes (or at least hopes) will not compromise his integrity. He follows the Roman law by sending Onesimus back to Philemon; but he tries to honor the fictive kinships of the church family by sending Onesimus back with a letter to Philemon asking him to treat him like a “brother” and as Paul's son.

He praises Onesimus as having been very helpful to him (Onesimus means “useful”). He even offers to pay Philemon for any financial damage he believes he has incurred. If Onesimus's absence has caused a burden to Philemon, Philemon can send Paul the bill and he will make restitution. He also asks Philemon to be especially kind to Onesimus, thinking of him as “more than a slave,” even though he also says that Onesimus' short time of being AWOL can now be followed by his remaining in service to Philemon for the rest of his life!

When torn between the mythic Commonwealth of God, the fictive family of Christ, the Church in the margins preaching liberty and empowerment to oppressed people, and the laws, power structures, and law enforcement capabilities of a mighty empire, Paul tries to find a middle way by which he can be compliant with the law and still fair with Onesimus.

Paul doesn't challenge the legitimacy of slavery, nor does he hide Onesimus or suggest places he might go. He simply gives Onesimus temporary asylum and then sends him back with a letter asking Philemon to not be too harsh with Onesimus and to send any financial invoices to Paul for payment. In the end, Onesimus, though a "brother in Christ," is all the same a slave and is kept in slavery by no less a "moral authority" than the Apostle Paul. This may be the most disturbing bit of correspondence in the Pauline corpus, and one might wonder why the Church thought it should be regarded as scripture!

Paul, who in other situations proved to be so courageous, falls desperately short of doing the right thing (at least from the perspective of the enslaved person).

What do we think of Paul's decision?

How does this compare to modern day situations when people seek compromise or study rather than taking a stand for full inclusion of women in ordained leadership or full inclusion of "out" LGBT people in the life of the church (including marriage and ordination)?

How does this compare to the ways church people used the bible in the worst of the AIDS crisis to blame the victims, or who in antebellum times used the bible to justify chattel slavery?

When we are dealing with human rights and dignity, is it right to compromise with those who are trying to hold onto privilege or power?

What is our final evaluation of Paul's decision and how do we relate it to justice issues in our own day?

What have you learned in this course that has challenged you, comforted you, inspired you, encouraged you, given you food for thought, or changed how you understand St. Paul?

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