

A Surprising Shift Change

ACTS 16:9-15 (NRSVUE) *During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.¹¹We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.¹³On the Sabbath day*

we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Paul gets a bad rap from many progressive Christians. He's characterized as an egocentric authoritarian, a champion of substitutionary atonement, and a male chauvinist pig. There might be some merit to those characterizations if we judge totally by 21st century Western values. On the other hand, if we assume our 21st century Western values are absolute and final—that the Scriptures are addressed exclusively for us in our time, then it is we who are the egocentric authoritarians.

In the first place, Paul never insisted that his hearers agree to some prepared and memorized lock-step plan of salvation. He always adapted his message to the language and to the religious context of the area where he was ministering.

Case in point: his ministry and later letters to that troubled, conflicted little congregation in Corinth. The members there quarreled over everything: loyalty to previous ministers (I am of Paul, I am of Peter, I am of Apollos), they argued over baptism and the administration of the Lord's supper, there were interruptions in the worship service, claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit. The greatest conflict came in the form of a pecking order: whose Spiritual Gifts were more important. Everybody wanted the gift of tongues.

In the city of Delphi, about thirty miles north of Corinth, there was the Temple of Apollo. On the grounds of the temple gasses drifted up from the soil. A priestess with the title, Pythias, would sit over one of the vents and get high inhaling the gasses, and her speech would become a distorted, babbling, kind of jibberish that was impossible to understand. It was considered to be "the Oracle"—the voice of Apollo, speaking through Pythias.

When the gift of tongues is mentioned in the letter to the Corinthian church, the word is "Glosson." It refers to the babbling of the Oracle at Delphi. The people obsessed over that one gift, but Paul didn't put them down because of that; in fact, he said, "I speak in tongues better than any of you." Ecstatic speech and ecstatic trances are reported in the Hebrew Scriptures. In a later letter to

Corinth Paul wrote about a man who was "caught up to the third heaven..." I don't know: maybe they were sniffing the same gasses as the Oracle of Delphi.

Paul didn't tell the Corinthians they had to give up what had given them meaning; although he did write that the gift of tongues was the least important of the Spiritual gifts. But he refused to exclude them from the church until they gave up those practices. Instead, he said, "Go ahead and strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way."

When questions arose concerning eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods—meat from animals not slaughtered according to Jewish Kosher laws—he didn't hand down a legalistic, infallible ruling. He said, "Eating meat has no effect on your life or your faith; but if eating meat is the cause of offense to my brothers and sisters—that is, if they see me eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods and thereby assume I am confirming the worship of those gods—then I will eat no meat."

Paul is criticized today because of his views regarding women. Oh, Paul told women in Corinth to cover their heads—a symbol of subjection. And yet there is no mention of head coverings in any of Paul's other letters. Why is that?

In Corinth was the Temple of Aphrodite: a thousand sacred prostitutes coming down into the city to share the love. And in a culture that insisted that women cover their heads, they could be identified by their uncovered heads. And so Paul was saying, "Don't let the public associate the church with the cult of Aphrodite."

In another reference to head coverings, Paul urges the women in the Corinthian church to cover their heads when praying or prophesying. It was a sign of their submission to Christ. But note, the statement implies a level of leadership.

You see, another criticism of Paul is that he counsels Timothy to forbid women from teaching men. How male chauvinist is that? But Timothy was in Ephesus. Paul encouraged the women in Corinth to prophesy; he left Lydia in charge of the church at Philippi; and a couple from Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila, traveled with Paul as a part of his missionary team. And some of the writings of the early church fathers say that she held the office of elder.

But, didn't Paul tell the Ephesian wives to be subject to their husbands. Yes, he did. Now, I have to be careful here, because this passage was the core of my doctoral dissertation, and I'll chase all kinds of rabbits if I don't stick to my script.

Long story short: the reference is Ephesians 5:22. If you back up one verse, Paul writes, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." And the root word for "be subject", in the original language, is "ὑποτάσσω"—to voluntarily surrender, in this case to each other.

Then he proceeds to list specific examples: "Wives, be subject (ὑποτάσσω) to your husbands..." "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave

himself up for her..." Different word here, but essentially the same meaning: it is the same word used in John 19:30: "*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up—surrendered—his spirit.*"

The text continues, "Children obey your parents in the Lord..." "And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." All this under the topic sentence: "Subject—voluntarily surrender—yourselves to one another..."

It's an ethic of mutual surrender. It is the opposite of any kind of male/female pecking order or military chain of command.

And so, to a large extent, Paul is misunderstood because he is judged by a 21st century Western set of values.

It's not exactly "different strokes for different folks;" however, Paul adapts brilliantly to each situation. In today's legalistic, binary right/wrong, black/white culture he comes across to some as arbitrarily authoritarian, and to others as wishy-washy: setting different rules for different situations.

But my concern this morning is not directly the misunderstandings surrounding Paul's life and ministry and writings. My concern is that the criticism and discounting distract from a crucial theme running throughout his writings, namely, the unconditional, universal gift of God's grace, demonstrated through the unqualified inclusiveness of Jesus' message and work.

Paul consistently refused to set up legalistic rules and standards of qualification. He established no "tests of faith" or "tests of fellowship." Instead, he found ways to witness to God's grace in that vast diversity called the Greco-Roman culture where gods and goddesses and demons and spirits were as thick as mosquitos on a humid summer night.

He confronted virtually all exclusionary practices of Judaism—and, by extension, all that directly or indirectly exclude people from faith communities today.

Grace is inclusive, not exclusive; and Paul got that. He wasn't perfect. His earliest writings carry a residue of the Jewish sacrificial system and Jewish apocalypticism, even though Galatians, one of his earliest letters, already is rejecting law as a means of justification.

He didn't require pagan Gentiles to jump through specific hoops. He started where they were, and Christ joined them there. Such is the nature of Grace. Grace precedes repentance. Grace precedes conversion. Grace is the power that enables repentance and conversion. Grace is the expression, and resultant experience of God's unlimited, unqualified, undeserved, all-inclusive love. And when we back away and take a broader view of all Paul's writings, we can thank him for that insight.