



PAUL

THE

PROGRESSIVE?

**THE COMPASSIONATE CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE
TO RECLAIMING THE APOSTLE AS AN ALLY**

ERIC C. SMITH

Paul the Progressive?

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The Compassionate Christian's Guide to Reclaiming the Apostle as an Ally

Eric. C. Smith

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Dedicated to the people of

Biltmore United Methodist Church, Asheville, North Carolina

First Plymouth Congregational Church, Englewood, Colorado

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Preface

If you ask progressive Christians about the Christian tradition, they will usually point to two moments where things went off the rails: the reign of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, and the career and writings of the apostle Paul in the first century. In both cases, progressive Christians will often talk wistfully about an otherwise-pure tradition that was sidetracked or co-opted. Constantine, the thinking goes, married the church to the state and sold out theology to imperial ideology. Paul, meanwhile, took the beautiful tradition Jesus left behind and turned it into an anti-woman, anti-gay, pro-slavery, anti-sex system of guilt and shame. If it had not been for those two moments, my fellow progressive Christians say, Christianity would be much better off today.

Those charges are a little bit unfair to Constantine (though that's a matter for another book), but Paul *definitely* does not deserve all the hate. After years of studying Paul within the academic field of biblical studies, I have come to see him as one of the most misunderstood figures of the Bible and the Christian tradition. And after years of preaching Paul in progressive Christian congregations, I have found that if he is read in light of modern biblical scholarship, we can legitimately understand Paul as an ally rather than an enemy. So much of what we *think we know* about Paul is *wrong*, and so much of what we *don't know* about Paul shows the apostle to be *far more right* than we imagined. On a litany of charges—misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, prudishness, slavery apologetics, and oppressive theology—Paul's reputation has much more to do with centuries of bad interpretation than it does with Paul himself. Some of the worst things attributed to Paul are found in books that many scholars now believe he didn't actually write. Some of Paul's authentic writings have been taken out of context

and had their meanings twisted. The Paul so many of us have hated isn't the Jesus-following Jewish Paul of the first century, but the Paul of Reformation-era figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Peel back these layers of misunderstanding and bad interpretation, and a new Paul starts to emerge—or, actually, a very old Paul starts to reassert himself.

Not only have we wrongly considered Paul an enemy, but we have also missed out on an ally. The Paul that is revealed in careful study of his letters is nothing like the person so many progressive Christians hate, and, in fact, he shares many progressive Christian values. He's passionate about justice, honesty, reconciliation across difference, and inclusion most of all. He gets angry and indignant when people pridefully put themselves above others. He intervenes on behalf of those with less power, recognizes the leadership of women, and believes in a God who has thrown open the doors to welcome everyone in. At times Paul can be surly, petulant, thin-skinned, and proud, but the person who emerges from his letters is electrifyingly human and authentic, even at a distance of nearly two thousand years.

I wrote this book for the people I have encountered in churches across the United States: people who are progressive, who want to be faithful, and who are looking for models of progressive faithfulness. Pastors and laypeople alike understand that there is a deep connection between the Christian tradition and their values, but most of the oxygen in the room is taken up by more conservative kinds of Christianity, not to mention more conservative kinds of politics. In talking with these progressive faithful people, I have heard them talk about Paul as an enemy to be overcome or ignored. However, the Paul I have encountered in his letters would be delighted to join their cause. He was always getting chased out of town by the (pagan) religious conservatives of his day, getting yelled at by traditionalists of all kinds, and working to tell people about a better way. Paul went around proclaiming a God who was overturning old

certainties, chipping away at old empires, and throwing open the doors to new family. He's much more naturally our friend than our enemy.

This book feels risky in a way that writing for an academic audience or writing a sermon rarely does. A book like this that crosses audiences and genres, and speaks out of and into different contexts, has the potential to ruffle feathers everywhere. In these pages, I have tried to strike a balance between saying too much and saying too little. Nearly every page could have had ten others behind it, tracking down opposing arguments, footnoting the history of the ideas, and presenting alternative scenarios. But this is not that kind of book. I have not always (as my math teachers used to say) "shown my work" mend the sentence to end "...shown my work" (although I do cite other scholars throughout, and the reader will find many works among the works cited that will make for great further reading). Likewise, there are probably places where I have said too much, or said things too opaquely, because I could not find a simpler way to say them. And, at every turn, there are possible objections, different interpretations, or alternative readings. This is the nature of biblical interpretation: no one framework explains everything, so we are left to try to find the explanations that can clarify the most. Paul himself is not always clear or consistent, and many parts of Paul's letters allow for multiple competing interpretations.

And of course, my own identity, location, and experiences limit my perspective. I am a straight white man, and a Protestant Christian with advanced degrees in religion and biblical interpretation, which gives me a view of Paul that's different from the view others have. Without a doubt, the limitations of my perspective will be evident in this book, and I hope that by presenting my perspective I do not limit the perspectives of others. As Paul himself seemed to recognize, communities benefit when every person contributes.

It also feels risky to be so openly confessional. Although all of my professional life has included both congregational ministry and the academic study of religion, those two worlds rarely meet. A scholar of religion who is religious can be accused of lacking objectivity, while a religious person who studies their own religion can be accused of lacking spirit. I suspect that I am guilty and innocent on both counts, and in this book I make little attempt to hide behind objectivity—not that there is such a thing. Instead, I try to help my two worlds talk to each other, but mostly I try to help the academy talk to the church, because I believe it has a lot to say about Paul.

My favorite verse of all of Paul's letters is Galatians 6:11: "See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!" This bit of trivia delights me. Paul had been using a scribe to dictate his letter, but at the end he took the pen and finished it out, as a personal touch and a mark of authenticity. But Paul was not a professional scribe, and his handwriting was bad, so he made light of how crudely he wrote in his own hand. That's how this book feels to me. I have written it in my own hand, however inelegantly, and now I give it to you, the reader. I hope you will find something worthwhile in it.

Acknowledgments

This book was made possible by the questions, struggles, teachings, and truths of hundreds of people over the past decade and a half. Some of those people were my students, some were my teachers, some were my congregants, and some were my friends and colleagues. It would be impossible to name them all, but I owe a debt to every person with whom I have discussed Paul, the New Testament, and the Bible generally.

The people of two congregations I have served deserve special mention. Biltmore United Methodist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, was my first ministerial position, and that congregation helped form and shape me in powerful and durable ways. I remember especially a number of wise elder mentors from that congregation—Jayne Smith, Naomi Wray, Joyce Anderegg, Martha Strunk, Esther Megill, Doris Gidney, Ray Ferrell, Elaine Gasser, Carlos Rodriguez, John Reed, Lorraine Gribbens, and of course Ashley Crowder Stanley, to name only a few—who helped me grasp how biblical studies, congregational ministry, and progressive values intersect and inform each other. Then, for over the past dozen years plus, First Plymouth Congregational Church in Englewood, Colorado, has helped me understand what a stridently progressive congregation can be, and it has helped me sharpen my ideas through countless conversations, sermons, classes, and discussions. Without those two churches, this book would not exist.

I also owe thanks to my students and colleagues at the Iliff School of Theology, who have formed the rich community of interpretation out of which this book has grown. These students are remarkable individually and as a group, and I am more hopeful for the world when I think of them in their many callings in the church, the nonprofit sector, and in society.

I am grateful to several individuals who read parts of this manuscript and offered helpful feedback, including Julie Muñoz Pittman, Jason Koon, Jeremy Garber, Dorcia Johnson, Suzanne Marie Myfanawy, and many others who expressed an interest in the project and supported it in various ways. Dennis Haugh was especially insightful in pushing me to clarify aspects of my thinking, and to draw a distinction between different traditions of scholarship and my own thinking.

The First Plymouth Endowment generously awarded me a grant to fund a retreat to write part of this book, and I am grateful for their support in this and other projects. When that writing retreat on the North Carolina coast was interrupted by Hurricane Florence, I evacuated to the home of my mother Dorothy Smith, and I am grateful to her for providing me the space to keep working.

My deepest gratitude is to my wife Jessa Decker-Smith and my three children—Amos, Hazel, and Eli—who give light to my life.

Chapter 1: Hating Paul (An Introduction)

“I Kind of Hate Paul.”

“I kind of hate Paul.” In almost every Bible class I’ve ever taught in a church or in a seminary classroom, someone has said these words of the person whose name is on about half of the books of the New Testament. They usually say it in a way that tells me that they know they’re not *supposed* to hate Paul. With a nervous grin on their faces and a “please don’t be angry about this” tone in their voices, dozens of people have told me that they cannot stand one of the most important figures in the history of Christianity.

People are usually relieved when I smile back. Not that I hate Paul—I don’t—but I certainly understand why people do. Most of my circles are filled with progressive Christians, and progressive Christians seem to hate Paul much more often than their conservative sisters and brothers do. Progressive Christians can usually recite a laundry list of reasons why they hate him, but most people seem to have one particular reason for why they hate Paul. For some, it’s because of all the passages in Paul’s writings that condemn homosexuality—and, usually, these Christians turn out to be people who have been wounded deeply by other Christians using Paul’s words against them. For others, it’s because of Paul’s contempt for women and women’s leadership. Often, these are women who have had their calls to ministry squashed, challenged, or undermined by their communities—and their gifts devalued—because of words that Paul wrote. Still others have a particular disgust for Paul’s sexual ethics—the way he always seemed to be shaming people for having bodies and wanting to derive pleasure from them. Some see Paul as a defender of slavery. Others point to Paul’s anti-Semitism as their most important reason for hating him, often citing personal connections to the Jewish faith and the ways Paul’s anti-Jewish

words have been used to hurt people they love. Recently, some people have a new reason to hate Paul—after his writings were used to defend the separation of families detained at the United States’ southern border. And, perhaps most frequently of all, people will talk about the way Paul took the message of Jesus—a message of peace, love, forgiveness, and community—and turned it into a system of personal salvation full of guilt, debt, and unpayable obligations to God. These people have often escaped fundamentalist or conservative Christian childhoods, in which the writings of Paul were used to instill feelings of inadequacy, shame, and (to use a word from the writings of John Calvin) *depravity*. For many Christians like this, Paul was the hijacker of Christianity, the person whose writings mark the point at which the tradition went from beautiful to abusive.

I’ve encountered so many Paul haters in my New Testament courses that I now begin class with a stark confession of my own: I love Paul. I don’t always *like* Paul, but I *love* Paul. I think Paul has gotten a bad rap. More than that, I think Paul has been completely misinterpreted by the Christian tradition. The Paul we know (and hate) has almost nothing in common with the Paul we encounter by taking a fresh look at his letters. I love Paul, I tell my classes, because once you get past centuries of Christian interpretation of him and approach Paul on his own terms, he turns out to be endearing and sneakily liberal. He turns out to be passionate about what he believes in, and he gets angry when he thinks people are being deceitful or dishonest. He can be stunningly egalitarian, a supporter of women’s ministries, and nothing at all like the misogynistic Paul we usually imagine. Instead of being anti-Semitic, he is one of the proudest defenders of Judaism in antiquity. Almost every reason to hate Paul listed in the previous paragraph turns out to be mostly unfounded if you look at the writings of Paul himself. Once you get to know Paul on his own terms, and get rid of the things the church has piled onto his shoulders over the years,

most of the reasons to hate Paul go away, and what's left is a Paul who is inspiring, moving, and actually very progressive.

I know: you don't believe me—yet. Most of my students don't either, in the beginning. Often they'll say that they're open to being convinced, but they're obviously skeptical. That's understandable given how the church has used and misused Paul over the years, and how much damage that misuse has done. But by the end of the course, many of my students have gained a grudging respect for Paul, and some even love him as I do. A few continue to hate Paul, but in my experience the more you're able to strip away layers of Christian theology and doctrine and encounter Paul in his own voice in the writings he left us, the more you like him.

It turns out that the Paul most of us know isn't the real Paul. Most of us know a Paul who's an invention of generations of interpreters and theologians, so encrusted with the residue of creeds and bad interpretations that he's hard to recognize. We know Paul through isolated verses pulled out of context, or we know him through books that bear his name that he didn't actually write. We know Paul through sermons about hellfire and those dramatic, "If you died tonight, where would you go?" ultimatums, although Paul never asked anything that sounded like that. We know a Paul that has passed through the filter of two thousand years of Christian thinking, but those twenty centuries of thought have made Paul into something he never meant to be. And, if we can get past *that* Paul, to the *real* Paul that we meet in his letters, we will find a very different person there waiting for us.

Ground Rules for Reading Paul

This book is an attempt to convince you to think about Paul differently. I hope that I can convince you that Paul was *not* a misogynist, a homophobe, an anti-Semite, a prude, an apologist

for slavery, a defender of arbitrary government power, a purveyor of spiritual debt and guilt, or a hijacker of the Christian tradition. I hope I can introduce you to a Paul who was early Christianity's great champion of inclusion, constantly pushing the boundaries of how people thought about God's family. I want to convince you that Paul was a champion of women, working alongside women and holding them up as examples of faithfulness. And, I want to persuade you that Paul was a Jew, and a proud one at that, and by no means an enemy of Jews and Judaism. By looking at the way Paul thought about ethics, I want to show that Paul was not a supporter of slavery, that he never meant his words to be used to instill shame about sex, and that he would object strongly to having his writings used to defend the separation of families at the border. I want to demonstrate that Paul was a great pilot of the Christian tradition, not its hijacker, and that the ways Paul's words have been used to create theologies of guilt and debt have nothing to do with Paul himself.

But before we do all that, we need to set some ground rules about how to study Paul's writings and other New Testament writings about Paul. These ground rules come from modern biblical scholarship and the many tools it uses to analyze texts. Not all scholars would agree with all of these, but through years of research and teaching about the Bible, these are the ones that I have chosen. There are four ground rules:

1. Know that Paul didn't write everything attributed to him.
2. Trust Paul's own words over the words of others about him.
3. Trust Paul's actions as evidence of his commitments.
4. Recognize that we are always already viewing Paul through a particular theological and historical lens.

Together, these four ground rules will help us to sift through the evidence found in the New Testament and come closer to the truth about Paul. They aren't foolproof, but they will give us a road map through Paul's life, teachings, and writings. I'll say a bit more about each of these ground rules, giving some context for them and why they are helpful.

Paul Didn't Write It All

First, it's important to realize that Paul did not write everything that has his name on it in the New Testament. This can be difficult for some people to hear, because it challenges their notion of what the Bible ought to be. It's hard to accept that there might be dishonesty canonized in the pages of the Bible. But in the ancient world, it was not uncommon for works to be written under someone else's name, and it wasn't always dishonesty, exactly. Often the followers of an important figure would write works using that person's name after their death as a way of furthering that legacy or of "completing" that work. The book of Isaiah is a good example of this; scholars believe that the "original" Isaiah wrote only chapters 1–39 of the book, and that one or more additional authors, inheritors of his tradition, wrote the remaining 27 chapters using Isaiah's name.¹ It also happened with other ancient writers, who sometimes complained even in their own lifetimes about people writing in their name, a stranger making a buck off their reputation.² But with Paul, it probably didn't happen until after he had died, and it was probably done by people with good intentions, who only wanted to claim some of Paul's authority to make a point with which they thought Paul would have (or should have) agreed. This seems really shady to us today, and it violates our ideas about intellectual honesty, but in antiquity it was fairly common, and sometimes it was even honorable.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 271–72.

² For a good and broad account of ancient forgery, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).