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## **Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Exploring the Spirituality of Paul's Epistles from the Underside of Selfhood**

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*For through the law I died to the law that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me. (Gal 2:19-20).*

These words express the heart of Paul's spirituality and what it meant for him to live a life devoted to God through Christ. Recognizing that these words are vital for Christian spirituality does not eliminate the complexity involved in understanding their meaning. There are debates concerning whether Paul meant the whole law or only part of the law, how he understood participation in Christ, and even how he understood himself when he used the pronoun "I." A brief tour of major interpretations of Paul's understanding of the self highlights the hermeneutical diversity and complexity of Pauline scholarship.

For Martin Luther, Paul's *I* is *simul justus et peccator*. Paul's expression of Christian spirituality in these Galatian verses springs from his central theological insight that the righteousness of God is imputed to sinners who through Christ now stand in right relationship with God through faith alone.<sup>1</sup> Krister Stendahl argues that the meaning of Paul's words is distorted in western interpretations because we read them through the lens of an introspective conscience that is alien to Paul. Paul's *I*, therefore, expresses a communal identity in Christ with strong Jewish roots now broken open to include Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> For Michael Gorman, the words resound with the echo of cruciform love, an echo that is always pulsing beneath Paul's words. Paul's *I* lives a cruciform existence that participates in Christ by being open and responsive to the needs and demands of others.<sup>3</sup> Each of these interpretations strives to hear in Paul's particular expression of Christian spirituality the transcendent universal meaning for all, who like Paul, seek to live a life devoted to God through Christ. The enduring significance of these interpretations in Pauline studies springs from the kernel of truth that lies at the root of each of them. The diversity of these interpretations points to their inherent limitations, limitations that arise for any interpreter seeking to find a universal and coherent meaning in Paul's theology, for in seeking a universal and transcendent truth aspects of the historical particularity of both Paul and the reader are overlooked.

The limitations of these interpretations are particularly evident when read with attentiveness to people on the underside of selfhood, those whose psychological or social location is characterized by oppression.<sup>4</sup> Paul's status as an authoritative leader in a patriarchal society, a status he held in the Jewish community before his call/conversion and in the Christian community after his call/conversion, clearly affects his approach to living a Christian spiritual life. For Paul, living a self-sacrificial cruciform life that is open and responsive to the needs and demands of others is life

giving. For people whose psychological or social location is shaped by oppression, however, this spirituality is potentially harmful. Paul's cruciform spirituality may reinforce themes that characterize the oppressive climate that dominates both the inner and outer lives of those who live on the underside of selfhood. Paul's expression of spirituality can still be vital and life giving for the oppressed, but only if it is read with sensitivity to the particularity of both the author and reader's social locations. Recognizing that Paul's spirituality is shaped by particularity reveals some limitations in his expression of Christian spirituality but uncovers strengths as well. Exploring Paul's spirituality from the underside of selfhood enhances Paul's contribution to Christian spirituality by drawing attention to rich aspects of his spirituality that are often underemphasized.

This essay will argue that attentiveness to the social location of both the author and the reader is essential for teaching the Christian spirituality of Paul's epistles. Beginning with a discussion of how Paul's social location shapes his understanding of Christian spirituality, I will explore the limitations of this spirituality for people living on the underside of selfhood and identify aspects of Paul's spirituality that are life giving for the oppressed. I will conclude with a reflection on the implications of this study for teaching the epistles of Paul.

## Paul's Social Location

Paul's own writings reveal some contradictory and negative attributes of his personality. He is depicted as uncharismatic, weak and ineffective in person but bold and challenging in letters, willing to become all things to all people, and offended by challenges to his authority.<sup>5</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel traces images of Paul through history and finds an intertwining of both positive and negative assessments of Paul's personality. For example, in 1912, in *Androcles and the Lion*, George Bernard Shaw writes, "Paul is more Jewish than the Jews, more Roman than the Romans, proud both ways, full of startling confessions and self-revelations that would not surprise us if they were slipped into the pages of Nietzsche."<sup>6</sup> Sandra Polaski observes that on the first day of a class she taught on Paul to doctoral of ministry students a male student remarked, "You know the women in my church don't much like Paul."<sup>7</sup> I wrestle with both positive and negative impressions of Paul when I spend a semester teaching Epistles of St. Paul to undergraduate students at St. Vincent College. Inevitably, I find myself inspired and annoyed by Paul at the same time. Only a very strong sense of self, a well-defined personality could elicit such a persistently mixed reaction. Paul has been inspiring and annoying people for almost 2000 years! Paul's strong sense of self is evident in three aspects of his identity revealed in his letters: his role as a leader, the authority of his vocation, and in his relationships.

Paul's role as a leader precedes his experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul's description of his relationship with his Jewish heritage reveals feelings of pride and superiority, a sense of accomplishment and purpose, and deep heartfelt anguish for those he calls brothers and kin according to the flesh who have not accepted Christ (Rom 9:1-5). Paul describes himself as having progressed in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries and attributes this progress to zeal for his ancestral traditions (Gal 1:14). This zeal motivated his persecution of the church, and allows him to say that in righteousness based on the law he was blameless as he brags about his Jewish heritage (Phil 3:4-6). Paul's zeal as a leader in Judaism lays the foundation for his role as a leader of the people of the way.

Paul often describes his role as a leader of the churches he has founded using the familial metaphors of father and mother. In using these metaphors, Paul sometimes appeals to the nurturing, guiding, comforting sense of the metaphors, while at other times appealing to their authoritative and disciplinary sense.<sup>8</sup> Paul uses the metaphors of father and nursing mother to describe his gentle,

caring, nurturing, exhorting, and encouraging role as leader of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:7-12). After pointing out to the Corinthians that though they have many guides, they have only one father, Paul then uses the authority of this relationship to judge and sentence a member of the community who has committed incest (1 Cor 4:15, 5:4-5).

Paul expresses his willingness to share leadership through the word “partnership” (*koinonia*). He uses this term to depict the close and joyful relationship he has with the Philippians (Phil 1:5-7). When Paul calls someone a partner, however, it does not necessarily denote equality. Paul occasionally uses relational terms in manipulative ways. The relational terms of father and partner are masterfully used to encourage Philemon to welcome the slave Onesimus back as a brother, another relational word (Philem 1:16). Paul claims to have become a father to Onesimus (v. 10). He reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his very self (v. 19). He calls Philemon his partner and then says, “So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me (v. 17).” After Paul tells Philemon that he trusts he will comply with Paul’s wishes, he off-handedly mentions that a guest room should be prepared because he intends to visit, a not so subtle way of suggesting that Paul will be checking to see if Philemon has done what Paul has “suggested” (vv. 21-22).

Finally, no look at Paul’s relationship as a leader to the churches would be complete without noting how often he refers to suffering for the sake of the gospel and for the church. In Philippians, Paul claims that his imprisonment has advanced the Gospel (Phil 1:12-14), describes the pattern for leadership that Christ established through his self-emptying love and obedience (Phil 2:5-11), and uses this pattern to describe his own leadership (Phil 3: 4-21)—a pattern also apparent in Corinthians (1 Cor 1:18-2:5, 4:6-13; 9:1-27). The pattern of suffering Paul relies on for leadership of the churches is intimately tied to his vocation, his call to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul describes his call in prophetic terms related to the call of Jeremiah (Gal 1:11-16). Like Jeremiah, Paul often finds himself suffering for the sake of the message God has given him, misunderstood by other leaders in the movement, and misunderstood by people in the churches he has founded. Paul refers to his call to be an apostle in order to assert authority and to defend himself and his message against false teachers. Suffering confirms the authority of his apostleship. That Paul is personally offended that his apostleship has been questioned is often obvious in his defenses. Defending himself against the Judaizers, Paul states that he bears the marks of Jesus on his body (Gal 6:17). When his apostleship is questioned by the apostles in Corinth, Paul launches into a recitation of incidents of suffering that confirm the authority of his apostleship, even while he recognizes the paradox of appealing to sacrificial suffering as a mark of status (“I am speaking in foolishness,” 2 Cor 11:21). Paul’s willingness to suffer, to counter false teachers, and even to confront prominent leaders within the church such as Peter and James is rooted in the authority of his vocation. Because Paul is called to proclaim a crucified Messiah, suffering confirms his authority as an apostle and is the pattern for his leadership.<sup>9</sup>

While Paul’s role as an apostle and a leader of the churches is most clearly evident from his letters, one is also able to see Paul’s relationships as a colleague, friend, and protector. Timothy, Silvanus, and Sosthenes appear as co-writers of letters. Silas, Titus, and Timothy are mentioned as companions of Paul and Prisca and Aquilla are named as co-workers in both Corinthians and Romans. The multiple appearances of close associates in different letters indicate that Paul was able to maintain friendships and collegial relationships over an extended period of time. Paul also mentions many women in leadership positions and praises them for hard work, dedication, and holiness. He ties himself to Onesimus in solidarity, using his own status as leader to raise the status of Onesimus, a person who lives on the underside of selfhood. When Paul believes Peter is wrong, he confronts him, charging him with hypocrisy. These many and varied interactions fill out our impressions of Paul so that through his letters we do not simply see a flat figure of history but a real human being. Paul’s theology can only be heard well when this context is taken into account, when

it is recognized that he is working out this theology as life is relentlessly pummeling him with new questions, new problems, and new concerns.<sup>10</sup>

Paul's well-defined personality and strong sense of self do not disappear behind a smooth theological veil. Cruciform love, cruciform faith, and cruciform leadership somehow coincide with Paul's personal defense of his apostleship and his teaching, a defense that is not always well thought out and politely articulated.<sup>11</sup> In fact, cruciform love, cruciform faith, and cruciform leadership are expressed most articulately when Paul is facing the challenges posed by misunderstandings of his message. As Paul works out his answers, interprets the gospel message for new communities and in light of new and sometimes surprising challenges, he reaches beyond his own understanding and articulates theological breakthroughs and radical departures that continue to echo today. Hindsight has judged these theological breakthroughs and radical departures to be correct but they were not self-evident at the time Paul was writing.<sup>12</sup>

### Theology Worked Out in Context

A few examples of Paul articulating his theology in the context of issues emerging from life experiences highlights the role questions, challenges, misunderstandings, and problems played in the theology of Paul. Attentiveness to this theological process leads to an appreciation of Paul's innovative and creative interpretation of the gospel message and his flexibility in adapting this message in ways that were salvific for different communities and in different life situations.<sup>13</sup>

In Galatians, Paul addresses questions that have emerged regarding the role of the law for Gentiles. These questions were not generated through a theoretical debate, but emerged because apostles and teachers came to communities founded by Paul and preached that circumcision is necessary for Gentile Christians. The question about circumcision did not arise quietly and thoughtfully and Paul does not address the question in a calm and placid manner. He refers to the Galatians as stupid and wishes that those who are teaching circumcision might accidentally castrate themselves. In explaining that Christ is sufficient for salvation in the face of the challenges posed by the Judaizers, Paul reaches a theological breakthrough about the meaning of baptism. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28)." Many have pointed out that some of the advice Paul gives in other letters, particularly about women, is inconsistent with this vision, but in fact, inconsistency is consistent with the nature of breakthroughs. Theological breakthroughs open toward transcendence and express a hope that has not been fully realized in experience.<sup>14</sup>

The dating for Galatians is notoriously difficult but scholars unanimously agree that this letter was written before the letter to the Romans.<sup>15</sup> The letter to the Romans appears to address questions raised by Paul's letter to the Galatians. In Galatians, Paul argued so persuasively for the inclusion of Gentiles as members of the community of Christ, and stated so forcefully that this community was the true Israel of God that it provoked questions about the reliability of God's promises to Israel.<sup>16</sup> Paul addresses this concern most effectively in Romans 9–11. He does not present a clear theological solution to the problem, but appears instead to grapple with the issue displaying emotions ranging from anguish to hope. Paul begins with his anguish over Jews who have rejected Christ, discusses God's freedom to show mercy, speaks of a remnant that will be saved, and proclaims that God's promises are irrevocable. The chapters do not conclude with a statement of theological certainty but rather with praise for God's incomprehensible wisdom. "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways (Rom 11: 33)!"<sup>17</sup>

In 1 Corinthians, Paul articulates a theology that deals with those in the Corinthian community who rely on a triumphant faith. Laying a foundation in the theology of the cross, he discusses practical ways that the Corinthians can pattern their relationships according to a cruciform model. He describes their community as a body, a common metaphor for communities in the ancient world, but inverts the typical hierarchy of this metaphor.<sup>18</sup> In Paul's use of the metaphor, it is those parts of the body without honor who receive the most honor, which is consistent with the message of the theology of the cross as a pattern for relationship in the Corinthian community. Throughout the Corinthian letter, Paul has faced the challenge presented by those in Corinth who believe themselves to be superior because of their spiritual gifts by presenting an alternative hierarchy based on the cross, a hierarchy that reverses the expectations of the world and argues that the strong, the powerful, the wealthy, and the privileged are to serve the weak, the marginal, the sick, and the poor.

Paul follows his vision of the Christian community as the body of Christ, with a hierarchy of spiritual gifts. He places varieties of tongues, the gift triumphant Corinthians are most boastful about, last on the list. With this inverted hierarchy, Paul has effectively countered the claims to superiority of the triumphant Christians in Corinth. This inverted hierarchy could conclude his discussion of the matter but it does not. Instead, perhaps recognizing the inadequacy of using a hierarchy to counter a hierarchy, he moves in a new direction stating, "But I shall show you a still more excellent way."<sup>19</sup>

What follows is one of the most recognizable passages of scripture, Paul's beautiful reflection on love. Like the passage in Romans that concludes Paul's attempt to answer questions concerning the reliability of God's promises to Israel, Paul's passage about love ends with mystery. "At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:12-13)." Paul concludes his theological arguments in Romans and Corinthians with statements that point toward mystery. These conclusions remind us that Paul is not asserting well-known doctrinal positions, but is engaging in faith seeking understanding.

That Paul is working out his theology in the face of particularity matters. It matters because Paul is innovative in his interpretation of the Gospel message. The message for him must be interpreted and thought through in the face of new challenges and in light of new situations. It is often when Paul is pushed the hardest to express his vision against contrasting views that he writes his most compelling theology. When that compelling theology is not only unmoored from its context but also used as the key to reading everything else Paul says, its truth is stretched and thinned and loses its life giving vitality.

## Reading Paul from the Underside of Selfhood

As he was preparing lectures on Paul, Luther had his own theological breakthrough when he realized that the righteousness of God was not a standard used to pronounce him guilty but was offered to him in grace to save him.<sup>20</sup> Luther read Paul through his own particular historical context and social location and found in Paul's writings a theological truth that led him to freedom. Gorman understands Paul's theology to center in the narrative of the Christ hymn in Philippians, and argues that all of Paul's writings flow from that central narrative.<sup>21</sup> Luther and Gorman offer important and compelling interpretations of both Paul's theology and the Christian spirituality that grows from that theology. The problem is that the models for spirituality developed from Luther and Gorman's interpretations of Paul favor passivity and self-sacrifice as the means of salvation. While these models have a basis in Paul's theological articulation, they rely on one central theological insight and therefore overemphasize some aspects of Paul's theology while underemphasizing others.

Attention to the ways historical context and social location shape Paul's theological thinking gives one the freedom to think about how to interpret Paul in other historical situations and from other social locations. In Galatians, Paul says, "For freedom, Christ has set us free (Gal 5:1)."<sup>22</sup> In the historical context of Galatians, Paul is talking specifically about freedom from the law, but the statement also challenges us to think beyond this specific historical particularity about the meaning of freedom in other historical contexts. It may be that for Paul, freedom lay in opening himself to the needs and demands of others, in letting go of the status he had achieved in Judaism, in sacrificing his rights as an apostle for the sake of those he sought to win for Christ. But if we pay attention to Paul's social location and historical context, we must also ask what freedom means for those who do not have status to let go of, for whom sacrifice is a reflex, and responding to the needs and demands of others a condition that has been the environment of their lives. A theology that emphasizes passive reception of grace and sacrifice as a path to salvation is not good news that leads to freedom for those on the underside of selfhood. When, however, it is recognized that Paul is working out his theology in light of many and varied questions and challenges, and is willing to interpret the gospel message in various life situations, Paul's writing opens up and reveals treasures that may be well known but underemphasized.

For a person on the underside of selfhood, sacrificing for others has become so habitual that it is often difficult for that person to recognize the self in the pronoun "I." It is also quite a difficult task for this person to distinguish freely exercised sacrificial love participating in Christ and directed toward God from the slavish sacrifice required to maintain life in oppressive situations. To ask what freedom looks like for this person is no small task. Surely it must begin with pulling that person both externally and internally from the environment of oppression and offering her a theology that convinces her of her value and worth before God, that she is beloved. Paul's letters offer theological gems that might provide the grounding for a spirituality that is liberating for those on the underside of selfhood.

In the same letter in which Paul proclaims, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me (Gal 1:20)," he also says that Christ came to ransom us for freedom, so that we might be adopted as children and heirs of God (Gal 4). In a letter that speaks of living a life patterned after the cross, Paul uses the body of Christ as a metaphor. This metaphor calls those with status and honor to empty themselves in self-sacrificial love for the other members of the community. It also calls those unaccustomed to status, those on the margins of society, those on the underside of selfhood to hear that they are a vital part of the body that in fact, the body could not function without them (1 Cor 12). In a letter that revolves around a soteriological narrative of self-emptying love, Christians are reminded that they are citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20). In Paul's solidarity with Onesimus, those on the underside of selfhood might glimpse Christ's solidarity with them (Phil). And in a letter that argues that all are equally convicted of sin, Paul speaks of the freedom to walk according to the spirit, of the love of God that has been poured into our hearts, of a spirit that prays for us even when we do not know how to pray, and of the impossibility of separating us from the love of God (Rom 5, 8). For those on the underside of selfhood, it is meditation on these aspects of Paul's theology that will lead to freedom, to salvation, and to a fully known authentic sense of self.

### **Implications for Teaching Epistles of Paul**

Attentiveness to interpretations of Paul that speak clearly to those on the underside of selfhood is essential for teaching Paul to undergraduate students today. These students live in a culture that is marked by fragmentation, dehumanization, uncontrolled technology, the breakdown of the family, loss of nature and the natural world, war, violence, racism, and materialism.<sup>23</sup> These

contemporary poisons make it increasingly difficult for people to have a well-defined, authentic sense of self.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Merton, a contemporary figure who wrestled with the role of the self in Christian spirituality, noted four great contemporary Western needs: “1) the need for authentic community; 2) the need for ultimate meaning in ordinary life; 3) the need for an integrated experience of the self in all its dimensions (bodily, imaginative, emotional, intellectual, spiritual); and especially 4) the need for liberation from an extreme of self-consciousness and self-awareness.”<sup>25</sup> These needs undergird the questions students raise in their search for spirituality today. I would suggest that in Paul, we can find ways to address these deep needs and help students find a way to voice their authentic selves so that they recognize the importance of their voices for the broken body of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes the paradox of ministry, a paradox that applies to teachers as well. He writes, “But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us (2 Cor 4:7).” This statement points to the struggle to articulate transcendent theological truths while limited by the fragmentary, transitory, and vulnerable conditions of our earthly existence. Approaching Paul from the underside of selfhood increases our awareness of the way Paul’s historical context and social location shape his theology. It also increases our awareness of the difficulties of interpreting Paul for those who live in different historical contexts and different social locations. Yet, if as teachers we persevere in our task of listening to what Paul said in his own time and conversing with students to hear why it matters today, perhaps we all might sense the surpassing power of God, despite our fragmentary and limited abilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 95-147.

<sup>2</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Lisa E. Dahill for the hermeneutical concept of this paper. Lisa E. Dahill, “Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer & Mark S. Burrows, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 249-266, here 256. Dahill uses the expression, the underside of selfhood, to describe women who have been subject to abuse. Dahill points out that in contrast to Bonhoeffer who had to “turn down the volume of the self in order to hear the other, the person living with abuse needs to turn down the volume of the other (specifically, the abuser) in order to attend to herself.” I am using the expression “the underside of selfhood” to describe those who have a submissive or other-defined sense of self.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul the Man and the Myth* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Hack Polaski, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 26-34.

<sup>9</sup> Roetzel, *Paul*, 60; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 19-31.

<sup>10</sup> Roetzel, *Paul*, 64, 93-134.

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- <sup>11</sup> Michael J. Gorman, "Paul and the Cruciform Way of God in Christ," *Journal of Moral Theology* 2 no. 1 (2013): 64-83; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 95-368.
- <sup>12</sup> Roetzel, *Paul*, 94, 123.
- <sup>13</sup> A fuller discussion of the way Paul's theology is shaped by his historical context is available in Roetzel, *Paul*, 93-134.
- <sup>14</sup> Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 35-61.
- <sup>15</sup> Roetzel, *Paul*, 121.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and his Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), 270.
- <sup>19</sup> Roetzel, *Paul*, 110-111.
- <sup>20</sup> McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 95-147.
- <sup>21</sup> Gorman, "Paul and the Cruciform Way of God in Christ," 68.
- <sup>22</sup> See also 2 Cor 3:17 and Rom 8:14-27.
- <sup>23</sup> Anne E. Carr, *The Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 6-7.
- <sup>24</sup> This paper focuses on the importance of reading Paul from the underside of selfhood for those who are crippled with a submissive or other-defined sense of self. This reading has implications, however, for a wider population because while the degree of intensity in the struggle varies, all students wrestle with finding an authentic sense of self.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 30-31.