

Session 5 – Contemporary Interpretations.

The last few decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a variety of several different, more contemporary, models of interpretation. As the study of sociology and anthropology developed, these methodologies were applied to the interpretation of the letters of Paul. Similarly Feminist and political studies brought to the fore issues which had not been addressed when the focus was more on abstract theology. I would like to point out at this stage that it was the change in contemporary culture that brought about this shift. Just as Luther interpreted Paul through the theological debates of the time, so do we bring to bear our particular concerns to the text. The danger of course is of reading our own version of things into the letters, but this is significantly mitigated if one is conscious of this possibility. A useful way forward is to ask our questions of the text but not to expect answers which fall neatly into contemporary categories.

In this final session we will be looking at 4 different approaches:

1. Social-scientific studies;
2. Paul and Empire;
3. Feminist Interpretations.
4. Liberationist Perspectives;

1. Social Scientific interpretation

This approach was introduced in the 1980s most notably by Wayne Meeks and Gerd Theissen. Their main focus was to interpret the letters in terms of the social and cultural realities of the Pauline communities, and to read their theological content within this framework.

In *The First Urban Christians (1983)*, Wayne Meeks, drawing largely on the letters to the Corinthians as do many such studies given the content of the letters, proposed that the early Christian communities founded by Paul formed a socially diverse urban movement, organised in household networks and sustained by strong symbolic language and ritual. I am sure you can recognise the sociological categories here. He rejected the claim that the Christians came mainly from a poor background and argued, (on the basis of 1 Cor 1: 26, where Paul reminds the Corinthians that at their calling 'not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth'), that there were social strata within the community. Indeed, he says Paul's communities included artisans and traders, freedpersons, household heads, women of means, some slaves and a few wealthier patrons.' This is now largely accepted, although it has been challenged by Justin Meggitt in his book *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, where he argues that, given the large percentage of people living in poverty in the Roman empire, most of the early Christian followers would have belonged to the poorer classes.

Another interpreter is Gerd Theissen who used disputes over the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts and patronage to reconstruct the internal sociology of Pauline congregations. He is best known for the idea of 'love patriarchy', arguing that Paul maintained a socially-stratified community which was however based on the values of respect, care and love.

So what do these, and later such studies have to contribute to the interpretation of Paul?

1. First of all, they're very interesting! They shed light on the lived reality and experience of the early Christians. The focus is on how they lived and the symbolic universe which they inhabited. It is true that Theology is somewhat relativised, but they do perform the essential task of reminding us that theology does not happen in a vacuum and religion does not only have to do with belief. They help us concretise Paul's theology and understand what he is really saying.
2. Paul is very often addressing the lived situation of the community. He uses theology to explain and exhort why things should be dealt with in a particular way. Knowing what is going on communally helps us understand his theology better, and how he applies it to pastoral care.

I will take one example from 1 Cor 8. Here Paul addresses the question of eating food offered to idols. This was acceptable to the group he calls 'the strong' but not to those whom he calls 'the weak'. Already we can see how social position can influence a 'theological' perspective. The strong, the richer, would be attending social gatherings where eating such meat was acceptable to them; they were also probably the ones who could afford meat. The weak might have been able to access such meat on the market, it possibly being cheaper, but they had reservations about eating it – and maybe here we can see something akin to contemporary pious devotion.

It is interesting to note how Paul argues his case and comes to what he considers to be an acceptable solution. He first addresses the strong and agrees with them there are no other gods so it is acceptable to offer food to idols. But, he says, not everyone has this knowledge. Therefore, since eating meat was not crucial to the strong, they should give up this right in order not to let 'the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died' be destroyed.

Love- Patriarchalism.

More on this on Thursday.

2. PAUL AND EMPIRE

This approach emerged in the late 1990s with the work of Richard Horsley and Peter Oakes. It was, of course, linked with the emergence of post-colonial studies and a re-reading of classical history from underneath. The *Pax Romana* was no longer considered to be the benevolent stable force it was once perceived to be, but studies now focussed on its underbelly and its subsistence on slavery (though slavery was very different from what we associate with African slavery in later centuries.)

Horsley's major insight was that Gospel (*euangelion*), Lord (*kurios*) Saviour (*soter*) and Peace (*Eirene*) were terms also used in the propaganda of Caesar, who was also deified and had his own cult. Christianity subverted this by attributing these words to Jesus, (although they do emerge from the Old Testament too). Whatever their origin, using this language in the context

of 1st century Roman Empire was an act of subversion. Calling Jesus Lord asserted his authority over Caesar. Claiming that it is at Jesus' knee that every knee shall bow made a public statement that relativised Caesar to the God of the Christians. Paul goes so far in Philippians as to claim that their citizenship (*politeuma*) was in heaven.... Understand not in Rome. Thus, Paul has the same attitude, if not the same verbal imagery, as does the writer of *Revelation*.

This lens on Paul was ignored for so long, because Paul was seen to be in favour of the Roman Empire, indeed of any political power, based on a reading of the notorious text in Romans 13: 1-7. Here he exhorts his hearers in Rome to 'be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Have a read of these verses and see whether you can hold them together with what I have said. Can this allow us to have a radical view of Paul, or must we acquiesce to centuries of teaching where Paul was seen as a quietist who wanted to maintain the status quo?

FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Other difficult passages present themselves when we think of Paul and women. Very often the two places we immediately go to are the texts in Ephesians and Colossians where women are told to be subject to their husbands, and to the text in 1 Corinthians where women are told they must cover their head if they are to speak in church (1 Cor 11:2-16), or indeed that they should be silent in church (1 Cor 14:34-45), though this is considered to be a later interpolation, and Ephesians and Colossians written by later followers of Paul.

But just as we cannot get away from what Paul says about obedience to authority, so we cannot get away from 1 Cor 11:2-16. Here Paul tells the Corinthians with no more ado that Christ is the head of man, and man is the head of woman. And a man should not have his head veiled and a woman must because if 'she prays or prophesies with her head unveiled (she) shames her head (ie man)' Have a read of the text, and see what sense you can make of it, taking into consideration that pagan customs often required a man to be veiled to sacrifice to the gods, and that Jewish custom as well as Roman propriety required most married women to cover their heads. We must not forget that Paul was a man of his time.

What I want to pull out from this text at this point is that Paul is talking about women covering their heads *when they are praying or prophesying in the assembly*. Rather than simply focus on head-coverings, it is crucial to note that women were allowed, indeed encouraged, to speak in the assembly. They did not take public-speaking roles in the synagogues. And remember the bit about women keeping silent is widely regarded as a later interpolation. So Paul gives permission for women to speak and indeed to prophesy. This was no mean thing.

Moreover, we know that there were several women who helped him on his mission. Indeed a brief look at Romans 16 will introduce us to :

Phoebe (1-2), called a *diakonos* and a *prostasis* (benefactor);

Prisca (3-5) and her husband Aquila, Paul's co-workers;

Junia (7) ‘prominent among the apostles’ (though earlier interpretations took this to be a man’s name.

Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis - ‘labor in the Lord’.

And in Philippians 4:2-3 **Euodia and Syntyche** who ‘struggled beside’ Paul in the gospel.

(We also know of Lydia, who was a merchant of dyes and a benefactor in Acts 16:11-15.)

When we look at how Paul views marriage and celibacy, apart from the deuteropauline Colossians and Ephesians, we hear him tell the Corinthians:

‘The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.’ (1 Cor 7:3-5)

This reciprocity is highly unusual in both the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman worlds. It is quite a radical statement from Paul.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, one of the earliest feminist interpreters of the new testament, maintains a balanced view of Paul, seeing him very much as a man of his own time, with limitations and blind spots, but also able to stretch the boundaries as we have seen above. More recent scholars have sometimes opted for an either-or approach. What I think is very important is to recognise that we cannot expect Paul to be a feminist in the way we understand feminism in our time. That would be completely anachronistic. Moreover, we do not have to abide with everything that Paul says about women either – we are living nearly 2000 years later!.

But I do want to point out how Paul has stretched the boundaries, and perhaps nowhere more than when he writes to the Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

Nothing can be more egalitarian than that!

Liberationist interpretation

And that quote from Galatians brings me nicely to the last point. For Paul says, there is no slave or free in Christ Jesus. How did Paul regard slavery.

As ever, the answer is not straightforward. Despite his egalitarian statement here, it appears that Paul does encourage the members of his communities to remain in the status they are in:

²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.^[a] ²² For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. ²⁴ In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters,^[d] there remain with God.’ (1 Cor 7:21-24)

Paul addresses the issue head on when he sends the slave Onesimus, whom Paul calls 'my child... whose father I have become in imprisonment.' (Philemon 1:10), back to his owner Philemon. What he actually asks Philemon to do is a matter, as ever, of debate. I encourage you to read this shortest of letters and make up your mind. We will look at this more closely on Thursday.

I am aware that Thursday is our last session. I would like to finish by taking a brief look at Paul's spirituality. The difference between theology and spirituality is a massive subject to address. Some argue that there is no difference in reality, only that traditionally theology has concerned itself with more systematic theology. But, certainly, any study of the great Spiritual writers looks at their theology and historical reality too.

Maybe for us, it means exploring Paul's image of God, how we relate to Christ, how we live our lives in the Spirit and how we form communities and celebrate liturgically. We have touched on aspects of these in our previous sessions.

So maybe to spend some time thinking about these points and how Paul addresses them. And then, and only then, to reflect on what this has to say to your own spirituality today.

I also hope to have some time to answer questions, so bring any you may have along.

So, in preparation for the class, please read:

1 Corinthians – focus on community relationships and disputes.

Philemon

Chapter on contemporary approaches in David Horrell *Introduction to the Study of Paul*

Texts for the session