

Paul and the reframing of leadership

The shape of western thought and society derives largely from the contradictions, antagonism and plagiarism between its two founding traditions – the classical world of the Greeks and Romans, and the peculiar worldview which grew from Jewish soil. As those living in a world heavily influenced by western ideas and traditions, we have inherited the richly contradictory notions and practices of these traditions. At the source of this creative tension lies the surprising story of Saul of Tarsus.¹

Paul and the reframing of leadership From Saul to Paul

Saul was a Jewish man and a citizen of the Roman city of Tarsus, an important trading city in the vicinity of far south-eastern Turkey today.

Palestine itself had been deeply Hellenised (influenced by Greek culture) for over a century and many Jews living throughout the Roman Empire held positions of significant rank.

Saul was a Jewish lawyer and leader, likely trained both in Jewish and Roman law, and a Roman citizen, an honour passed from forebears who had merited high standing, perhaps by the generosity of their benefactions. Saul had not forgotten his Jewish roots, however, and was a member of a Jerusalem based party which at times supported terrorism against the Roman forces occupying Palestine. Saul could play both worlds: zealous Jewish agitator, and urbane Hellenised professional.

Soon, however, Saul was to become the most articulate advocate of a radically different kind of social subversion. Soon, Saul would be better known by his assumed name,

Paul. Several of his sayings have passed into western parlance. Think how often we hear the saying, “All things to all people?”² Or some variation of, “don’t conform to the patterns around you,” or “get a (re)new(ed) mindset?”³ And while “change” may be all the rage now, these words were first spoken in a world that *censured* change.

Alongside the tall figures of classical and Hellenistic literature and culture, Paul appears as a most unlikely figure to influence the future shape of thought and society, yet he is arguably *the* leader who forever changed our expectations of leadership. Such a claim only makes sense when we see him in his world. If we can see what he was doing then, we might catch his spirit of wise leadership for now.

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From rationalism and nationalism to a simple story

The earliest Greek philosophers were preoccupied with the problem of the One and the Many:

*(The One) is ungenerated and indestructible, whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete. Nor was it, nor will it be, since now it is, all together, one, continuous... The same and remaining in the same state, it lies by itself, and thus remains fixed there. For powerful necessity holds it enchained... because it is right that what is should be not incomplete.*⁴

Being... is infinite... unique... changeless... always homogenous with itself... can neither perish nor grow nor change its



*arrangement nor suffer pain nor suffer anguish... (nor) move.*⁵

Plato’s answer to the problem in many ways set the course for

western thought: the world we apprehend through reason is perfect; the world we experience is imperfect: *We must in my opinion begin by distinguishing between that which*

*always is and never becomes from that which is always becoming but never is. The one is apprehensible by intelligence with the aid of reasoning, being eternally the same, the other is the object of opinion and irrational sensation, coming to be and ceasing to be, but never fully real.*⁶

Plato left us with life split between the realms of ordinary experience and some purer reality. We call it dualism. Plato’s formula and terms didn’t catch on with everybody, but the spirit of dualism did. Each formulation presumed a purer more important reality located beyond our experience. The perfect had to be unchanging, balanced, ordered, uniform, symmetrical, harmonious,

smooth and serene.

Paul knew these intellectual legacies. No educated urbane man could miss them. Like other free born boys, he probably learnt Greek copying portions of the texts of Homer and other literary greats. Later he would dialogue with Stoics and Epicureans, the leading eclectic philosophers of the day, quoting their own texts. But Paul had also been schooled in his countrymen's traditions, the story-filled world of the Hebrew writings. The two mindsets were very different despite a long history of Judaism absorbing the intellectual and cultural patterns of Hellenism.

Paul was convinced that the success of his work hung on his hearers embracing a fundamentally new mindset, free from Greek rationalism and Jewish nationalism. He knew they must sustain this mindset through a new kind of conversation grounded in a story from which they derived a new identity and purpose.

When Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at Athens heard Paul speaking in the marketplace, they presumed he was peddling some new philosophy, theology, or religion. There was enough parallel to make the connection likely.⁷

Despite the comparative oddity of encountering a Jewish lawyer declaiming publicly in Athens, he was clearly conversant with the main themes of Graeco-Roman philosophy and quoted their own sources confidently. But the more he talked, the more the parallels dissipated. Paul began from an entirely different place. Gone was the old dualism between gods and men; Paul described a creation that was good. Gone were the abstract attributes of deity; Paul told a scandalous story in which God showed love (never a virtue for a Greek or Roman god or man) without respect for rank.

Steeped in the Jewish writings

and tradition, Paul brought all questions back to a single all-encompassing story and its recent surprising climax. Where Paul parted from his Jewish heritage, it was not to defer to the abstraction of the Graeco-Roman tradition, but to ground all of life in the story of an unlikely figure, a Jewish building worker from the back country Galilean town of Nazareth. Paul never developed any abstract conceptual system in the style of the classical philosophers and theologians. Rather Paul saw enormous implications for humanity and society in the paradoxical reversals of dying and rising at the heart of Jesus' extraordinary story. This paradoxical story continued to convey its equally paradoxical power to transform life through the experiences of wisdom in foolishness, riches in poverty, joy in suffering, and strength in weakness. Story was the shape of a paradoxical new mindset.

The great clash between Paul's story and his world was not over

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ideas, but over the *implications for society* of those ideas. To see this we must understand how Graeco-Roman society worked.⁸

From social pyramid to genuine community

Imagine a social network like a modern pyramid scheme. A vast web of patron-client relationships carrying formal obligations and conventions. One worked to create obligations to oneself and called upon the conventions of enmity when slighted. This is the social reality behind the sermonising on friendship by Plato and Seneca. People in the top layers of the

pyramid never worked a day in their lives. Work with one's hands was unseemly, including what we would call administration or management. Those above took a share of what was achieved below.

Strange as it may seem to us, money flowed down as well as up the pyramid. So what did patrons stand to gain? Support. Prestige. Influence. The harmony and well-being of the *polis* (city or state) depended on public works, the dole in times of famine, and the goodwill generated by festivals and games. Most of these were financed by private benefactors. The money came from men at the top and those keen to impress. Friendship meant reciprocity. There were no free lunches in Corinth or Rome. Layer upon layer of free born men, and not a few entrepreneurial freedmen, spent the bulk of their days in lobbying and intrigue, subterfuge and toadying. Litigation was rampant.

Sitting behind this whole system were the ancient demarcations of

rank. “Free,” “freed”, or “slave” stamped a person (usually) for life. Many further levels of rank delineated those who were free-born. Admitting a boy to a prestigious gymnasium could require proof of high rank

stretching back six generations on the father's side and eight on his mother's to prove his good stock.⁹ Household slaves gave themselves ranks with special prominence for the literate – we find them in the occupational references on their tombstones and in the wills of unusually benevolent masters. As a freedman, you might rise to great prominence, but there was always someone from the old guard ready to rub your lowly origins in your face.

We need to appreciate the difference between rank and status. One's rank was largely fixed by birth with some chance at change through marriage or adoption. (We read of

great men with sons many years their senior.) Status was another matter. Its marks are familiar to us: education, wealth, fame, achievements, friendships, personal appearance, memberships, lifestyle. A man might live many steps above or below his rank according to how well he fared in business and in securing the right friends.

Talent, piety, virtue and citizenship could each offer a platform for new status. A carefully orchestrated divorce, re-marriage and adoption by one's new father-in-law – all in exchange for money – might facilitate a rise in rank. It was in everyone's interest to keep the system going. The costly business of benefactions brought status to those of means. Plutarch, a contemporary of Paul, wryly observed: "Most people think that to be deprived of the chance to display their wealth is to be deprived of wealth itself."¹⁰

Whatever inner reflection was meant to be triggered by the famous aphorism, "Know yourself," it first of all reinforced social convention. There were over 250 such aphorisms circulating in various lists in the first century.¹¹ The four sayings most frequently listed – the original motivational pack – were:

- Know yourself = know your place.
- Nothing to excess = stick to what is expected.
- Cost to every commitment = assess the risk to your honour.
- Pick your time = seize the moment to improve your position.

Intellectuals, inscriptions and postcard wisdom only projected what everybody knew: one must maintain one's rank and improve one's status. Compassion and humility hinder ambition. Keep compassion to those who deserve it. Don't exceed what is socially expected. Or there'll be a price to pay. So stay in your place while you wait your chance.

Paul's message and life were a blast of arctic air on this stifling social scene. He modelled and taught something radically at odds with the structures of society. Yet he did not advocate an outward

revolution, but a quiet transformation from within. His groups formed communities around simple gatherings for dinner. Inside the gathering, Paul expected the group to maintain a high standard of propriety and morality, but to disregard social distinctions – even to honouring the less honourable. This advice must not be intellectualised. It involved inverting the normal conventions of honour. Paul expected them to break with the normal convention of allocating food and seating according to rank. He expected wives, children, even slaves, to be allowed, no, invited, to recline at meal with those of rank

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and to participate fully in the conversation. This was entirely scandalous. He might as well have instructed them to sit around in their underwear (not a few neighbours probably had their suspicions about that too, what with all this new talk about love).

This realignment of social behaviour was critical. Paul was building something entirely new. He had to neutralise the grip of every social convention that tied the hearts and minds of his co-workers and converts to the current world order. His strategy depended heavily on bringing his hearers and readers to a mindset often profoundly at odds with the basic tenets of the political and social system. He did so by showing them what the new order looked like in his own relationships and lifestyle.¹²

From leadership to service

In the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome, leadership meant rank. Position, not role. Leadership was a right and responsibility attached to a man (overwhelmingly a man) by

birth, marriage, or adoption. Leadership did not depend on competence, gift, intellect, or experience. Its purpose was to maintain the order of a highly stratified society. Good order depended on people staying in the places allotted to them by birth, by Fate, by the gods, or by personal accomplishment.

Society and philosophy have a habit of mirroring one another. Plato lived a privileged life in a highly stratified society structured around the great divide of free and slave. Unsurprisingly, he hypothesised reality as split between what mattered and what didn't. The logic flowed from social experience to theory and back to experience. What a slave did was part of the lower order of reality. What a noble man did was closer to the ideal. The philosopher was to guide the noble man into being more noble; more intellectual, more distanced from everyday concerns, more superior to all others.

Some had argued for a flatter social world. It wasn't hard to see through the conventions which maintained society. Thus Euripides' famous line, "there is nothing shocking but thinking makes it so."¹³ In this spirit Antiphon rejected race and class distinctions as arbitrary: "By nature we all stand with a like equipment, whether we are barbarian or Greeks; our natural wants are the same...we breathe a common air...we feel respect and awe for the nobly born, and for them only: in this matter we behave like barbarians to our own people."¹⁴ Likewise, Euripides and others felt intensely conscious of the rights of individuals and a concern for the oppressed classes. Alcidas, Georgias' student, captured the mood: "God has left all men free; Nature has made none a slave."¹⁵

But another line of thought better reflected the social reality that was always going to hold sway. "Every free born man has intelligence but doesn't know how to use it. Every free born woman has intelligence but will never learn how to use it. And every slave born man or woman has no intelligence." This is the gist of

Plato's assessment.¹⁶ Aristotle, Plato's pupil, followed suite: "The better a man is, the more he deserves, so that he who deserves most is the best."¹⁷ The world was structured by rank and its associated privileges and responsibilities. According to Aristotle, those who find themselves at the highest ranks in society, who have the most, are proved superior. It's an awkward argument and I suspect Aristotle knew it. His defence of slavery is perhaps the worst line of argument he ever ran. The noble man remains aloof from the exertion of those beneath him: "He will rarely undertake anything or if he does it would be something great and glorious."¹⁸

The noble man must avoid all excess and model calm and serenity. One must only do what will be seen by others as great and noble and thus bolster one's reputation before them. "He must live his own life, uninfluenced by anyone, unless perhaps a friend, since to permit such influence would involve some degree of complacency."¹⁹ The key is to maintain one's own position. If he drops his guard, if he becomes complacent about his own position, the noble man will allow other people to come into his life and to exert an influence over him. As Dio Chrysostom, another contemporary of Paul, put it "The man who administers this office with firmness and self-control does not find it difficult from then on to show himself superior to even the whole world."²⁰

Hear Seneca, another of Paul's contemporaries:

*You ask me to say what you should consider it particularly important to avoid. My answer is this: a mass crowd. It is something to which you cannot entrust yourself without risk. I never come back home with quite the same moral character I went out with; something or other becomes unsettled where I had achieved internal peace, some one or other of the things I had put to flight reappears on the scene... You must inevitably hate or imitate the world. But the right thing is to shun both courses... Retire into yourself as much as you can.*²¹

Plato's dualism simply reflected the social order. The everyday world is corrupt. The world of ideas is pure. So what's a noble man to do? Certainly not work with his hands. A century before Paul and Seneca, Cicero declaimed on which work could be regarded as becoming to a gentleman, and which work was vulgar: "In regard to means of livelihood, which ones are to be considered becoming to a gentleman and which ones vulgar...the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labour...the very wages they receive is a pledge of their slavery..."²² Even if you were free born, those who

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work with their hands are no better than slaves. Cicero continues, "all mechanics are engaged in vulgar trades...fishmongers, butchers, cooks, and poulterers, and fishermen...But the professions – medicine and architecture, for example, and teaching – these are proper for those whose social position they become." They may have been "proper," but Cicero or Seneca would never have allowed *themselves*, or *their* sons to be doctors, teachers or architects. Such professions were noble for those whose ranks befitted them, but Cicero and Seneca were above them. Bottom line: a leader should not work with his hands.

Leaders were advised to wall themselves with logic. A closed circle of elitist logic assured the noble man of his superiority. Seneca reflects the importance and function of such arguments: "Know, therefore, Serenus, that this perfect man, full of virtues human and divine, can lose nothing...The walls which guard the wise man are safe both from flame and assault, they provide no means of entrance – are lofty, impregnable, godlike."²³ Likewise

Plutarch, another contemporary of Paul: "The sage of the Stoics is not impeded when confined...not injured...(but) invincible... impregnable... uncaptured."²⁴

The man who is honoured by all is better than all. The mind is superior to the emotions. The use of reason is what he must grow into. He must surround himself with those of high reputation, noble birth and philosophical ability. Each argument is like another brick stacked in a wall of logic safeguarding a man from disturbance by the world of ordinary people.

Leaders must be honoured.

Listen to this inscription:

*since Theophilus...is of very noble ancestral stock, having contributed all good-will towards his country...being amicable to the citizens and in concord with his wife Apphia...it is resolved that Theophilus be honoured with a painted portrait and a gold bust and a marble statue...and that this decree be read aloud so that all may know that such people who exercise their life on behalf of their country meet with such a testimony.*²⁵

There are thousands of such inscriptions surviving from across the Mediterranean world. Every inscription praises the man, and recounts the things he has done. Like repaving the theatre, upgrading the market place, building a new road, or hosting games or a festival in honour of Caesar or a god. The inscriptions always come to the same punch line: "And that the whole world may know that we, the citizens of this city, know how to honour such a man, we have arranged for the following honours for him." This was propaganda. When Theophilus' son saw the inscription, he knew what he must live up to. When a man of low rank saw the inscription he knew that society would crumble without men like Theophilus, and that he himself was unworthy of such men and must stay in his own lower place.

Yet for all the strictures of rank and the philosophical censure of change, leaders in the first century were on the move. Recall those little

aphorisms. A leader had to know his place, yet he was also working his way up the ladder. The art was to make one's move without being criticised for acting excessively. What would happen, for example, if a man showed compassion to those of lower rank? What would his peers think of him? There was a clear cost to each commitment. He must carefully pick his time. He must serve his own ambition. In the classical world, love, mercy, peace, compassion, kindness – these things were never the virtue of a man. Nor of a god. At least not in the sense we might think. Rather the noble man sought courage (to preserve his own place), justice (to act according to what people deserve given their place), wisdom (to see what actions follow from rank), and self-control (to gain self-mastery and mastery over others).

A new order of leader was emerging at the time of Paul, and they were particularly prominent in Corinth. They were known as sophists, a play on the word for wisdom, and the movement is known as the Second Sophistic.²⁶ Sophists were men with what we would call a tertiary education, which was fundamentally training in rhetoric.²⁷ Their training equipped them to function as public speakers, lawyers, teachers, and dinner party speakers. Normally if a sophist travelled to another city, he would stay with a friend of his own patron.

But sometimes things soured. A sophist might need to find a new patron, perhaps in a new city. In such circumstances, he and his assistant might go to the marketplace upon arrival in the new city. When a good crowd was present, he would take the orator's stand and posture – the podium, the robe, the hand gesture, the look – and declare that he would declaim briefly on any topic of the crowd's choosing. Before anyone had a chance to speak, his assistant would suggest the topic. The sophist would then give a short address he had given numerous times before, beautifully staged and crafted to appear to be extempore. Of course everyone knew it was a set piece, but

that was part of the game. This was his entrance to the town and its social structures. It was vital to parade one's eloquence. And so he would lace the argument with aphorisms and witticisms, carefully modulating a clear affirmation of social convention with perhaps just a hint of playfully iconoclastic humour. The whole point was to secure a patron into whose employ the sophist would enter to teach his children, run his litigation, speak at his dinner parties, and in every way

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increase his patron's status. Boasting was crucial but carefully constrained within propriety on behalf of advancing the patron's prestige.²⁸

A new hue came to colour this social dynamic in Corinth in the first century. A flux was at work in the normally fixed conventions of rank and status. The sophists saw their chance and gained significant social standing and influence. Many sophists gained prominence even to the point of entangling patrons within complicated webs of social responsibilities and accountabilities to improve their own positions. In short, the conventions and intrigues normally associated with the top of the social hierarchy were working their way down the ladder. A whole middle class of people – an anachronism that nonetheless usefully conveys the sense – were mimicking and in some cases supplanting those at the top. The nobly born were outraged. Sophists ingratiated themselves to wealthy

patrons of comparatively low rank who resented the nobly born. The whole game was changing and the flux provided a new platform for social intrigue. The sophists were ready to manipulate uncertainty to their own ends. Their oratory and deceit created new webs of obligation. This was the world of Paul at Corinth.

We think of Paul as a leader, but *in the terms of his own day*, perhaps it is becoming clearer that he was *anti-leadership*. Leadership equalled rank. But not for Paul, as he had seen in the example of Jesus.

Imagine an educated, urbane, professional Jewish man stands up to speak or sends you a letter. He announces that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one?”²⁹ As a similarly educated, urbane, professional Greek man or woman (even more so as a woman as Paul has broken convention to write directly to you), what would you make of this? Or what if he advised you to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves?”³⁰ Or to “not think of yourself more highly than you ought,” nor to be proud, but to “associate with people of low position”?³¹ Or to “give greater honour to those without honour?”³² Or perhaps the ultimate lines for endearing oneself and one's message to a first century patron: “Not many of you were wise, brothers. But God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise...I did not come to you with superior wisdom or eloquence...We messengers are the scum of the earth!”³³ Today we prize adaptability. Today we require humility of leaders. But in Paul's world each was unseemly. Grace, he said, drove him to adapt to those he sought to serve: “I have become all things to all men.”³⁴ To most he appeared unstable and inconstant.

Paul had set himself on a collision course with Graeco-Roman social expectation and convention. And for good reason. The social implications of his story were profound. First of all, the story was

anchored in a man who, in Paul's words, "emptied himself, made himself nothing, and subjected himself to death," even execution by the Romans. Then he claimed that this man had been raised from the dead to a renewed human existence (an absurdity to Greeks) and had supplanted the place of Caesar as Lord.³⁵ To the majority of his hearers, Paul's story was ridiculous, offensive and treasonous. Second, Paul claimed that on the basis of this inexplicable act of self-sacrifice, grace was now available impartially to all. No decent Greek or Roman god would ever subvert the Emperor or the social system! Paul was modelling in his own life the shape of that subversion.

Paul left no room for personal power or office. Again, in a world where leadership was rank, and only rank, Paul was *anti*-leadership. This is difficult for us to grasp. He exerted profound influence. He founded communities. He taught and modelled a reordering of relations that would eventually reshape the social order. We are

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accustomed to calling all of this leadership. Yet he did not employ the vocabulary of leadership. He described himself with simple, demeaning metaphors like slave, servant, or gardener. He reframed friendship away from personal gain. In time, the new language (servant) would come to delineate rank (minister). But not for Paul. He refused the marks of the sophist so highly valued by the Corinthians. He would not take their money. He would not use eloquence. He would not boast. He would not be drawn

into improving his would-be patrons' prestige. He worked with his hands at the wrong end of town rubbing shoulders with slaves. He did not defer to patrons sufficiently. He honoured and championed the less honourable. And he dismantled the intellectual pretence and

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snobbery of Seneca and his ilk: "We demolish every argument that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to Christ."³⁶ Every thought, every convention, must be brought captive to the paradoxical wisdom in foolishness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.³⁷

The way Paul worked

Paul showed no conscious dependence on any one school of thought. Rather, as an independent thinker, he simply built on whatever was to hand, as Edwin Judge has remarked, creatively "exploiting the material rather than subjecting oneself to it."³⁸ Paul's conversations were peppered with the phrases and thought of Hellenistic education and of popular philosophy and morality. Yet though he largely accepted the civil order of life in the cities, he promoted a distinctive set of social relations in his groups. No simple formula can account for his choices.

Paul engaged with the world rather than retreating into an intellectual or religious ghetto. He was a thoroughly urban man. He had no difficulty in employing his audiences' vocabulary, literary techniques, intellectual models, and even social conventions. All the more so wherever these enabled him to improvise his approach to converse with an audience, entering into their needs and world views. He used clichés from contemporary letter writing. He was conscious of

the conventions of friendship. Indeed, he deliberately exploited the theme, reframing it in the light of his story. When Paul described himself as a debtor to those with whom he had no prior relationship, he reversed the normal expectations of Graeco-Roman friendship. He recast the common honorific and moral term *philotimia* (love of honour, ambition) to advertise his choice not to compete with others.³⁹ He used the building as a metaphor for social relations in a remarkable innovation that enabled him to dismantle the traditional indicators and expectations of status.⁴⁰

Nor was he interested in uniformity of behaviour in others. His own life embodied the dynamics that he sought to open up within his groups. His message was provocative, not prohibitive. It avoided the pettiness of philosophical and legal controversies. Nor did he prescribe any one pattern for the gathering. His advice left room for spontaneity and diversity. His message offered no formula to settle in advance which way to respond to contemporary intellectual and social issues.

Paul used the common political metaphor of the body to drive home the reversal of status. The image was normally used to reinforce the greater necessity and worth of the head over the lesser parts. Once again Paul reframed convention. The greater part could not say to the least, "I don't need you." Nor vice versa. Each part, each member, had its role to play.

Paul then brought the metaphor of gifting to this inverted image of the body in one of the most remarkable innovations in the history of thought.⁴¹ Every person had talent and ability. Each should see this as a gift, a trust on behalf of others. Together the metaphors of body and gifting as Paul envisaged them were to deeply influence western understanding of humanity and society.

New understanding for new circumstances emerged within the communities through conversation. Indeed, the power of the story was

realised in its ability to inform and reorient the changing circumstances of social life. Paul, his colleagues, and the communities were each working out the message as they went. Yet even as his thought matured, Paul continued to show no interest in formulating final statements in the sense of the debates and creeds which followed his writings in subsequent generations. He remained focused on specific people and contexts. New contexts continued to prompt new responses.

What Paul offered was neither abstract nor idealised. He gave voice to a relationship. He was constantly reflecting and learning, yet he had no time for abstraction. He was gripped by the possibilities of the present moment, and of the next. He gives the impression of working out his thought on the run, with both remarkable clarity and surprisingly little formulae.

The rhythm of Paul's choices – alternately conforming and innovating – was far from easy to pick up. This metaphor of rhythm is deliberate. Paul was more akin to a jazz musician improvising than to a lawyer, philosopher, or theologian assembling a tight argument or system of thought. Paul creatively adapted his message and methods to match new challenges raised by new circumstances. His thinking and practice was contextual – shaped by and for each new context. Strong patterns and defining experiences linked all that he said and did. This coherence lay in his gospel, his story of the person and events concerning Jesus Christ, and his dogged insistence on seeing all things in the light of Jesus.

Paul's legacy

Whether or not a person acknowledges Jesus Christ in the manner that Paul did, his message and the flimsy, risky experiment in reorienting social relations based on this story somehow significantly influenced the trajectory of subsequent western thought and society.

Paul's groups had been dinner parties of perhaps 9-12 people

occasionally meeting in larger combined gatherings in rented dining rooms.⁴² No one would have rated them a chance of surviving, let alone of subverting the social order. Less than 50 years later, Pliny the Roman governor of Bithynia, wrote to the Emperor Trajan wanting to know what to do with the increasingly numerous followers of Jesus.⁴³ To be a follower of Jesus in the wrong part of the empire in the mid to late first century could lead to an untimely demise under imperial

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decree. Three hundred years later Julian was the last emperor to profess faith in the traditional Roman gods (ironically, Julian's agenda shows a deep influence of the gospel upon his own thinking).⁴⁴ The shift was complete. Well, almost.

Paul's original vision was sustained, plagiarised, corrupted, and creatively adapted. There is no simple picture to what happened in the awkward partnership of Christianity and empire in the centuries that followed. No doubt Paul would be dismayed at so much that was said and done in his name. I suspect he still would. And yet his influence extended beyond what he could ever have imagined. Political systems, jurisprudence, public health and education as we know them in the western world, every humanitarian institution and domain of social reform – indeed, the very idea of social reform – owes its existence and character to a very large degree to Paul's radical story and example of leadership.

Working with Paul's legacy today

A number of principles have impressed themselves upon me from the example of Paul. I have seen them enable new insight and heart in today's leaders of corporations, not-for-profits, schools, and communities. I think of them as

starting points for conversation.

Know, shape and reshape the central story by telling it

Paul's letters show a man working out the story as he went. The story stayed strong and retained its internal coherence in part because of his confidence in telling and retelling it in the marketplace of ideas and events. Every new context brought some measure of reframing.

Vision is a story. Craft a new story built upon the old. *Tell* the story more than present it. Tell it often, and tell it differently. Tell it to enrich it.

Subvert unhelpful abstractions by story

Though happy to adopt contemporary language and conventions in so many ways, Paul would not allow his story to be recast in terms of abstract ideas. Indeed, he undercut the prevailing ideas even as he interacted boldly with their champions. There was no lifeless abstraction in Paul's thinking and practice.

Push for the real stories that sit beneath problems and opportunities. Story animates strategy. Use story to bring reality to planning and change initiatives.

Maintain the central conversations

The gatherings of Paul's groups were dinner parties. They were conversations. At the heart of the fledgling groups was a commitment to sustain the central conversation. They met to remind themselves of the central story and to think through its implications for their own lives.

There is a central conversation to every social group. Name it. Honour it. Promote it. Place it at the heart of strategy, culture and practice.

Craft new meaning in these conversations around the story

No two of Paul's letters told the story the same way. Each retelling was prompted by and reflected the changing circumstances of his groups and their social and political environments. The conversations at the heart of the gathering drew in their own stories. There were massive implications to work

through, and Paul laboured both to equip them to take up the conversations and to assure them of his confidence that they were gifted to do so.

Story must be given room to evolve and to adapt. Make the conversations real. Leave room to chase the questions that matter most. Sustain commitment in the face of breakdown in conversation. Show people you are confident in their capacity to craft new meaning.

Embody the story

Paul knew that grace and freedom, equality and gifting would stay mere subjects of dinner party speculation unless they could be seen. For Paul, grace meant stepping down in the world. It meant embodying the paradoxical dynamics of weakness in strength, wisdom in foolishness. He would stay with a wealthy benefactor on one occasion, and sweat it out at the wrong end of town on another. He accepted the pragmatic realities of the social system, but detached his own identity from any marks of rank and status.

The old adage “Walk the talk” is crucial, but doesn’t say enough. It’s not just about consistency and integrity. It’s about leading as a “living letter known and read by all.” Show in your life and leadership the heart and wisdom of the story.

Subvert inappropriate rank and status with grace

Paul marched to an entirely different drum when it came to rank and status. He mixed freely with people of all backgrounds. He broke convention and taboo to honour those deemed dishonourable. He played down his education and intellectual capacity, yet the rose to the full height of his powers of argument and persuasion to oppose those who defrauded their new associates from lowly origins. He did not advise the wholesale release of slaves (slaves had no legal identity and thus no protection other than a master). Yet he argued for and modelled a reframing of the master-slave relationship as brother/sister

to brother/sister under a common master.

Every social system has conventions which foolishly and often unjustly discriminate. Find one that you can dismantle. Show yourself a fair leader who regards all with equal dignity and value. Make this act of grace a little hinge by which to turn a big door.

Aim at congruence, not conformity

Paul made no attempts to standardise the communities he founded (another irony of subsequent history). His letters show wide diversity in vocabulary, perspective and practice wrapped around the central non-negotiable story. He drew them into the same conversation around the same story. But he expected they would tell the

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story and work out its implications with a high degree of local nuance.

Conformity kills community and brilliance. Diversity around a shared story fosters richness. No two groups will ever be identical. Give up trying to make them so. Foster a robust dynamic and dialogue that ensures diversity of expression around an honouring of the central story and identity.

Aim at maturity

Paul presumed and promoted maturity. This was no easy task as the groups struggled to come to grips with an alien story and worldview which cut across so many ideals and conventions. It required a new kind of rigour and thoughtfulness. Paul characterised this as “speaking the truth in love that we might in all things grow up.”

Conformity and ideals are not the

marks of maturity. Aim instead for strength of character. An ability to speak into one another’s lives boldly and respectfully. A freedom to acknowledge and draw from one another’s brilliance without embarrassment. A gutsy grace.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on my keynote address at Kingdom Builders conference in Auckland, September 2005 and the Clyde Vautier Memorial Lecture, Wellington, October 2005, as well as the final chapter of my forthcoming book for a general market, *The Arts of the Wise Leader*.
2. 1 Cor 9:22.
3. Rom 12:2.
4. Parmenides, in Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 144.25-146.27. For this text and others of the pre-Socratic period, see J. Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1987).
5. Melissus, in Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 103.13-104.15.
6. *Timaeus*, 27D-28A.
7. Acts 17:16-33. For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Paul and the Graeco-Roman philosophers, theologians, priests, and moralists, see my *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000).
8. For access to inscriptional and papyrological sources relating to the New Testament, see the superb *New Documents* series published originally by Macquarie University and now Eerdmans under the editorship of G. H. Horsley, and S. R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, Vols 1-9 (Sydney: Macquarie University and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976-2002).
9. P. Oxy. 3283. This papyrus dates from 148/49AD. See the discussion in E.A. Judge, ‘Rank and Status’ in the *World of the Caesars and St. Paul: The Broadhead Memorial Lecture 1981* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 1982).
10. Plutarch, *Cato Maior*, 18.4.
11. See E. A. Judge, “Ancient beginnings of the modern world”, *Ancient History Resources for Teachers* 23.3 (1993): 140-144.
12. For a stimulating portrayal of Paul’s life and message in the context of the Roman Empire, see B. Walsh and S. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).
13. Fragment 19.

14. P.Oxy 1364.
 15. Schol. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1373b.
 16. See for example his *Timaeus*, *Laws* and *Republic*. There are places where Plato seems, even in these works, to allow for something closer to an inherent dignity in all. But the concession is hypothetical. Likewise Aristotle's prevailing view of women as inherently inferior: "A male is a male by virtue of a particular ability (to produce semen), and a female by virtue of a particular inability." *On the Generation of Animals*, 1:82.
 17. *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3.
 18. *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3.
 19. *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3.
 20. *Oration* 49.8-11.
 21. Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 7.1, 8.
 22. *On Duties* 1.150-151.
 23. *On the Firmness of the Wise Man* 6.3-8.
 24. *Moralia* 1057DE.
 25. Inscription AE 808 dating to 75/76AD, in G.H. Horsley (ed), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1982), 2:58-60.
 26. I am indebted here to B. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). For evidence of another "movement" with significant bearing on understanding of Corinth at the time of Paul, see also Winter's *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI:

- Eerdmans, 2003).
 27. There is no evidence of women being counted among the sophists, but some women ran their own defence in litigation and served as legal advisers (perhaps even lawyers in their own right). See Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 176-179.
 28. See Christopher Forbes, "Comparison, Self-Praise and Irony: Paul's Boasting and Conventions in Hellenistic Rhetoric", *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 1-30.
 29. Gal 3:28.
 30. Phil 2:3.
 31. Rom 12:3, 16
 32. 1 Cor 12:23.
 33. 1 Cor 1:26-27, 2:1, 4:13.
 34. 1 Cor 9:22.
 35. Phil 2:6-11. See also Col 1:15-20.
 36. 2 Cor 10:5.
 37. For a discussion of Paul breaking convention with Corinthian expectation, see my *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000). See also A. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).
 38. E. A. Judge, "St. Paul and Socrates", *Interchange* 14 (1973): 110.
 39. Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 5:9; 1 Thess 4:11.
 40. 1 Cor 3:10-17.
 41. Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:12-31; 14:26-40.
 42. See B. Blue, "Acts and the house church", in *The Book of Acts in Its First*

- Century Setting: Vol 2. Graeco-Roman Setting*, D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf (eds) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 119-222.
 43. *Letters*, Book 10, 96.
 44. See E. A. Judge, "Christian innovation and its contemporary observers", in *History and Historians in Late Antiquity*, B. Croke and A. Emmett(eds) (Sydney: Pergamon, 1983), 13-29.



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