

That writer of cheerful little ditties, Leonard Cohen, once wrote the following lines:

‘Give me back the Berlin Wall, give me Stalin and St Paul  
I have seen the future and it’s murder.’ (Leonard Cohen, *The future*, 1993).

In bracketing St Paul with the Berlin Wall and Stalin, Cohen reflects a common assumption that many today make about the saint whom we remember today. The cultural commentariat paint him as a reactionary, a homophobe, a religious fascist and a misogynist. It’s still common to hear the old chestnut that Jesus was an inspired teacher of love and freedom, but then St Paul came along and turned Christianity into a nasty religion of rules, oppression and orthodoxy. The reality is, unsurprisingly, more complex. Without St Paul, none of us would be here. There would be no Christianity, in the sense we understand it. Probably no Christianity or significant memory of Jesus at all. Change the original community, and its message, Paul probably did. But did he do it in a way that evacuated the value of Jesus’ teaching, or did he bring forth its full potential?

Let’s trace Paul’s background up to his conversion. Both Jesus and Paul were rabbis – religious teachers in Judaism. Rabbis in the Judaism of the time had a credibility which was passed on from one generation to the next. Jesus’ had a limited pedigree. We have no record that he ever studied under a more important rabbi. He was a self-made rabbi from a rather rustic background. Paul, in contrast, had studied at one of the most illustrious rabbinical schools of his day, the school of rabbi Gamaliel the Elder, who himself was the grandson of the great rabbi Hillel. Paul’s theological education was excellent and he was a rising star in the Judean theological firmament. Paul enters the Christian story as a persecutor of the early Christians, convinced that their belief was a false messianism, and their teaching heretical. But all this was to change, as we have heard, on the road to Damascus.

Paul’s conversion was the most famous in history, not least because it was so drastic. But although we think his change from persecutor to apostle was drastic, the really drastic thing was his theological interpretation of the Christian message. Until Paul came along, Christianity had largely been a Jewish sect. Of course, there is evidence that Samaritans and Gentiles were attracted to the message about Jesus, but no one in the church, until Paul, had worked out the full theological implications for this. Even Jesus’ ministry was focussed on his own people, the Jews. It’s Paul who realised that the message of Jesus is not merely for the Jewish people, but for the whole world.

To get the sense of Paul’s significance, it’s worth comparing the Paul we see in the Bible with St Peter. St Peter is the first to tell the good news of Jesus to gentiles, when – in Acts – we read of the conversion of Cornelius and his friends in Caesarea. Now Peter is following the prompting of the Holy Spirit and by meeting with and eating with gentiles, he breaks many of the food laws and taboos of orthodox Judaism. But, unlike Paul, Peter does not appear to work through what the theological implications of this conversion are. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul accuses Peter of vacillating over whether to eat with Gentiles in another circumstance. The idea that Gentiles could come to faith in Jesus was relatively uncontroversial. The question was, what do you do with them once they believe? Peter offered no solution of his own. That took the energy and theological genius of St Paul.

From the perspective of the original Jewish believers, were a Gentile to believe in the Jewish messiah Jesus, then the most obvious next step would be to fall into line with the main religious system, with its law code and modes of behaviour. This meant circumcision for the men, but it meant a lot more than that. Circumcision was just the beginning. In this understanding, belief in

the gospel was a way of enlarging God's people, the Jews. But Paul's insight was more radical.

Paul's radicalism is best summed up by the words from his letter to the Galatians: 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.' Paul's great gift to the Church and to subsequent generations was his radicalism: he realised that Jesus' resurrection was not just something of significance to Judaism, but it was something which was of cosmic significance, affecting the whole creation. He realised, early on, that the message of the gospel was not merely a wake-up call for Judaism, but the most amazing thing to be spoken of in the world. The boundaries which separated Judaism into a faith of its own faded into insignificance against the significance of Jesus for the whole world.

But beside thinking through the implications of the resurrection, St Paul walked the talk. He utterly side-stepped any demand on Gentiles to fall-in with Jewish identity. And for this, he was persecuted by his own people and was generally held in suspicion by the original Christian community in Judea. He was too radical for many of the first generation of Christian disciples based in the Jewish homeland. And when he moved out into the wider Roman empire to plant churches, other Christian Jews followed in his wake, trying to 'tidy up' the radical message of God's freely-given grace and forgiveness that Paul was proclaiming. Paul, rather than being accused of being a reactionary in his own day, was accused by the early Christian establishment of being a libertarian, a theological revisionist, a promoter of moral anarchy.

So it's historically ironic that this 'libertarian' now has a reputation of being a 'reactionary'. How has this come about? In the first place, we have to remember that when we read the gospels and when we read the epistles in the mass, we are reading very different kinds of literature, written with rather different purposes in mind. The gospels are compilations of sayings of Jesus wrapped around community recollections of the story of Jesus' life and ministry. Of course, they reflect the theology of the various gospel writers (and earlier compilers of his teaching) – which is why they are all different from one another. But they are theology as story-telling and sayings-retelling. The epistles, the letters, by contrast, are working documents from particular situations. When it comes to Paul's epistles, most of them are provoked by particular circumstances. They are not meant to be read as theological or religious books, even though they contain a lot of theology. The one exception is Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul is trying to explain himself – as a very controversial figure – before paying them a visit. It's a summary of his position in the face of his detractors, which is why it's such a useful book for getting a wider picture of Paul's thought as a whole. Nevertheless, even the epistle to the Romans has a particular purpose, and we can only gain insight into Paul's wider theology by bearing that context in mind.

Paul was frequently accused of unleashing moral anarchy by his Jewish compatriots. The view of gentiles in Jewish eyes was fairly low: gentiles were regarded as morally inferior, ritually inferior and inferior when it came to habits and cleanliness too. For Paul to maintain any credibility that he was planting communities that were genuinely filled with Christian disciples, he had to ensure that some of the less defensible gentile behaviour was not reflected by them. There were certain areas where Jewish sensibilities were very acute: one was eating, one was sexual morality and one was social roles. Even Paul has to tread lightly on the question of eating kosher and non-kosher food, but he does go so far as to adopt a live and let live approach. In the area of sexual morality, Paul sticks to the Jewish script in the light of Gentile practice: divorce is to be avoided, no sex outside marriage and as regards homosexuality, which was one area of massive difference between Jewish

and Gentile morality, an absolute 'no-no'. In the area of social roles, Paul seems to dislike the idea of Christian masters keeping Christian slaves, but he doesn't plot the ethical implications fully through – that took centuries. In regard to women and men, who were regarded by gentile culture as the inferior and the superior, Paul is primarily concerned to maintain current propriety, both in the face of sexual libertarianism in the gentile world and in regard to modesty of behaviour and roles which would be widely acceptable. Yet he does include women in his ministry teams and is prepared to call a woman an apostle on at least one occasion and to assign Priscilla a major teaching and eldership function. When it came to the role of women for Paul, discretion was the name of the game. But his theology of women was that they were equal to men as co-heirs with Jesus Christ, and this worked through in his use and reliance upon their ministry, irrespective of how counter-cultural this may have been.

Remembering that we are dealing with letters, when we come to St Paul, part of our struggle is his habit of summarizing social ethical teaching in terms of a quick summary list at the end of his letters. His social and ethical teaching is abbreviated, even though it's important to him. For this reason, it's often hard for us to work out whether he's saying something in order to maintain a sense of social propriety in the situation the church was in, or whether to maintain compliance with the Jewish Christian congregations and hence Christian unity, or whether he thinks something's absolutely right and wrong for all eternity. It's this fact that makes his teaching easy to dismiss as reactionary or antediluvian, centuries later. To be fair on Paul, we don't have sufficient space in his epistles to enter into a subtle dialogue.

But what we do have, with Paul, is indisputably radical thinking. Paul turned Christianity from a Jewish sect into a missionary agency which had the intention and the intellectual foundation to transform the wider, non-Jewish world. Without his thinking and his vision, Christianity would probably have perished with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70, for after that period, the original Judean Christian communities went into a rapid terminal decline. Without his thinking, our theological understanding of Jesus would be extremely limited, and doctrines such as the incarnation, the divinity of Jesus and the atonement would have not had the intellectual traction to make any headway against the philosophy of the graeco-roman world. There is a part of Paul which is deeply human and flawed. There is a part of Paul which is a creature of its time. But there is a part of Paul which has given us our faith today and shapes our understanding of Jesus. There is a part of St Paul in all of us; and it's arguably the most radical part of our Christian faith.

So, Leonard Cohen: I'll say no to the Berlin Wall and certainly to Stalin. But I'll say 'yes' to St Paul, and be enormously grateful to God for speaking to the world through his mind, through his message and through his ministry.

Paul Roberts  
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