liberating Paul

& the Justice of God
& the Politics of the Apostle

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The Canonical Betrayal of the Apostle

I declared at the end of the preceding chapter that the oppressive face of the "canonical Paul" is largely the reflection of words Paul never wrote, which nevertheless appear under his name in the New Testament. Obviously, a preliminary step in interpreting Paul must be to sort out which writings are *pseudepigrapha*, that is, writings falsely attributed to him. The next step is even more urgent for our purposes here, however: to determine the effect of the pseudepigrapha on our perceptions of Paul, and to control for it. As we shall see, the centuries-long acceptance of inauthentic writings as genuine letters of Paul not only has resulted in a skewed picture of the apostle's thought in general; the inauthentic letters have even contaminated the way we read Paul's genuine letters.

FACING THE FACTS OF PSEUDEPIGRAPHY

Which purportedly Pauline writings are not, in fact, his? Although scholarly consensus is always somewhat elusive, even a cursory review of reference works written from the historical-critical perspective (for example, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*) and of articles in journals like the *Journal of Biblical Literature* will reveal a wide agreement among many scholars on the following points.

(a) Paul did not write the Pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), Ephesians, or Colossians (although the case with Colossians is more ambiguous, and consequently more controversial, than with the others).

(b) The verses pronouncing God's judgment upon "the Jews" who killed Jesus (1 Thess. 2:14-16) or commanding women to silence (1 Cor. 14:34-35) are interpolations into Paul's genuine letters, made after the apostle's death.

(c) A significant minority of scholars likewise contend that the commandment to submit to governments (Rom. 13:1-7) is also a late interpolation.
This is not the place to rehearse those arguments at length: I happily refer the interested reader to standard critical introductions to the New Testament,¹ and to literature cited in what follows, for the relevant arguments pro and con. The judgments that will guide my interpretation of Paul in the subsequent pages are as follows:

(a) With the majority of historical-critical interpreters, I do not consider 1 Timothy, Titus, or Ephesians to be from Paul himself. Beyond the conventional observations that these letters differ in style and vocabulary from Paul’s other letters—observations often explained by defenders of authenticity as the result of Paul having dictated these letters to assistants—this judgment relies on the different social and historical situation presupposed, or advocated, in these letters.

The concentration on conventional Roman morality as the qualification for church office, the alignment of Christian morality to the customary gender and master-slave roles within the household, and the more favorable attitude toward civil government all mark 1 Timothy and Titus as products of the second or third Christian generation, closer in situation to the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp (early second century) than to Paul himself. Further, where these letters deviate from Paul’s genuine letters (as when 1 Tim. 2:11–15 commands women to silence in the churches; compare 1 Cor. 11:5), they constitute a deliberate reversal of the apostle’s own position.

Ephesians shows a similar distance from Paul himself when its author writes that the Law has been “abolished” (Eph. 2:15), a suggestion Paul explicitly rejects as blasphemous (Rom. 3:31)! The author of Ephesians also distills “the mystery” of Paul’s proclamation as the already achieved unity of Gentile and Jew within a single new people, the church (Eph. 3:1–7), while for Paul himself the “mystery” he reveals involves the destiny of still distinct peoples in a consummation he still awaits in the future (Rom. 11:25–36).

My judgment also depends on the presence of pseudonymity as a literary device in these letters. In other words, statements that would work to make a letter particularly effective in the situation of the supposed author’s extended (or permanent!) absence are a strong indication that the letter is inauthentic. “Paul’s” remarkable prescience in 1 Tim. 3:14–15 is a good example of such a literary device: “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.” (There follow extensive instructions regarding church order, written as if “Timothy” had never heard these things from Paul previously.) Another good example is Eph. 3:1–7, which puts Paul’s theology in a nutshell for an audience that knows him only by reputation.²

(b) I regard Colossians as inauthentic, though with somewhat less certainty than in the case of Ephesians, since the elements of the sort of
literary device I have just described are less obvious in Colossians. (The letter's distinctive vocabulary and theological perspective are less conclusive for pseudepigraphy than differences of style.) Nevertheless, we may detect the pseudepigraphic device when the "Paul" who speaks here claims to strive for the Colossians, the Laodiceans, "and for all who have not seen my face" (2:1). Paul's relevance for a post-apostolic generation is thus potentially guaranteed. 3

(c) The passage urging women to "keep silent in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:34-35), and the brazen announcement that "God's wrath" has overtaken "the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets" (1 Thess. 2:14-16), are surely interpolations. The plain sense of the first passage flatly contradicts 1 Cor. 11:2-16, where Paul clearly expects women to pray and prophesy in public worship. Further, a comparison of early manuscripts shows the interference of copyists at just this point in the letter. 4 The second passage, as it now stands in 1 Thessalonians, is a remarkable contradiction of Paul's nuanced and agonized argument in Romans 9-11, and transparently expresses the views of (Gentile) Christians living after the Roman war against Judea, a decade after Paul's death. Moreover, the "punchline" in verse 16 is absent from a number of Old Latin and bilingual manuscripts (dating from the mid-fourth century). Here as well we see the interference of copyists at precisely the point in question. 5 The coincidence of "internal" evidence (contradictions with what Paul says elsewhere) and "external" evidence (disturbances in the manuscript tradition, indicating interference from copyists) allows us to declare with confidence that Paul did not write these words.

(d) The situation is more complicated with regard to the command to "be subject to the ruling authorities" who derive their position from God (Rom. 13:1-7). On one hand, we must take seriously the tensions between this single passage and other places where Paul announces that "the schéma of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31) or represents the "subordination" of all earthly powers to God as an end-time event for which he longs (1 Cor. 15:24-28), rather than as a present reality that is in essence good. As James Kallas remarks on Rom. 13:1-7, "Paul could not have ascribed such an exalted status to Rome without being not only hypocritical and servile but untrue to his whole theological position." 6 On the other hand, the absence of any manuscript evidence for the interference of copyists should prompt caution. With most historical-critical scholars, I believe we must find some satisfactory explanation for the very uncharacteristic remarks in Rom. 13:1-7 without dismissing the passage as an interpolation. Several recent attempts to explain the passage have focused on political realities in Rome or in Palestine; these urgent questions will occupy us in chapter 6.

(e) Finally, I observe a series of interventions by ancient copyists and misjudgments by modern translators that have obscured Paul's close and
collegial relationships with women peers and have thus effectively effaced the leadership of women in the congregations Paul served. Phoebe, *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrae (Rom. 16:1), was as much a deacon as any other *diakonos* in early Christian literature; she has nevertheless become something else, a “deaconess” (Revised Standard Version) and has suffered demotion from Paul’s patron (*prostatis*) to his “helper” (Revised Standard Version) or “good friend” (Revised English Bible). Co-workers for whom Paul has obvious respect, Apphia (Philem. 2) and above all Prisca, toward whom Paul feels obvious fondness, respect, and gratitude, for she and Aquila “risked their necks for me and were in Christ before me” (Rom. 16:3–4), have routinely been marginalized as wives of the “real” co-workers, their “husbands” (for Apphia is usually assumed to be Philemon’s wife). Why else, commentators apparently assume, would these women have merited the apostle’s mention?

Such erasure of women’s contributions is more difficult, of course, with women who are partners with other women, like Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom. 16:12) and Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 3:2); so their contributions must be “feminized” and thus marginalized (consult any commentary on the “women’s squabble” between Euodia and Syntyche). In the extreme case, women themselves must be “disappeared” from the text: so Julia, declared “eminent among the apostles” in Rom. 16:7 in our earliest manuscript of Romans (p46, circa 200 C.E.), was promptly renamed Junias in later manuscripts and now remains one of Paul’s “fellow countrymen” and one of the “men of note among the apostles” (Revised English Bible).7

The cumulative effect of all these observations regarding mistranslations, changes and insertions made in the manuscript tradition, and probable pseudepigraphy is to cast doubt not only on the specific passages and letters I have just discussed but more broadly on the collection of Paul’s letters as they appear in our New Testaments. I am less interested in arguing specific cases of pseudepigraphy than in asking, What difference should these judgments make for the way we read Paul?

*First, we must face the fact that there are pseudepigrapha within the New Testament collection of Paul’s letters.* In the light of the historical evidence, to imagine that these letters were somehow providentially protected from the tampering of copyists, or that the canon itself was divinely insulated from fraudulent writings, is nothing but pious fantasy. As New Testament scholar William O. Walker writes, the question the interpreter is compelled to ask about any of these cases is “no longer simply, ‘Is this passage an interpolation?’ Rather, it becomes, ‘Is this passage one of the interpolations that almost certainly are contained within the Pauline corpus, and indeed, in this particular letter?’”8

To put the point in strong language, we must recognize, on principle,
that the Paul who speaks to us in the New Testament as a whole is an artificial composite, resulting in part from a campaign of deliberate revision of the memory of Paul. Judgments as to whether that revisionism was a faithful "adaptation" of Paul's teaching to a new situation, as some apologists argue, or a sinister deceit may differ from case to case. But we must not minimize the fact that pseudepigrapha by nature reflect the "deliberate alteration of the received tradition" (New Testament scholar E. Elizabeth Johnson).9

Pseudepigrapha are forgeries, however devoutly motivated they may have been. We must not allow discussions of how differently the ancients understood "authorship"—as they ascribed a philosophical treatise to an esteemed mentor, for example, or wrote an apocalypse under the "inspiration" of an ancient hero of the faith—to obscure the import of the act of forging a letter under someone else's signature. As New Testament scholar Luke T. Johnson writes, observations about the frequency with which ancient authors wrote under pseudonyms "are without either general or specific pertinence" to the Pauline writings, for literary pseudonymity was practiced "as a transparent fiction," while the Pauline pseudepigrapha, on the other hand, "deliberately [use] signals—his autograph, the network of names—that make the enterprise much more like a deliberate forgery."10

For just this reason, I cannot accept the broad definition of "authenticity" that this same scholar applies to the Pauline writings. Basing his judgment on "the persuasiveness of their literary self-presentation," Luke Johnson goes on to declare that "the whole Pauline corpus is one that Paul 'authored' but did not necessarily write."11 This seems to me a dubious wordplay that muddles more than it clarifies. Nor am I prepared to accept any of the other euphemisms for the Pauline pseudepigrapha that are current in textbooks and commentaries, including references to "post-pauline Paulinism" or "the Pauline school," or to "interpreters" or "disciples" or "heirs" or "followers of Paul" or "continuity in the Pauline tradition," without considerable qualification.

It is not enough to observe that the pseudo-Pauline letters appropriated much of Paul's own language and concepts. We must ask to what new use these materials were put. To the extent that the pseudepigraphist's "alteration of the received tradition" in fact contradicts the plain sense of Paul's genuine letters, we must be prepared to judge that the author of 1 Timothy, for example, was as much a betrayer of Paul as his "disciple," a saboteur of one form of Pauline community as much as a member of a Pauline "school."

We should not retreat from such conclusions simply because 1 Timothy appears in our New Testaments. Of course, I recognize the difficulty such historical judgments present for those concerned with the theological status the pseudo-Pauline letters enjoy within the canon.
As E. Elizabeth Johnson succinctly remarks, "If Paul did not write them, they do not cease to be the church’s scripture." But as Johnson herself notes, that fact raises theological questions; it does not answer them.

I respect the efforts of biblical theologians to honor the constraints of the canon even in the face of pseudepigraphy, in effect making the best of a bad situation, as J. Christiaan Beker does when he urges that "even in their failures the early interpreters of Paul provide the church today with important guidelines and warning signals." I note, however, that the lesson Beker would have us learn from the pseudo-Paulines is the necessity of adopting Paul’s gospel "to new historical circumstances" so that it may "remain a living word for new times and seasons." That is, what the pseudo-Paulines attempted in reactualizing Paul’s voice, not how they went about it, seems to be what Beker considers authoritative for us.

I hesitate to give the pseudo-Paulines any more authority than this. Indeed, in order to evaluate their significance for us today, I would urge Christians to weigh the fact that these pseudepigrapha are in the canon against the probability that they were canonized under a misconception (for they certainly were canonized as letters of Paul, not as "adapta­tions" of Paul).

Seen from the historical point of view, the fact that 1 Timothy or Ephesians stands in our canon shows only that the pseudepigraphists were hugely successful in their attempt to rewrite Paul and to suppress other understandings of the apostle’s legacy. The pseudo-Pauline writings emerged from conflict between rival interpretations of Paul, a fact easily obscured since only one side of this conflict "won," having been assured a place in our New Testament. The notion that the Pastoral letters emerged in an organic development from the earliest churches through a simple and continual process of "institutionalization" remains a naked postulate, more often assumed than argued in current scholarship. Rather, the Pastorals were written by some Christians to combat the views and practices of other Christians, conventionally dismissed as "heretics" by virtue of the historical triumph of the Pastorals, but no less "interpreters" and "heirs" and "disciples" of Paul.

As church historian Hans von Campenhausen wrote decades ago, the Pastorals portray a Paul who rejects all exaggerated asceticism, and directs his readers toward an officially organized Church life, bourgeois virtues, and respect for the ordinances of creation... in other words: they portray the sort of Paul who was needed in the fight against gnosticism, and who was quite definitely not to be found in the genuine epistles. Only when combined with these inauthentic letters could the genuine legacy of the apostle be tolerated by the Church and made "canonical."

Von Campenhausen’s comments are very much to the point, provided we recognize that "Church" here refers to those elements within
second-century Christianity that found "officially organized church life, bourgeois virtues, and respect for the ordinances of creation" more tolerable than the leadership of charismatic women, egalitarian community life, and resistance to Roman coercion.

Speaking so generally of "the Church" is an example of what church historian Dennis MacDonald sees as the failure of earlier scholarship "to account for the tremendous diversity of ways the early church remembered the apostle." As a consequence, MacDonald writes, "we have too often seen the apostle of freedom as the priest of social convention. The domestication of Paul in the Pastoral Epistles was not an inevitable, linear development of the Pauline mission, as is usually assumed." To the contrary: When we read the Acts of Paul and Thekla—a third-century apocryphal writing that incorporates much earlier Pauline traditions, as MacDonald has shown—"we recognize that not all Christians in the Pauline circle would have silenced women from teaching, trimmed the order of widows, exhorted slaves to continued servitude, and commanded obedience to Roman authority. We can, in short, no longer assume that the Pastoral Epistles were the rightful second-century heirs of the Pauline legacy."16

To elaborate on this point, we may observe that other second-century heirs of Paul included the passionate, ascetic women who found their experience of spiritual emancipation echoed in the Acts of Paul and Thekla, and the individuals who in their pursuit of truth gathered around the bold interpretations of Marcion, who regarded himself as the champion of the Pauline gospel. Thekla's spiritual daughters, however idiosyncratic their appreciation of Pauline theology, might have taught Paul's other heirs the equality in the Spirit of men and women. The companions of Marcion, despite the principled extremism of his approach and its vulnerability to anti-Semitism (a flaw equally endemic to his orthodox opponents),17 might have bequeathed to the larger church the legacy of a Pauline gospel of nonviolence. The pseudo-Pauline writings not only risked betraying Paul, they were written to subvert other second-century Christian communities that had preserved elements of Paul's truth.18

REEXAMINING PAUL'S "SOCIAL CONSERVATISM"

Once we recognize the existence of pseudepigrapha within our collection of Paul's letters, we cannot be content simply to draw a line between "genuine" and "inauthentic" letters. More insidious than their capacity to skew our general perceptions of Paul at the level of the canon is the power the pseudo-Pauline writings continue to exert in contaminating the way we interpret even the genuine letters.

This contamination is particularly evident in two issues of critical importance for any attempt to assess Paul's social or political position: