

In order to break the hold of androcentric biblical texts over us, it is necessary to uncover the mechanisms and incoherences of such texts, to see the inconsistencies of our sources, to elaborate the androcentric projections and political-theological functions of such texts and their contemporary androcentric interpretation.¹

As this is a contribution to a volume interested in reshaping biblical scholarship by attending to the ways culture, identity and power influence how we engage biblical texts, I begin this chapter with a brief discussion of some aspects of my own identity.² As someone living in the United States who can select “white” for my ethnicity, I am aware that I have certain social and economic privileges simply due to the happenstance of where I was born, the color of my skin and the countries my ancestors came from. As a female, I am simultaneously aware that my voice is granted authority and respect differently than that of males. Some of my experiences growing up in a lower-middle class family have taught me not to take for granted housing and daily sustenance. Being predominantly heterosexual, I find human sexuality and how we choose to express it to be more accurately described as falling somewhere on a continuum instead of into one of two categories. I point out these components of my identity because of the role the bible has had in shaping our understanding of national identities, wealth and poverty, sexuality, and gender roles. But I also think that we would collectively benefit from acknowledging how these aspects of ourselves and our cultures inform how we read and interpret the bible. In an interest in simplicity for this chapter, I will foreground a feminist critical voice, noting that it will at times intersect with some of these other ideological concerns.

The date of the quotation at the beginning of this chapter reminds us that we are going on thirty years of sound, critical feminist biblical scholarship, yet the primary point—the primary call to action—within this scholarship has still to be taken to heart by a stunningly large portion of biblical scholars. The call to action to which I refer can be summarized in the following way: Since biblical texts and the interpretations of them have been written by males, for males, we, as responsible, critical thinkers in the twenty-first century, must acknowledge and grapple with the numerous ways this male-centered perspective has affected the content of the biblical texts and the realms of scholarship on them.

For the realm of Pauline studies, as this chapter seeks to engage, this call to action is still relevant, even within the sub-disciplines that allegedly are striking new ground. I will engage a recent edited volume on Paul, *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, as a means of elucidating this point for the reader.³ There are three questions that outline the main body of the chapter: 1) if we continue to use the categories already established for “proper” Pauline studies and simply add new layers to them, how can we say we are doing something new? 2) who is it that inhabits the realm of

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Remembering the Past in creating the Future: Historical-Critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, Adela Yarbro Collins, ed., SBL Biblical Scholarship in North America, 10 (Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1985), 61.

² It is indeed an honor and privilege to be able to contribute to this volume honoring Fernando F. Segovia, who was my advisor at Vanderbilt University. He is exceptionally gifted as an advisor. With great humility and unending attention to detail, Fernando teaches his students how to do the work in their own voices instead of in a version of his. It is my hope that I am similarly inspiring for the students entrusted to me.

³ Mark D Given, ed., *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010).

“respected” scholarship? and 3) why is it that so many scholars only dance around the claims—or worse yet, merely implied conclusions—in their scholarship that if made clear and taken seriously *could* truly shake up what is thought to be normative about Paul? In conclusion, bolstered by a challenge directed to all biblical scholars by Vincent Wimbush in his 2010 Presidential address, I will end the chapter with suggestions for a way “forward” in Pauline studies that is not simply another layer added to the same structure but is interested in a restructuring altogether.

What About This Is New?

In the “Introduction” to the book, editor Mark Given explains that the aim of *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle* is to be a book that is relevant to yet goes beyond “traditional theological and historical concerns.”⁴ The title is intended to allude to Prometheus—who was bound for years because he offered humankind fire, thus helping them—in that Paul has been somewhat bound by tradition and theology, and “these chapters reflect some of the ways in which the study of Paul has in recent years been liberated from a variety of traditional or conventional perspectives.”⁵ These ideals are noteworthy, and in my opinion commendable. But they are not as easily accomplished as claimed.

Several of the chapters of this book offer helpful political and economic data that shapes our understanding of what Paul did and the people he actually engaged with, in particular the chapter by Steven Friesen that I discuss below. But offering these contributions is not the same as letting Paul go, loose and free from traditional perspectives. Additionally, the subtitle suggests that what is presented in this volume is cutting-edge, new perspectives on Paul. What makes this suggestion confusing is that most of the chapters are written as summaries of recent scholarship, which is helpful in its own way, but do not make clear when the author assumes that she or he is stepping beyond the traditional boundaries. Saying that something is new does not make it so.

The first chapter in this volume is by Warren Carter, “Paul and the Roman Empire: Recent Perspectives,” in which he reviews three books edited by Richard Horsley that were products of the “Paul and Politics” Group of the Society of Biblical Literature.⁶ His primary claim about them ought to pique the interest of any reader: that they “offer a significant challenge to much previous and current work on Paul and advocate an innovative and exciting approach that cannot be ignored in studies of Paul.”⁷ While I realize he is reviewing some of the work that has been done on these dynamics, the way he handles his review is strikingly centered on scholarship that maintains the overall framework of Pauline studies.

For instance, he highlights several features of the work contained in these three volumes. The first is that in addition to the three “overlapping and comprehensive societal structures and

⁴ Mark D. Given, “Introduction,” in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle* (Mark D. Given, ed., Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ Warren Carter, “Paul and the Roman Empire: Recent Perspectives,” in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 7-26. The three books he reviews: Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997); idem *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000); idem, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2004).

⁷ Carter, “Paul and the Roman Empire: Recent Perspectives,” 8.

cultural traditions, namely, the assemblies of Christ believers, Israel, and the Roman Empire” that Paul engages, scholars are now bringing the “legacy of debate and interpretation concerning Paul” into the fray.⁸ Carter asserts that the political is theological. On this level, pointing out that much of the language Paul used theologically was initially political is new and ground-breaking for many scholars. But this does not do anything to unsettle the theological implications of, for instance, serving a God who is Lord and master. This basic theological assertion has been problematized by feminist theologians for several decades now. So, while it is shocking for some to see the political implications of their theological beliefs, it can still be simply another power-play: Paul’s Lord trumps the Lord in Rome. This new twist still concedes the authority of Paul, perpetuates it, and reinscribes it.

The two scholars that he engages whose work, if taken seriously, *could* influence a change in the framework, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Davina Lopez, are summarized in such a way that if a person is not really paying attention, she might miss the implications of their work. Schüssler Fiorenza is challenging the “correctness” ascribed to Paul in the first place and the subsequent authority that scholars take on when they affirm Paul’s words.⁹ “Schüssler Fiorenza and [Antoinette] Wire make the point that attention to Paul must not tune out the other voices, especially those of women and slaves, in the assemblies of which his is only one voice.”¹⁰ It seems he summarizes them nicely. But were you paying attention to what they are saying? Paul’s voice is but one in a conversation of more than just two. There were many thoughts about how things should run and what people should think. What is not also being said, here, is that we need to go beyond imagining differences of opinion existed to challenging the voice that “won” in the end: Paul’s. He is correct because his voice is canonized, not because he necessarily *was* correct.

The quotation from Lopez’s book implies that gender constructions based upon the Pauline corpus ought to “challenge and reconfigure” the male dominant/female submissive construction of gender. If Lopez is correct and Paul was challenging the dominant/submissive construction of gender, it is worth the time to pause and consider how many relationships within church structure would be changed in applying this insight. The claims being made by both scholars have profound implications for Pauline studies and our current social constructions based upon the Pauline corpus. I do wonder what Carter’s chapter would have looked like if he had spent more time discussing the work that has the potential to genuinely “loose” Paul from the fetters of tradition and theological certainty.

Carter does state that the imperial framework of Paul’s words needs to be highlighted and problematized.¹¹ I do agree with him, but here I have two responses to his brief comment. The first is to note that some scholars have done precisely that in their work.¹² Does this mean that he is

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 20-1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² For example, Joseph Marchal, “Military Images in Philippians 1-2: A Feminist Analysis of the Rhetorics of Scholarship, Philippians, and Current Contexts,” in *Her Masters Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds. (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 265-86 ; idem, *Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “1 Peter,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2007), 380-403; idem, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Jennifer Bird, *Abuse, Power and Fearful Obedience: Reconsidering 1 Peter’s Commands to Wives* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

unaware of this work or that he was bound by time and space and could not engage it here (there is no reference to it in the footnotes)? What does this tell us, as readers of Paul and the scholarship on him, about the political motivations of our colleagues? The second response to his statement about needing to address the imperial framework of Paul's words is that for someone new to this realm of study the implications of "exposing Paul's imperialism" are not necessarily clear. Indeed, not simply the labels used, "Lord? Savior? Son of God? Christ?," but also the framework of Paul's thought – male-centered and imperial-friendly – the tone of his assertions and commands in his letters, and the dualism of his thought all need to be challenged, or do I mean "changed"? They are certainly all perpetuated today.

Another chapter worth noting in this "tell me which part is new" section is the one contributed by Deborah Krause, "Paul and Women: Telling Women to Shut Up Is More Complicated Than You Might Think."¹³ She offers an overview of feminist scholarship on Paul, in particular how it has moved from addressing specific "problematic" passages for women to investigating Paul's letters contextually with women in mind. This is an important shift. She thus concludes something similar to other contributions in the *Paul Unbound* volume: Paul's writings are "not so much a reservoir of Paul's ideas about women as they are artifacts of discourse about human relationships, gender, religious experience, and power at work in Paul's churches and the world in which they lived."¹⁴

They are witnesses to the struggle that women and men have engaged to define the nature of the church's leadership, the shape of human community within the church, and the intersection between religious experience and the authority to speak of it.¹⁵

To this end, Krause suggests that Paul's letters ought not to be sought for comfort as much as for courage to continue the struggle.¹⁶ Krause takes up two of the most problematic passages for women, 1 Cor. 14:34-36 and 1 Tim. 2:12-15, and shifts the light on them ever so slightly so that the reader can see how they both give an indication of the struggle that is happening regarding women's ability to speak in the *ekklēsia*. She suggests that we read them as a man's attempt to control the speech of women, rather than as a description of what was already happening. Yes, this does seem to be the point: there were women speaking up and assuming leadership roles and some men were not comfortable with it and sought to control them. Unfortunately, this is precisely how many communities do handle these passages already, using them to "legitimately" curb the participation of women in church congregations today. The texts indicate there was a struggle going on, and that struggle for power between males and females continues. Period. I am at a loss as to how in leaving the discussion here, without also somehow unsettling the authority of biblical texts entirely, this is an empowering reading for women. Krause has done nothing to upset the apple cart of Paul's privilege and power, thus she does nothing to unbind him. Rather, I would suggest she, perhaps unwittingly, re-binds him.¹⁷

¹³ Deborah Krause, "Paul and Women: Telling Women to Shut Up Is More Complicated Than You Might Think," in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody: Hendrickson), 161-174.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161-74.

As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us, since “it is not ‘biological’ sex difference but patriarchal household and marriage relationships that generate the social-political inferiority and oppression of women,” then we must challenge the authority of scripture that has this kind of prescription for women.¹⁸ Regardless of who penned the restrictive prescription – Paul or someone in his wake – the command has been afforded unquestioned authority simply because it is in the canon. This is the level on which something new needs to be said and done.

One of the striking characteristics of some of the recent scholarship on Paul that claims to be doing something new or breathing fresh air into the field is that there is a simultaneous need to disagree with Paul without letting go of his authority.¹⁹ Any approach that does not unsettle or uproot the problematic passages in Paul but allows them to remain, supposedly now just fallow, is perhaps underestimating the power of scripture to continue to define our realities today. It is the fact that the difficult passages remain that is something we can no longer overlook. In addition, it is not just a few phrases here and there that are at issue. These *are* androcentric texts; they *do* promote ideas and theological beliefs from a kyriarchal world view; they *do not* accord women equal status or representation; they *do* embody first century biases; they absolutely *do* promote heteronormativity; Paul’s rhetoric *is*, as often as not, manipulative, judgmental or otherwise of an ilk we would do well not to perpetuate; and his writings *can and do* justify abusive and exploitative relationships, both within male/female pairings and within the structuring and running of ecclesial bodies. It is a curious business, needing yet hating Paul. When we do not seek to reframe Paul and his writings entirely, but simply add a feminist interpretation to it, the effect is much like dipping something in chocolate: it might taste a bit better, but the androcentric texts at the core remain the same.

Thus, I was not convinced that either of these two chapters, or any of the others, falls outside the umbrella of being in service to the church and theology. There are new twists on the same basic ideas or structures; there is nothing challenging enough to cause a shift or effective liberative change. Just as the field of biblical studies in general has tried to “add and stir” when it comes to incorporating new perspectives and voices from “the margins and periphery,” and thus do everyone a disservice for being somewhat disingenuous, so too are we falling short if we think that simply adding new perspectives will change the understanding of what is normative in Pauline studies.

Who Inhabits This World?

Feminist studies therefore maintains that established scholarship as androcentric scholarship is not only *partial* insofar as it articulates only male experience as human experience, but that it is also *biased* insofar as its intellectual discourse and scholarly frameworks are determined only by male perspectives primarily of the dominant classes.²⁰

In the two chapters in *Paul Unbound* that discuss Paul and the Law and Paul’s “opponents,” what interests me more than the content itself is that the voices in this dialogue are almost

¹⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Remembering the Past in creating the Future,” 58.

¹⁹ Sandra Hack Polaski’s recent volume, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), does a good job of straddling the fence in this way. She very clearly wants to disagree with several parts of the Pauline corpus, but all the while she is maintaining Paul’s overall authority.

²⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Remembering the Past in creating the Future,” 56, italics original.

exclusively those of white males.²¹ The inquisitive student of Paul and all things related might want to ask why this is the case. What is it about the debate that does not draw women and people of various ethnicities to it? Is it that discussing and dissecting the Law is not relevant to them? (No) Is it that there are women and people of various ethnicities who *are* writing on these topics but are not being taken into consideration? (Perhaps) Given the numerous subfields on Paul to choose to engage, perhaps these other scholars prefer to put their energies elsewhere. I do not expect to be able to explain this situation but merely to draw attention to the political implications of it.

Given the importance of Paul for Christian doctrine and belief it *is* worth the time to reflect on why the traditional Pauline topics are so predominantly directed by white males, or perhaps more to the point, to consider the implications that the topics predominantly filled with “pale male” scholarship are considered to be the most important topics. Given the power and authority that Paul and his writings confer on those who interpret them, it *is* worth our time to consider the power implications of certain topics being predominantly populated by white males. There should be no confusion as to why those topics tend to be seen as the “weightier matters” whereas a focus on Paul and gender constructions, for instance, is often deemed secondary or peripheral to important Pauline issues.

To be sure, it does matter how we interpret Paul in relation to his own Judaism. Paul’s views of the Law and of God’s covenant with Israel were of import in the first century and remain to this day. What perhaps needs to be noted here, though, is that all of these conversations about legalistic upholding of the Law or ethnic inclusion in the covenant conceal the deeper issue, which is that Paul did indeed “create” something new and, intentionally or not, it led to the supersession of Judaism by Christianity, from the perspective of the Church. None of the debates regarding how to properly interpret Paul’s motivations or view of the Law will change this fact. Making Paul into someone innocent of wrongdoing will not change what did develop out of Paul’s thought and writings.

One may want to ask why these males “protesteth too much,” then, and why they have not been as invested in addressing the manifold other injustices that have been carried out based in part on Paul’s words. In saying this I do not intend to make light of any manifestations of anti-Semitism. I do, however, wish to direct our attention to the centuries of harm, violence, abuse and exploitation of millions of people—especially of females, but also of people of various races and ethnicities—that his writings have also contributed to. Or to come at the issue from a different perspective, what do we get from clearing Paul’s name of any connection to anti-Semitism? What is it that people are after in *needing* to find Paul innocent on any topic: the law, the covenants, sex/sexuality, leadership and so on? It is all related to the need to ultimately be able to claim Paul as authoritative.

This brings us full circle in this discussion of how the authority ascribed to Paul and his writings is also given to those who agree with him. The gender, ethnicity, social standing and places of academic training of the scholars involved in any discourse will influence how that discourse is framed and what is deemed important or central to it. For people who engage biblical texts for the sake of personal edification, sermon preparation or scholarly endeavors, take note of the voices you trust to guide you in making sense of Paul’s words.

Who Will Be Brave Enough to Speak?

²¹ A. Andrew Das, “Paul and the Law: Pressure Points in the Debate” in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 99-116.

Paul is so inherently interesting that anyone who writes about Paul should feel an appropriate sense of intimidation, lest one's words detract from the writings and accomplishments of Paul himself.²²

I include this quotation from the preface of another book as a way of indicating how powerful and authoritative Paul continues to be, even here at the beginning of the 21st century. Thomas Phillips's fondness for Paul stands in stark contrast to the questions I regularly hear from engaged students: "Why do we still see Paul as authoritative?" and "Why do we assume that Paul is correct about everything?" While Phillips is certainly more educated on the matter than my students are, I do not think that he is more invested in his admonition than these students are in their line of questioning. They are less invested in maintaining Paul's place of prominence, however. They are willing to name what is there in Paul's words. Many scholars dance around these difficult issues instead of taking them head-on, perhaps because of how far and wide the reverberations might be felt. I suggest that it is time to stop avoiding and start saying what is apparent to us.

Steven Friesen's contribution to the volume, "Paul and Economics: The Jerusalem Collection as an Alternative to Patronage," is a fascinating example of this dynamic.²³ He makes several strident claims but he does not hold his reader to having to think them through thoroughly. For instance, he states that "In our reconstructions [of Paul's churches] we must compensate for the historical invisibility of the poor."²⁴ Yes, this is indeed an important contribution or challenge to scholars of early Christianity. It is worth our time to sort through the implications of a thoughtful understanding of the prominence of the poor in the Jesus movement and early churches. Friesen's careful data collection and analyses of the people Paul refers to in his letters suggest that the early churches did not have people from the upper echelons of wealth as we are often lead to believe. Furthermore, according to Acts it was *only* the wealthy that Paul interacted with. This distinction between Paul's version and Acts' on this matter is more than a minor point; it has huge implications for how we envision the earliest churches and what we claim Paul's *modus operandi* was, not to mention the challenge to the authority of scripture that this indictment brings.

But it is Friesen's closing comments that I find most curious:

There are other topics to explore in the context of systematic deprivation and Paul's churches. We could look at the Lord's Supper as a meal shared among the poor, or Paul's manual labor as a refusal to commodify his apostolic calling . . . all three of these experiments [including the collection as a counter to patronage] apparently failed . . . Perhaps it was necessary for Paul's boldest economic initiatives—the ones that abandoned the Roman system of inequality—to fail in order for an evolving Pauline Christianity to become over the course of time an integrated part of that system of inequality.²⁵

²² Thomas E. Phillips, *Paul, His Letters, and Acts*, Library of Pauline Studies, Stanley Porter, gen. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2009), preface.

²³ Steven Friesen, "Paul and Economics: The Jerusalem Collection as an Alternative to Patronage" in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 27-54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51-2.

I cannot help but wonder if he has flipped the order of cause and effect here, as that is what I take him to be suggesting in his article. Regardless, his point is made, and it is one I appreciate. But while the way he “says it slant” may make it more palatable for some, I fear that it will allow too many to ignore the implication altogether.

Jerry Sumney’s chapter, “Paul and His Opponents: The Search,” also has bold implications somewhat tucked away in plain sight. One of the main points he makes is that there were teachers that Paul opposed who nonetheless thought that they were carrying on his tradition. This indicates for us two things: Paul was considered authoritative, and there was already diversity in the way his teachings were interpreted.²⁶ More to the point, “the churches were still defining the range of diversity they would deem acceptable.”²⁷ Certainly this clutch of points has been made before, but the fact that respected biblical scholars, such as Sumney points out, do not seem to have fully considered them ought to raise some questions for us. It is not just a matter of it being too recent of a development for them to be expected to be familiar with it. There is something deeper at stake. Suggesting that Paul’s way was not the only way, which these points do indicate, raises the issues of power and control, whose voices “counted” and whose did not.

While Sumney is only dealing with identifying Paul’s opponents, his cautionary remarks regarding how we read Paul’s polemics perhaps ought to apply anytime Paul makes strong claims and asserts his authority with powerful words.

Interpreters in recent decades more readily recognize and take account of the fact that Paul’s characterizations of those he opposes are often tendentious, particularly in polemical contexts. Similarly, when Paul is defending himself, he often presents the charges others make about him in a dramatic and exaggerated form to lead his readers to dismiss those charges out of hand or to make them easier to refute.²⁸

Not only are these important observations about Paul’s tone and his use of rhetoric in general, but do they not also suggest that the very label “opponents” ought to be reconsidered? The dualistic framework here, of Paul versus others, creates or sustains an assumed antagonism within the movement instead of allowing for accepted variations. It sets us up to need to find “the” correct doctrine or practice. As Sumney suggests, one of the benefits of more carefully identifying Paul’s “opponents” is that “we will be able to recognize a breadth of diversity among early believers that disallows simplistic and false frameworks such as the ‘orthodox church’ and the ‘heretics’ for the first-century church.”²⁹

Beyond simply embracing variety in the early church understandings of what was “allowed” and what was not, we come back to the reality that Paul’s legacy and assumed correctness have deep roots, psychologically, ecclesiastically and theologically. I suggest that we have to make the bold implications of our findings quite clear, or they will not penetrate the established models for how to understand all things Pauline.

Concluding Commentary

²⁶ Jerry Sumney, “Paul and His Opponents: The Search,” in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-7.

Vincent Wimbush opened his 2010 Presidential address with the following challenge for all those who undertake critical engagements of the bible. I have chosen to quote him at length in order to convey the urgency of his message and so as not to dismiss that his driving concern is about race/racism. While it was not my intention to engage the specific form of his challenge in this chapter, the underlying power dynamics that Wimbush speaks of are of particular interest to me from a feminist standpoint and do concern us all.

I stand before you this evening with yet another challenge, imploring the Society—and by extension, all critical interpreters—to start and to sustain “talkin’ ‘bout somethin’.” Here is the challenge plainly put: there can be no critical interpretation worthy of the name, without coming to terms with the first contact—between the West and the rest, the West and the Others—and its perduring toxic and blinding effects and consequences. The challenge remains for this Society and all collectivities of critical interpreters in general to engage in persistent and protracted struggle, not symbolic or obfuscating games around methods and approaches, to come to terms with the construal of the modern ideologization of language, characterized by the meta-racism that marks the relationship between Europeans and Euro-Americans and peoples of color, especially black peoples. What might it mean to address in explicit terms the nature and consequences of first contact for the unstable and fragile big tent that is our Society? What might it suggest for the ongoing widely differently prioritized and oriented work we do in our widely different settings and contexts with our nonetheless still widely shared absolutist and elitist claims and presumptions about such work? It would make it imperative that we talk about discourse and power, slavery and freedom, life and death.³⁰

I have sought to highlight in this chapter a certain amount of complacency within Pauline studies, regardless of the “critical” method that any given scholar brings to the engagement. The world needs us to be about the business of “talkin’ ‘bout somethin’,” instead of being comfortable with mere nuances on the status quo counting as a “fresh voice” within Pauline studies.

Instead of accepting as truth and standard what is said in a given passage, responsible biblical scholarship would then wrestle with the implications of the content. If taken seriously, if put into practice, what does that idea, command, or custom lead to? Is the result something beneficial? Does it contribute to creating spaces and relations of equality, mutuality, and respect for all people? Or does it put restrictions on some, for reasons that we can understand in its as-close-as-we-can-get-to-it original context but that we no longer need to acquiesce to? If it is the latter, it is time to find a way to say, categorically, that it is not authoritative anymore.

I suggest that we start to take more seriously the ethics of interpretation and the afterlives thereof.³¹ When the focus is on what Paul says or meant for the sake of accurate application we tend to overlook the side effects of uncritically engaging and teaching Paul and his letters. What results is that a positivistic approach is undertaken, for the sake of “mutual benefit,” “building up the Church,” Christ-centered discipleship, and so on. It is relatively inwardly focused: either on the individual or the local church body. What about the Body worldwide? What about the engagement

³⁰ Vincent L. Wimbush, “Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate,” *JBL* 130, no. 1 (2011): 9.

³¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

with humankind? What about the way Paul and his writings shape our worldviews, set the tone we take in engaging someone with whom we disagree, or initiate intense “us vs. them” paradigms for the Church and scholarly discourse? Ought not our current scholarship be engaging Paul and his “legacy” at the level of how well it plays in the sandbox of life? Instead of spending hours upon hours determining the correctness of a given understanding of an element of Paul’s thought, why not engage the ethical and moral implications of assuming that Paul is the best voice to listen to on any given topic? To be sure, biblical scholars have learned well at the feet of Paul and by his example; we have become too good at imitating him, in his rhetorical devices no less than in his theological claims and assertions of correctness.³² It is high time that we find new examples to model our faith and scholarly discourses upon.

My life-long church attending, undergraduate students put a fine point on the urgency of the matter. I asked them to consider, throughout a semester course on Paul, the effects of teaching and preaching Paul’s writings uncritically. Though they joked around all semester about the tone of Paul’s assertions, which they deemed to be arrogant, at the end of the semester not a single one of them reflected on the affects Paul’s arrogance might have on those who take up his writings uncritically. They could consider such issues when pressed on it in seminar, but it had not penetrated their overall framework for how they think about Paul.

I think that it is no longer sufficient to acknowledge that our social values have changed since the first century when the texts of our religious communities have not. Put differently, it is about time for us to confront, instead of explain away, the reality that people can turn to Paul’s contributions to “God’s word” and find judgmental ideals, justification for power-over relations between men and women, and rhetoric that contributes to creating oppressive communal structures, to name but a few manifestations of leaving Paul’s writings unchallenged. Their situatedness cannot be excused; it must be engaged directly. Instead of finding ways to make Paul palatable and understandable, I suggest that it is time for us to challenge Paul and his interpreters on the very idea of granting Paul such authority. If what is called God’s word is to lead to embrace and empowerment, to fullness of life, to the end of relations of domination and exploitation, and to authentic and loving communities,³³ then let it be so.

³² Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

³³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 30-1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), xiii.