

PAUL

LEGACIES OF AN UNLIKELY RADICAL



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AN ANCIENT STORY OF LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

I want to tell the story of a man who is perhaps the architect and leader of the most significant social experiment in Western history and thought. Few, if any, have ever told this story in this way in this context. Not only is it a great case study in leadership, but it is the story that explains so many of the tensions of leadership today.

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 a peculiar world view which grew from Jewish soil. As Westerners, or as those living in a world heavily influenced by Western ideas and traditions, we have inherited their richly contradictory notions and practices. In this creative tension we seek an understanding and practice of wise leadership for our own times.

This is the surprising story of Saul of Tarsus.

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 Hellenized (influenced by Greek culture) for over a century and many Jews living throughout the Roman Empire held positions of high rank. Saul was a Jewish lawyer and leader, likely trained in both Jewish and Roman law, and a Roman citizen, an honour passed from forebears who had merited high standing, possibly by the generosity of their benefactions. Saul had not forgotten his Jewish roots, however, and was a member of a Jerusalem-based party which supported terrorism against the Roman forces occupying Palestine. Saul could play both worlds: zealous Jewish agitator, and urbane, Hellenized professional.

Soon, however, Saul was to become the most articulate advocate of a radical new kind of social subversion. Soon, Saul would be better known by his assumed name, Paul. Ever heard the saying, “All things to all people”? That was Paul. Or how about, “Don’t conform to the paradigms around you, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds”? Paul again. That’s the mindset of an innovator and an improviser.

Of all the tall figures of the classical and Hellenistic world, Paul could claim the prize for radical of the era – the ancient leader of change. Such a claim makes sense only when we see him in his world. If we can see what he was doing in his world, we might catch his spirit of wise leadership for our worlds.

FROM RATIONALISM AND NATIONALISM TO A STORY

We have seen how the earliest Greek philosophers were preoccupied with the problem of the One and the Many. Plato’s answer to the problem set the course for Western thought. The world we apprehend through reason is perfect; the world we experience is imperfect.

Plato left us with life split between the realms of ordinary experience and some purer reality. We call it dualism – a dual world. 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 is unchanging, balanced, ordered, uniform, symmetrical, harmonious, smooth and serene.

Paul knew these intellectual legacies. He was an educated urbane man. Like most other free-born boys, he learnt his Greek by copying the texts of Homer and other literary greats and moral philosophers. He dialogued with Stoics and Epicureans, the leading eclectic philosophers of the day. But Paul had also been schooled in his countrymen's traditions, the story-filled world of the Hebrew writings. The two mindsets could hardly have been more 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 from 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 in 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. Despite the comparative oddity of encountering a Jewish lawyer declaiming publicly in Athens, they soon found that he was clearly conversant with the main themes of Greco-Roman philosophy and quoted their own sources confidently. But the more he talked, the more the parallels dissipated. Paul began from an entirely different mindset. 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 Judaism, it was not to defer to the abstraction of the Greco-Roman tradition, but to ground all of life in the story of an unlikely figure, a Jewish building worker from the back-country town of Nazareth. Paul never developed any abstract conceptual system in the style of

the classical philosophers and theologians. Story was the shape of the new mindset.

The great clash was not over ideas but over the implications of those ideas for society. To see this we must understand how Greco-Roman society worked.

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 sermonizing 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 (the city or state) depended on public works, the dole in times of famine, festivals and games. Relatively few of these were financed by public monies. The money came from benefactors, the men at the top and those keen to impress. Friendship meant reciprocity. There were no free lunches in Athens 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 for life. A papyrus describing the admission of a boy to a prestigious gymnasium stretches back six generations on the father's side and eight on his mother's to prove his good stock. 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 some guy from the old guard ready to rub your lowly origins in your face.

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.

It might seem that leadership positions were filled as a matter of course by some benign social process. Not at all. We need to appreciate the difference between rank and status. One's rank was largely fixed by birth with some chance for 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 – divorce, marriage and adoption might even give you a rare shot at lifting your 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."

Ever heard the line, "Know yourself"? Whatever inner reflection it was meant to trigger, it first of all reinforced social convention. There were over 250 such sayings. The fab four – the original 3x5 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. Compassion and humility hinder ambition. Keep compassion for 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 await your chance.

FROM RANK AND STATUS TO RADICAL AND SUBVERSIVE

Enter Paul.

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." As a similarly educated, urbane, professional Greek man, what would you make of this? Or what about when he advised you to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" ? Or to "not think of yourself more highly than you ought," nor to be proud, but to "associate with people of low position" ? Or to "give greater honour to those without honour" ? Or perhaps the ultimate lines for endearing yourself and your 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" !

Today we prize adaptability. In Paul's world it was unseemly. Grace, he said, drove him to adapt to those he sought to serve: "I have become all things to all men." To most, that meant he was unstable and inconstant.

Paul set himself on a collision course with Greco-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. If Paul wanted to cast the central figure of his message as eminently embarrassing and dismissible, he couldn't have done a better job of it. Second, and to make things much worse, Paul claimed that on the basis of this inexplicable act of self-sacrifice, grace was now available impartially to all. What! No decent Greek or Roman god would ever subvert the social system! And Paul was modelling in his own life the shape of that subversion.

THE WAY PAUL WORKED

So did Paul set out to transform Greco-Roman society? I think we have to take an each-way bet on that one.

No, in that he was pragmatic about living in society. Patrons, he said, should not stop benefactions, but do so with generosity freed from the need for personal honour or reciprocity. Clients should busy themselves with meaningful activity rather than endless lobbying for patrons (what else do you do all day if you don't have to work?).

Yes, in that he sponsored a quiet revolution from within. Yes, overwhelmingly yes, when it came to his own circle of associates. His groups formed communities around the simple convention of gathering for dinner. Inside this gathering, Paul expected the

group to maintain a high standard of propriety, but to disregard social distinctions, even to honour the less honourable. This advice must not be intellectualized. 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 and to participate fully in the conversation. This was entirely scandalous. He might as well have advised 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 and had set himself an ambitious programme of nurturing co-workers for the task. He had to neutralize the grip of every social convention that tied their hearts and minds to the old world. His strategy included undermining virtually every assured premise and outcome of the social system. But he did so by showing them what the new order looked like in his own relationships and lifestyle.

Paul was no less radical on leadership. He left no room for personal power or office, 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 social relations that would eventually reshape the social order. We are accustomed to calling all of this leadership. Yet he rejected the term. 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.

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 (him)self to it." 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 Greco-Roman friendship. He recast the common honorific and moral term *philotimia* (love of honour, ambition) to advertise his choice not to compete with others. 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.

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. 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 revolutionize the Western understanding of humanity and society.

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

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 were 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 story and its central figure.

THE LEGACY

Whether or not you subscribe to the story that Paul put at the centre of his work, we live with the fact that this flimsy, messy, risky experiment somehow changed the face of the Western world.

Paul's groups had been dinner parties of perhaps 9 to 12 people occasionally meeting in larger combined gatherings in rented dining rooms. No one would have rated them a chance of surviving, let alone of subverting the social order of the Roman Empire. Less than 50 years later, we find Pliny, the Roman governor of the region we call north-western Turkey, writing to the Emperor, wanting to know what to do with the numerous followers of the person at the centre of Paul's story.

To subscribe to Paul's story in the wrong part of the empire in the first century could lead to an untimely demise under imperial decree. Three hundred years later, if you didn't, you couldn't be the emperor. The shift was complete. Well, almost.

Paul's original vision was sustained, plagiarized, corrupted and creatively adapted. There is no simple picture to what happened in the fusion of church and empire in the centuries that followed. I have no doubt Paul would be dismayed at so much that has been said and done in his name. 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 every 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 his example of grace and freedom, equality and gifting.

WORKING WITH THE STORY TODAY

A number of principles impress themselves upon me from the example of Paul. I have seen them enable new insight and heart for today's leaders of corporations, not-for-profit organizations, schools and communities. Once again, they are not flash-card formulas that will solve every problem. Think of them more as starting points for real conversation in your organization.

1. Know, shape and reshape the central story by telling it

Paul's letters show a man working out the story as he went along. 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. Tell the story more than present it. Tell it often and tell it differently. Tell it to enrich it.

2. 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 the problems and the opportunities. Story animates strategy. Use story to bring reality to planning and to change initiatives.

3. 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 enterprise. Name it. Honour it. Promote it. Place it at the heart of strategy, culture and practice.

4. 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 each 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 adapt. Make the conversations real. Leave room to chase the questions that matter most. Sustain commitment in the face of breakdown. Show your people you are confident in their capacity to craft new meaning.

5. 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 at the Hilton' 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 your story.

6. 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, then 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 emancipation 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 to slave relationship as brother/sister to brother/sister.

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

7. Aim at congruence, not conformity

Paul made no attempts to standardize 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 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.

8. 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 world view which cut across so many ideals and conventions. It required a new kind of rigour and thoughtfulness. Paul characterized this as "speaking the truth in love that we might in all things grow up."

Conformity, best practice 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.

FURTHER READING

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