



The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon

Marcus J. Borg , John Dominic Crossan

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“Borg and Crossan reveal a figure who, besides being neither anti-Semitic, anti-sex, nor misogynist, stresses social and political equality among Christians and between them and others. A refreshing and heartening exculpation of a still routinely maligned figure of the first importance to culture and civilization.” — *Booklist* (starred review)

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus J. Borg—two of the world’s top-selling Christian scholars and the bestselling authors of *The Last Week* and *The First Christmas*—once again shake up the status quo by arguing that the message of the apostle Paul, considered by many to be the second most important figure in Christianity, has been domesticated by the church. Borg and Crossan turn the common perception of Paul on its head, revealing him as a radical follower of Jesus whose core message is still relevant today.

The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon Details

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Walter says

Borg and Crossan are both insightful Biblical scholars and pithy writers, so this book about the apostle Paul is as enjoyable as it is thought-provoking. Simply put, the authors have some controversial viewpoints on many of the aspects of Paul's teachings/writings, but, for the most part, they back them up with extensive research and credible, logical reasoning. After reading this book, I can say three things appreciatively: I learned a lot; my spirituality was both broadened and deepened by the authors' perspectives; and I enjoyed the trip.

The controversy starts almost immediately, as the opening salvo from the authors posits that there are actually three Pauls reflected in the New Testament (NT): the "genuine" and "radical" Paul of seven NT books that most scholars agree that he wrote in the 50s CE; the "reactionary" Paul of the three "pastoral letters" that are considered to be written in his name but probably not by him and are "non-Pauline" in style and content; and the "conservative" Paul of three books whose authorship is disputed and that many if not most scholars think Paul did not write and are effectively "post-Paul" and often contradictory in message.

They go one to assert many more intriguing (and, in some cases, outlandish) perspectives, but most of the time they are able to explain context and cross-reference other sources, both scriptural and secular, that offer compelling support to their theses. For example, they show that Paul is often misunderstood, including relative to some of his more controversial passages on slavery, patriarchy and homosexuality. For the first two issues, the authors rather effectively demonstrate that the common perception of Paul as a supporter of these two practices is mistaken and that, in fact, he is actually an advocate for their opposites, totally equality of people irrespective of class, race and gender - a very radical position for that time and, sadly, still too often in ours. Their address of Paul's stand against homosexuality is both less well developed and, accordingly, far less persuasive in suggesting that he was not homophobic. I would argue that, given the authors' often antipodal theses, two out of three isn't bad....

In addition to rather stunning and often controversial takes on various aspects of Paul's theology and writings, Borg and Crossan also analyze myriad scriptural passages in piercingly insightful and moving ways. For example, most Christians (and even many non-believers) and/or anyone who's been to a wedding in the past fifty years are familiar with the famous 13th chapter in his first letter to the Corinthians. (You know, beginning at verse 4, "Love is patient; love is kind....") Yet, in reflecting on Paul's intent for this chapter, to "extol the supreme importance" of love, the "greatest spiritual gift," they give context and break down the all-too-familiar passage in a way that is fresh, insightful and incredibly moving. Having studied, read and/or heard this particular passage hundreds of times, frankly, I doubted that anyone could tell me something new and meaningful about it. Wrong! Borg and Crossan illuminate it so beautifully and discerningly that I have come to appreciate it in a new and even more profoundly impactful way. To be able to re-engage and elevate a skeptic like me (who is still recovering from too many years of religious schooling in several different belief systems) takes some doing, so hat's off to them.

This being said, this book, though excellent, is not perfect. There are quite a few passages in it that could be tightened up to increase their clarity. Also, though generally pithy, some of their commentary can be snide or otherwise indelicate occasionally. Finally, their arguments in some cases are not particularly well-developed and therefore not convincing, in large part because their track record in the vast majority of the rest of the book stands in such contrast. This being said, though, this book is still tremendous and worthy of everyone's

serious attention.

Accordingly, I both thoroughly enjoyed The First Paul and recommend it highly to others. It is well-written, incredibly insightful and very often especially moving, so, in addition to learning a lot, readers will enjoy the journey as well.

Christopher says

This book is a theological treatise, not necessarily a work of unbiased (as if such a thing exists) historical scholarship. It does use historical data to make theological points, but overall it offers Borg's and Crossan's radical interpretation of Paul's works.

I enjoyed it and recommend it to left leaning Christians.

Thurman Faison says

First in proper deference to the authors for obviously an intense amount of research and labor, I acknowledge the scope of their writings to be a commendable task. I must say, I had looked forward to reading this book for perhaps a fresh view of the great apostle Paul, and was somewhat disappointed. The book appears to pit the apostle against the Roman-Greco empire as if that was what the gospel was all about, to replace the rule of Caesar and his kingdom with the rule of Christ and his kingdom. I think we must recall that Jesus said, "my kingdom is not of this world".

To me, it was not a battle between Roman theology and Christian theology, it was a matter of the introduction of the good news to all the world whether Rome was the ruling power or not. The kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of came with power on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God entered those early believers, for Jesus had said regarding the kingdom that "it is within you". That fact continued to be confirmed in all believers from that time forward. I might add the fruits of the kingdom should reflect itself to the outside world and I think it has in a multitude of ways in a multitude of countries.

I was a bit disappointed in the "twists and turns" over how many Pauls there were, referring to the epistles bearing his name. I don't think this will set well with most believers, they might prefer to interpret his statements about specific things elaborated on in different epistles in different ways to be based on both the circumstances of the times and the emphasis necessary for the moment. I also was quite saddened by the fact that the authors chose to attempt to dismantle the concepts of "substitution", "justification by grace", and the meaning of the "atonement", by suggesting that their theology is a better interpretation than the prime figures of the Reformation. The authors almost wear out the word "misunderstanding" to refer to many of the doctrines so many believers hold dear and which has sustained their faith for centuries. The authors almost insist that they know exactly what Paul meant by what he said and others have been mistaken in their interpretations.

The matter of judgement, the authors say, has nothing to do with the gospel. I would venture to say it is precisely because of current and impending judgement that the gospel is addressed to the human race. Death is still the wages of sin and we are told there will be a final judgement. Christ crucified! cancels our debt. I will not go into other specifics of the faith that are challenged by the authors, I would simply say we should attempt to add to the faith, to bolster and strengthen it among believers and not tear it down. With all due

respect, I would just say to the authors that they should follow their own admonition on page 159 "when all else fails, read the text". To me it is not theology or church history that holds the greatest relevance. it is "the text" itself.

Cardcaptor Takato says

I used to have a very negative view of Paul. I thought Paul was very sexist and promoted immorality like slavery and I thought Paul was the opposite of everything Jesus stood for. But this book by the biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan explains how the issues with Paul's writings are much more complex than this. Like Paul didn't actually write all the letters attributed to him. The Pastoral epistles which contain the verses I found troubling about Paul in regards to women was actually written by later Christian scribes who were writing in Paul's name long after Paul had died. Even in the authentic letters of Paul, there are chapters attributed to Paul that were added in later to suppress the role of women in the church. In actuality, women played a very large role in Paul's early church. Phoebe was a female deacon, Junia was an apostle who was a woman, and women and men were equal partners in a marriage relationship.

I also appreciated how they went into a detailed verse-by-verse examination of Philemon as Philemon is a book that isn't really study that much in church and show that Paul was actually very anti-slavery and pro-slavery books were written in Paul's name by the later church. Borg and Crossan then examine Paul's theological beliefs and the history and flaws of the classic orthodox view of atonement theology. My only disappointment was that I wish they had examined the rest of orthodox Pauline beliefs like original sin and his views on the afterlife but you would probably have to devote a whole different book just to Paul's theology alone and I still give this book five stars because I think it succeeded in what it set out to do and I don't have any other real complaints with it. If you've only had a negative view of Paul or if you're only familiar with the orthodox views of Paul and want to see a different way of reading Paul, I highly recommend this very fascinating and challenging book.

Janice says

This book provides new interpretations, and new insights, into the life and writings of the Apostle Paul. I particularly liked the way the authors looked so closely at the culture and historical context in which Paul was writing, and at the whole body of his work, finding the consistencies within, and also with their guidance in examining the seven books most surely written by Paul, and the other six often attributed to him, but most likely written by others after his death. This has given me a new appreciation of this historical man and his teachings.

LindaJ^ says

It has been awhile since I read a book by Borg and Crossan. It has been awhile since I did any reading in the theology area. At one time, I read a lot in this area. This book was consistent with my recollection of Borg's prior work. I highly recommend his *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

This book deals with the thorny issue of the contradictory Paul. Paul supposedly wrote 13 books of the New Testament (out of, I think, 27). That's a lot! But these 13 books are not consistent in how they deal with the

issues. This book takes an academic look at determining which of the conflicting messages are truly Paul's. They start by providing some facts concerning the current state of academic research and conclusions. The primary one is that of the 13 books, the majority of biblical scholars agree that only 7 can be attributed to Paul. Of the other 6, the majority agree that Paul did not write 3 of them and there is still significant debate about the other 3. Borg and Crossan have given each of these three categories a name: they call the 7 that most agree Paul wrote books written by the "Radical Paul;" the 3 disputed books, they say were written by "Reactionary Paul;" and the 3 books most agree were not written by Paul, they say were written by "Conservative Paul." The bulk of Borg and Crossan's book concerns the work of "Radical Paul," whom they consider the real Paul and the one who needs to be reclaimed.

Radical Paul was indeed radical. Borg and Crossan present him as a believer in distributive justice rather than retributive justice, a believer in equality for men and women, and against slavery for those slaves who accepted Christ, among other positions that were indeed radical in the ancient Roman world that Paul lived in. I particularly enjoyed how they parsed Paul's position on whether Christ actually disappeared from the tomb and returned in bodily form.

The book is written in a style that makes it very accessible to the everyday church attendee who is interested in exploring contradictions in biblical text. The narrator of this audible book was good.

Tyler Hill says

I truly enjoyed this book. It was an engrossing look into the early Christian community and a contextually-based analysis of what one of the early fathers of Christianity, Paul, really thought about his Lord's teachings. If you are a Christian (and even if you are not one!) and you want to learn more about the early church you should totally give it a shot.

Julianne Steelman says

Dense at times, but very informative and provocative. The authors focus on Paul as a revolutionary within the Roman Empire, his primary mission being to contrast the violent/dominating power structures of the world with the selfless justice-seeking of Christ. I also appreciate how the authors reclaim terms such as atonement, justice, sacrifice, and faith, which has helped me better understand Paul's arguments.

Matt says

I always enjoy reading Borg and Crossan. This book is every bit the joy to read that their previous works have been. Scholarly but highly readable, clear, concise, and very informative.

The essential point of the book is that Paul has been misread by nearly everyone. Paul is typically read as ordering wives to submit to their husbands, condemning gays, and as offering up the Christian faith as a set of doctrines which are dogmatically asserted to be "beyond dispute." Religious conservatives read Paul this way and rejoice, religious liberals read Paul this way and recoil.

The Problem is, as Borg and Crossan see it, that this is just not Paul. To begin with, although there are 14 letters in the New Testament attributed to Paul, there is a massive scholarly consensus that Paul surely did not write at least 4 of these, and probably only wrote 7 of the letters attributed to him. If this claim is accepted, and there is good reason to accept it, then the Passages in Paul commanding slaves to obey their masters and wives their husbands vanish from the authentic Paul's writings.

Borg and Crossan claim that those later "Pseudo-Pauline" letters contain passages deliberately created to subvert the real Paul's message, which was radically egalitarian - seeing all people regardless of gender, social status, etc as fundamentally equal in Christ and before God. There are numerous passages that support this reading of Paul. From his comments about inclusion regarding celebration of the Eucharist, to his constant reference to and praise of female "co-workers and Apostles."

Most famously however is Paul's ecstatic assertion in Galatians (also repeated in Romans) that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). Add to this exclamation Paul's request to Philemon (in the letter of that name) that he free his runaway slave Onesimus and accept him as an equal "brother" and you have Borg and Crossan's case for a "radically egalitarian" Paul. It is compelling.

Despite my admiration for their book, I have some criticism of Borg and Crossan. They downplay those passages - present frequently even in the letters they accept as authentic - in which Paul stresses God's judgment, wrath, and exclusion of "the unrighteous." Presumably they are uncomfortable with this; so am I. But those passages display a genuine aspect of Paul's thought and they must be dealt with.

Likewise, though they correctly argue that Paul opposed the Lordship of Jesus to that of Caesar and thereby explicitly rejected Roman social norms and Imperialism, Borg and Crossan fail to adequately deal with the obvious fact that Paul had no real program for social reform. Since Paul thought Christ would very soon return to earth to establish the Utopian Kingdom of God on earth, what need was there for practical reform? Borg and Crossan recognize that Paul believed in Jesus' imminent return, but seem to brush it off as peripheral. That is problematic.

When all is said and done, however, Borg and Crossan have accomplished their task. Anyone who reads their book cannot help but come away from it with a great appreciation of Paul. Paul was not the conservative enforcer of religious dogma and hierarchy, but a radical egalitarian, whose vision was one of everlasting peace with all people equal before, and one with, the God in whom "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17: 28a).

David says

Refreshing, brisk exploration of Paul. I especially appreciated the care with which Borg and Crossan presented the various theological strains that have emerged over time. I've been reading quite a few books about early Christianity lately (Boyarin, Pagels, etc) and that diversity of thought within Christianity over time is such an important thing to understand. The fact that so much of the more conservative/fundamentalist approach to Christian theology (especially the rather crabbed, bloody, and mechanical versions of penal substitutionary atonement that are in the ascendant on the right these days) emerged closer to today than to Jesus' time cannot be emphasized enough, and Borg and Crossan discuss this carefully, kindly, but firmly. Their discussion of Phoebe delivering the messages of Paul are particularly persuasive on these matters.

Much better than I expected. Fascinating and a fine tonic.

Edit to add: As the title/subtitle suggests, this book does a fine job of providing better context for Paul. If you've felt (as I certainly have) impatient and even angry with Paul over the years, and would like to move beyond that, this book will help you. (It does so, though, in part by using the biblical/historical/textual scholarship of the last 150 years to distinguish between the letters Paul almost certainly wrote, those he probably didn't, and those he certainly didn't. Beyond the textual evidence, Borg/Crossan show a rather clear difference in content amongst the letters, and distinguish the Radical Paul from the Conservative Paul from the Reactionary Paul. I found this portion of the book persuasive and very helpful.)

Todd Lattig says

This is a very engaging read. Very enlightening on the historical Paul. I have always felt that Paul hasn't been given a very fair shake in terms of modern scholarship and that is because of a laziness in researching the historical context of his world along with nearly two thousand years of misinterpretation. That and people today have a hard time understanding a world without their 21st century, democratic Western lenses on. Borg and Crossan don't fall into any of those pitfalls and, as a result, First Paul shows Paul for who he was: A sincere and devoted Apostle of the Risen Christ who was a radical visionary and a fierce proponent for radical equality! He was flawed, and which one of us can hold that against him? But the truth be told, he is someone the church needs to rediscover and reclaim in a way that is true to the radical vision of equality he put forth!

Caleb says

The writing is a tad dry in places, but the authors present a thoroughly researched and argued, scholarly objective and yet still easy to read and understand case that there was more than one Paul responsible for the letters of Paul in the New Testament. And that the real, "first" Paul was actually a radical in terms of the religion, society and (especially) politics of his day, rather than the conservative, status quo supporter he's usually viewed as (One of the two most anti-gay parts of the Bible, for example, comes in a letter from Paul, although it is one probably written by a third Paul; passages of some of the letters also seem to support the subjugation of women and the support of slavery).

Not only was Paul not such a bad guy, according to the authors, but he actually seems like he was probably pretty awesome.

Also something of a revelation (if one can use that word when talking about Christian theology in this context) was the authors' interpretation of Paul's interpretation of some of the central mysteries of Christianity, and how different they were from what now seems to be commonplace.

Steven Williams says

It was a very interesting interpretation of Paul's theology. One point was that he didn't believe in Christ's resurrection.

JoAnn W. says

From some of the other reviews here, I'm not sure all of those people really read Borg's book. These are not Borg's ideas, but he is interpreting standard Biblical scholarship for us laypeople.

The pop culture and the mass media apparently haven't done their Biblical homework. Paul turns out not to be the anti-feminist he has been painted out to be.

Paul only wrote Romans, Galatians, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, I Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon. HE DID NOT WRITE Ephesians or the two letters to Timothy where the "women must keep silent" and "obey your husbands" texts appear.

The books he did write reveal a respect for women that was RADICAL in its time. Women had leading roles in many early churches, and Paul MENTIONS THEM BY NAME in these letters. An anti-feminist set of verses that do appear in I Corinthians are believed to have been added.

Roman society was very patriarchal, and women were devalued in Roman society, expected to keep in the background. The later letters that scholars believe Paul didn't write caved to the popular culture, in contrast to the radicalism of Jesus and Paul.

Kudos to Marcus Borg for pointing this out and, because of his popularity as a writer, breaking through the inaccurate stereotype of Paul.

Donald Powell says

This book was a revelation to me. It felt like a vindication and an illumination. It is very scholarly in spots and full of grace in others. I would hope anyone who has any interest in Christianity would at least expose themselves to this analysis of one of its most important founders.
