Paul and Secession from Empire

This is a sermon offered at the Eighth Day faith community on January 30, 2011. It presents some information from recent scholarship on the writings of the Apostle Paul, and its relevance to the church as we confront the American empire, and how we in the Eighth Day community might respond.

We've talked a good deal in this community about empire. We've found considerable insight in scripture and current literature that challenges the dominant consciousness of our day: its militarism, consumerism, individualism, and idolatry of money, prestige, and power. This has given our community a foundation on which we've worked to build an alternative vision of peace, solidarity with the oppressed, downward mobility, ecological sanity and community.

A number of years ago I discovered *Unveiling Empire*—a book that interpreted the Book of Revelation as a subversive document with an alternative vision to empire. More recently, two other books— *Paul and Empire* and *The Authentic letters of Paul* —have shown me the subversive nature of Paul's writings. They're explicitly anti-imperial documents that—in treasonous language—called the early communities to resist the Roman empire. I'd like to share a bit of that with you.

As background information, it's important to know that "religion," as we understand it today, didn't really exist in the ancient world. Religion wasn't a separate institution. What we today would consider religious rituals, practices, beliefs, even temples and shrines were part-and-parcel of imperial rule.

In the Roman empire, for instance, the emperor was a divine figure, acknowledged in shrines, temples, and monuments in every city and community. The emperor's image was everywhere: on public buildings, in private homes, in statues throughout the city, even on the coins. Festivals and games were held in his honor. But this powerful "religious" imagery was completely interwoven into, and necessary to, the political and economic stability of the empire. Caesar's divinity not only cemented Roman political control over the empire but also justified the economic hierarchy of wealth and oppression and legitimated the social institution of patronage that was so crucial to the empire's existence.

So it's important for us to understand that when Paul challenges Roman "religion," he's fundamentally challenging the empire itself.

One way he does this is by appropriating very specific "religious" words and concepts from Roman imperial rule. The word we translate as *gospel*, for instance, meant at that time the good news of *Caesar's* reign. Caesar was the *savior* who brought *peace*, *justice*, and *salvation*. Caesar was named the *son of God*. And the people were to have *faith* in him.

Even the word *parousia* that Paul used to refer to the return of Jesus' meant in ordinary parlance the *emperor's* entrance into a subject city.

So, when Paul used the word *parousia*—or gospel, savior, peace, justice, salvation, or faith,—in the context of the good news of Jesus and God's reign, it would have been obvious to the early followers of Jesus (and to discerning Romans) that he was deliberately challenging the primacy of the empire itself, that is, its political, economic, social, military *and* religious structures. Even Paul's oft-repeated, seemingly innocuous, greeting "Grace and peace to you from the Lord Jesus Christ" challenged the Roman political structure because peace came *only* from the emperor. To call Jesus the "son of God" or, worse, "Lord," was an unmistakable affront to Caesar and thus to the power of the empire. It was treasonous language, and Paul had to know it.

A second challenge to the empire was Paul insistence that poor and rich, slave and free, men and women, Roman citizen and Jewish nobodies were equal before God, members of the same community. This was an indirect but powerful attack on the Roman *patronage* system that was

crucial to maintaining order and stability within the empire. In the system, the Roman "patron" offered political and economic support, encouragement, status and some degree of privilege in return for loyalty, devotion, and … not bucking the system. The emperor, for instance, was patron to his clients in the aristocracy who showed their loyalty through worship, obedience, and expressions of devotion, like building temples or monuments to the emperor. In turn, those aristocrats were patrons to the wealthy-of-lesser-rank who were dependent upon their favors, including access to the emperor. And so it went, down through the ranks, spreading out well beyond Rome into the provinces. Each lower rung was dependent upon the rung above. Even the relatively poor received their crumbs from the table of the empire through their patrons. The entire political, social, and economic hierarchy was reinforced by this patronage system: clients at each level had too much to lose from rebellion against the empire.

So the patronage structure itself created order and stability. It kept the empire together.

Paul's insistence, then, that everyone in the community was equal before God defied the empire. A community made of people from every societal level who then ate together, supported one another financially, freed members who were slaves and so on was a living threat to the hierarchy, and it put both Paul and the newly formed communities at significant risk.

The third challenge to empire was Paul's theology of "Christ crucified." Within the Roman Empire, of course, crucifixion was widely used in restless peripheral provinces to execute political dissidents and common criminals; it was meant to sow both terror and shame in the population. Crosses sometimes lined the roads of Palestine as bloody reminders of who was in charge. Yet Paul's writes in today's passage from the first chapter of I Corinthians that the cross is the power of God, that the crucifixion of Christ is utter foolishness to the political elite who've benefited from this Roman cruelty, and that the pretentious elite who quest after wisdom, power, and wealth can't understand that it's the weak and despised who will be saved.

This was not just an expression of God's upside-down kingdom. It was a challenge to a primary means of maintaining emotional and physical control over a restless populace on the periphery of the empire.

Fourth, when Paul speaks of Jesus' reign over the Powers of the day, those Powers are not just invisible spiritual entities but real-life, political, economic, and religious authorities. A little

further on in I Corinthians, Paul writes that "the *rulers* of this age … are doomed to perish." The *authorities* made the mistake of crucifying "the Lord of glory" and Christ will hand "over the kingdom of God to the Father, after he has destroyed every *rule* and every *authority* and power." This is politically subversive stuff.

Paul writes often that followers of Jesus must not conform to "this world." We usually interpret the "this world" he's writing about as the milieu of self-indulgence, luxury, sexual immorality, wealth, and so on of the culture. These are included, of course, but the "this world" of first century Palestine was the Roman empire! And given the indivisibility of religion, politics, economics and so on, non-conformity was essentially secession from the empire.

Paul is writing to the *ekklesia*, which is usually translated into English as "church." But that translation is misleading. The meaning of the word then was a "citizen assembly." Paul wasn't referring to a religious congregation as we think of, say, Eighth Day. Rather it was an alternative society living in conscious opposition to the entire imperial order. This is dangerous talk!

Paul insists that a primary task of the assemblies of the people of God is secession from the empire. I've been trying unsuccessfully to find a better word than "secession." Paul didn't mean donning a weird uniform or creating public rituals. He didn't mean a public demonstration or political revolution. He didn't mean dropping out and refusing to engage the culture or physically retreating to a mountain cave to await Jesus' return. Rather, he was calling the members of the assemblies to a thoroughgoing change in allegiances, in values, in attitudes, and in practices. Later in I Corinthians, for instance, Paul suggests not eating meat sacrificed to idols—not because it was wrong in itself but for fear of misleading weaker community members. This wasn't a religious issue as we think of it. Rather, the practice of Roman subjects was to gather to eat the sacrificed meat together as a communal activity, a ritual that bound the community under the empire's political, social, and religious values and practices. For weaker members of the Corinthian community, attendance at these rituals might be co-opting. Not joining in, on the other hand, was a public act that would have been noticed. It wasn't obvious what to do, so the community asked Paul.

So why is Paul talking secession at the risk of such dire consequences? The question was one of identity. Who are we? What defines us? Where is our allegiance? Our identity comes from being bonded to the body of Christ. That's how we live physically within the empire yet belong to the Reign of God.

Now Paul had to walk a fine line between his direct confrontation and not wiping the communities out by yelling it from the agora. But a careful observer would have easily known what he was talking about.

If we go back and read the Gospels with this understanding of the political and religious realities of the time then the revolutionary nature of Jesus' teachings becomes clear. For instance, women had standing among his followers, the poor were blessed, the rich were admonished to give their money away, the reign of God was primary, and Jesus directly challenged religious authorities (who, remember, were also political authorities in the chain of commend). These weren't just matters of personal religiosity; they were also threats to the empire that were certainly among the reasons for Jesus' execution.

Now, it didn't take long, of course, for the followers of the way to begin to moderate both Jesus' and Paul's teaching—just a few decades, in fact. The gospel lectionary reading for today was the Beatitudes from Matthew. Instead, I asked that we read Luke's version. Contrast the two: In Luke it's the *poor* who are blessed, not the poor in spirit; it's the hungry who will be filled not those who hunger for righteousness. Luke has Jesus damn the rich, the well-fed, and those whom others speak well of; Matthew leaves that part out. While we can't, of course, know with any certainty, many scholars believe that Luke's more politically challenging version is closer to what Jesus actually said than Matthew's softer version. While it's a difficult question, is Matthew's version a safer ratcheting down of the rhetoric to make it less threatening?

What we do *know* is that later New Testament writers began to emphasize that they were not serious threats to the imperial order. Christians tried to soften the threat by separating out their religious practices from the economic and social structures. Even martyrs about to be thrown to the lions insisted that Christians were paradigms of political loyalty, despite their exclusive religious loyalty to the one God. And by the early fourth century, even the emperor was a Christian, and the notion of secession "from the world" had been utterly spiritualized and the threat to the empire neutralized.

Let's consider the powerful parallels between the Roman and the American empires.

Although today a free-standing institution, American religion (or at least American Christianity) is an essential support structure of empire. Deeply enculturated, the contemporary American

church is rarely a threat to empire and usually an affirmation of the American values that support it. Until the first Iraq invasion, for instance, every time the country had previously gone to war every major American denomination except the Anabaptists had pronounced the war acceptable under the just-war theory. (This isn't a problem only for the American church, of course. Consider Nazi Germany. The church always seems to believe that God is on our side.)

In the Roman empire, Caesar's image was plastered everywhere. Today's consumerism is our equivalent. It also is both a political and religious power that knits a far-flung empire together, thus helping to avoid the conflict that class war implies. The images of consumerism, too, are simply everywhere.

The American empire has (until recently, at least) also offeredsalvation through financial security: a good job, home ownership, substantial savings, good health insurance, a solid 401(k) or pension plan (or at the very least Social Security). For many of us, there's no need to depend on the , for our security: We've either got that part already sewn up or we'd consider such dependence shameful.

The American economic structure knits our empire together much as the Romanpatronage system knit theirs. Like patronage, today's system gives everyone (except those at the very bottom) a big enough piece of the pie that true revolution—or even significant reformation—is highly unlikely: it's just too scary because each of us has so much to lose. And even the poorest are promised that if they just work hard enough, they'll get theirs, too. Our version of the patronage system is an orderly and highly effective institution of social control.

The implication of Paul's letters is that sustained, effective secession from the empire was only possible within the context of a community. In contemporary society, that kind of community may not be the same threat to the empire that it was in the first century, but it's still probably the only means for cutting through our personal consumerism, obsession with financial security, individualism, measuring so much with a money yardstick, and so on.

So what are the implications for us? How do we become a voice for God's reign? First of all it's important to acknowledge that in this community, we've already agreed upon some of the fundamentals and are trying to respond appropriately. To varying degrees, we work for justice and share our resources with the poor. We give honor and respect to God's creation by at least taking notice of environmental realities. We deepen our community life through regular attendance, contributions of time and money, and participation in small groups, potlucks, and

vacations together. We often work actively against the political, economic, and social structures that do so much damage. We take time for silence.

But I think Paul is talking about something qualitatively different. Not more, necessarily; I doubt Paul is trying to burden his communities with more to do. In fact, Paul is inviting us into deeper, richer, more joyful Christian community (right here at Eighth Day).

But I've had a difficult time with this question of exactly what Paul is calling us to. I really can't answer it yet.

But I'm deeply struck by the depth of the secession to which Paul called the early communities. And I doubt that more than a few of us have even aspired to that degree of secession, much less pulled it off. We're to live in a dramatically different world, obeying radically different rules and accepting unthinkable claims of lordship.

How can we be less shaped by the values of empire? How can we become more aware of the compromises we've made with the culture and seek to undo them? How can we forego our individualism and depend on each other? How can we observe Sabbath?

I'm still too bound by own attachments to the empire to make the radical changes necessary. I suspect I'm too bound even to see most of them clearly. But I'm sure I won't get very far in figuring it out by myself, to say nothing of acting upon it. This will have to be something we do together—consciously and conscientiously exploring the details of this secession as a community.

There are probably at least six areas we'll have to examine:

First, our own enmeshment in consumerism. If we consider that even our level of consumption requires an economic system that's oppressive to most others around the world, and if we consider how destructive our life style is to the earth, it's obvious that secession from consumerism is one of the primary requirements of God's reign. In the classes I teach, we sometimes measure our own carbon footprint. So far no one has been consuming at low

enough a level that it could be sustained if all seven billion of us lived that way.

The second area is the extraordinary level of individualism within our culture. How do we become more dependent on each other and less on ourselves?

Third: the idolatry of money. Money defines virtually every aspect of the empire. We have much to teach each other and much to learn together about our enslavement.

Fourth, security: Is it really to be found in our savings or 401(k)s?

Fifth, keeping Sabbath. It's astonishing, actually, how often scripture, especially Hebrew scripture, mandates Sabbath. Yet none of us, as far as I know, has regularly kept a Sabbath day for a significant period of time.

And, finally, community. Paul seemed to believe that it wasn't possible to secede from empire without community. Not possible!

I won't speak for any of you, but the fact is that I hear much of what I've just said as onerous prescription (and I've probably presented it that way, too). But even that's a good indication of how deeply our culture (and I with) it misunderstand Christian life and Christian community. Jesus and Paul saw all of this as *liberating*. They were inviting us to a great feast, away from an oppressive empire. How can we share in that vision of liberation? The pull of the culture will be strong in the other direction. I suspect that we'll have to deliberate together very consciously in personal conversations, sermons, classes, retreats, all-church discussions, and so on.

Personally, I'm a bit scared of it all, but the promise is that it will be life-giving.

Amen.



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