

*Paul Behaving Badly: Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?*

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## The Paradox of Paul

The apostle Paul was known as arrogant and stubborn. He called his opponents derogatory, racist names. He legitimized slavery and silenced women. He was a moralistic, homophobic killjoy who imposed his narrow religious views on others. Essentially, he was kind of a jerk!

Or was he?

Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brien explore in *Paul Behaving Badly* the complicated persona and teachings of the apostle Paul. Much like their approach in their first book, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, Richards and O'Brien unpack Paul's personal history and cultural context.

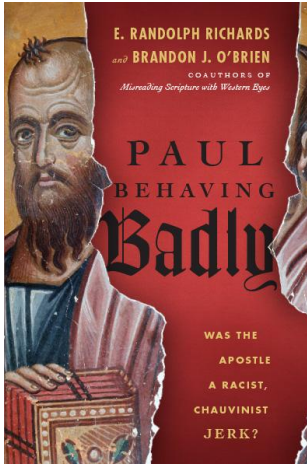
"We argue that Paul was, in fact, behaving badly a lot of the time," write Richards and O'Brien. "But by that we mean that Paul regularly offended Jewish sensibilities and Roman sensibilities, modern sensibilities and ancient sensibilities – sometimes all at once! It takes a special gift to offend everyone for different reasons. What is distinctive about our approach is that we hold Paul's feet to the fire on his most controversial topics, using what we think are the most compelling arguments against him, and we don't rescue him too quickly."

Throughout the book, they examine such topics as

- Paul's historical context
- Paul's countercultural nature
- Paul as a guide for the current culture
- Paul's ethical datedness
- Paul as a chauvinist
- Paul as a racist and supporter of slavery
- Paul as a hypocrite who twisted Scripture

The authors once again lend a unique collaboration to this book, combining Richards' academic background in biblical studies and missions work with O'Brien's own academic work and writing history. Richards currently serves as dean and professor of biblical studies in the School of Ministry at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is a popular speaker and has authored and coauthored dozens of books and articles. Early on in their ministry, he and his wife Stacia were appointed as missionaries to east Indonesia, where he taught for eight years at an Indonesian seminary.

O'Brien is assistant professor of Christian theology at Ouachita Baptist University and director of OBU at New Life Church in Conway, Arkansas. Previously he was a senior editor for *Leadership Journal*. He has published in *Christianity Today*, *Relevant*, and the *Out of Ur* blog, and has been interviewed by and quoted in *USA Today* and other national newspapers.



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## Paul Was the Go-To Guy to Stop the Fun

The first and greatest commandment of my (Brandon's) childhood – the rule of thumb for all Christian behavior – was a Pauline command repeated by countless revivalist preachers: “Avoid even the appearance of evil.” Because of this prohibition, I could not drink root beer or ginger ale on the grounds that both of those beverages were named after alcoholic potables. They weren't alcoholic, but holding a bottle with the word “beer” on the label certainly could have been an “appearance of evil.” Then there was the matter of movies. There were wholesome ones to watch at home (when we weren't boycotting Disney), but watching movies in a theater was a different issue. The people who saw you exit a movie theater late at night had no way of knowing whether you attended a G-rated movie or an R-rated one. It was safest, they argued, to avoid even the appearance of having attended an inappropriate film. And Big League Chew, the bubble gum packaged to look like chewing tobacco, was out of the question.

What Paul actually said, according to the King James Version, was that the Thessalonians should “abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thess 5:22). My tradition added the word “even” (*even* the appearance of evil) the same way Eve added “and you must not touch it” to God's command not to eat from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:3). Which is to say we improved the command by making it more restrictive. Surely there is no sin in tightening things up.

I don't remember questioning whether this maxim was a verbatim quotation. It didn't matter. Everyone was confident it captured the spirit of Paul's teaching in general. Paul was our go-to guy when we needed a Bible text to stop the fun. When he wasn't urging people to avoid the appearance of evil, he was encouraging them to work hard: “Attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you” (1 Thess 4:11 NASB). When he wasn't encouraging people to work hard, he was urging them to laugh little, to take part in “neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting” (Eph 5:4 KJV). In short, Paul was the champion of seriousness and sobriety (Tit 2:7). What we're describing here is sometimes called the spirit of Puritanism, an impulse the American journalist H. L. Mencken once defined as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

This impulse that supposedly began with Paul made its way into American culture through New England's founding flock, the Puritans, in the eighteenth century. Puritanism, in the popular imagination, is a dour, joyless piety, with its high collars and low hems. Americans never use the term “Puritanical” as a compliment. We find the same impulse across the pond in England and summarized aptly in the teaching of that most famous nineteenth century “puritan” Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

Christian man, remember this. Let not allowable diversions become occasions for



# BOOK EXCERPT

*“For those who have been daunted, angered, confused, or shocked by the apostle Paul, this fine, honest, lucid book by Richards and O'Brien helps readers better understand Paul in his own first-century setting. The authors do not fully exonerate Paul (he too was finite and sinful), nor do they engage in chronological snobbery, as many of Paul's critics are wont to do ('It's a good thing we moderns know better than Paul'). Paul Behaving Badly gives a fresh glimpse into the life and thought of the controversial apostle – one that is both fair minded and charitable, at once challenging to staid assumptions while faithful to Christian orthodoxy.”*

– **Paul Copan**, professor and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University, West Palm Beach, Florida

transgression. This they will be if they cause waste of time; for in such a case you will be reported to your Master as a steward who has wasted his goods.

The pastor urged his congregation to not misuse the talents Jesus had given them by wasting time on “diversions,” even permissible ones, when they should be working. Spurgeon cautioned the Christian:

Nor will you be blameless if your recreations weary the brain and heart, and cause a new and unenumerative expenditure of force.

In Spurgeon’s reasoning, if you play too much today, you might not be able to work or pray tomorrow. To whom does the preacher turn to justify these strict instructions? To Paul, of course:

Above all, you will be greatly censurable if there is the slightest tinge of sin about the amusement: “Abstain from all appearance of evil.”

There you have it. From Paul to the Puritans to a pulpit in the 1880s to my religious imagination – a heritage of sour Christianity. This is one of those problems with Paul that becomes a problem for the entire church. We can manage if Paul was generally gruff or grumpy – some people just are. But if Paul was a killjoy, and if in inspired Scripture he commanded a grim and joyless discipleship, then we begin to have problems. Plenty of people have rejected Christianity for philosophical or intellectual reasons. Anecdotally it seems to us that far more abandon the faith because they view the church as prudish. That may be right, but is Paul to blame?

– *Taken from chapter two, “Paul Was a Killjoy”*