

## **The First Paul – Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church’s Conservative Icon**

*Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan (± \$28)*  
*Harper One 2009*

Bestselling authors Borg and Crossan join forces again to present what they believe to be the suppressed (by the church) view of Paul. These two scholars are best known for their studies on the person and message of Jesus. In this long awaited publication they now turn to Paul, the author of the oldest texts in the New Testament. The authors use their collective knowledge and research of biblical and historical scholarship to explain the reasons for Paul’s mixed reputation throughout history. Borg and Crossan argue that there are actually “Three Pauls” in the New Testament: “The Radical Paul” (of the seven genuine letters), “The Conservative Paul” (of the three disputed epistles), and “The Reactionary Paul” (of the three inauthentic letters).

The premise of the book is that if we take seriously the results of scholarship that point to three different authors, we discover three very different people with clearly different theologies. The “Radical Paul” when separated from the other New Testament contributors, turns out to have quite clear and radical views that distinguish him from subsequent writers who have “softened” his message to fit their own social norms and context in order to reach their own audiences.

The book focuses on many issues but particularly on those of slavery and patriarchy. How did the different “Pauls” think through these issues? An example is a brilliant chapter entitled “How to read a Pauline letter” which explores the “Radical Paul’s” view on slavery and how he dealt with what was a very thorny issue of his time. This chapter is so well written that most Ministers of the Word will not be able to resist writing a sermon based on the one-chapter letter to Philemon even before finishing this book.

This has to be most thought provoking book about the life and writings of Paul that I’ve ever read. Through separation of the writings and then dealing seriously with them as individual authors, a very clear and convincing picture emerges. Paul is not simply either appealing or appalling. There are three writers that all need to be read in context and each one needs to be taken seriously. The book also clears up many of the questions on so-called contradictions in Paul’s views on slavery, women, etc. It is thought provoking and challenging. It is a must read if you’re part of the debate.

There are critical comments to be made about the book as well. Chapter four doesn’t flow as well as the rest; I would have loved more references to established research; “Christ crucified as revelation of God’s character” I didn’t find convincing enough; etc. But all in all, this is a must read for those serious about being part of the current debate.

Chris Crause, 2010