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“I Love Dr. Parker But. . .” : When Love Paternalism Shows Up in the Classroom

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About a year ago I was teaching a Greek class where we were translating Paul’s short letter to Philemon. I mentioned the idea that States could use the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in order to curtail the rights of women to travel across state lines to secure an abortion. In case you are not aware, friends, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 criminalized any provision of aid or sanctuary to escaped enslaved individuals. And I was not just making it up. There are articles both in newspapers and legal journals to document my reference.[i]

Unbeknownst to me, a student took issue with my statement and decided to correct me. However, they did not correct me during the class period and they did not correct me by scheduling a time to meet with me. Neither did the student decide to send me an e-mail. The student decided to send an e-mail to all of the White students in the classroom. The student did not send the e-mail to any of the Black students in the classroom. As you can probably discern from the title of this blog, the e-mail began with “I love Dr. Parker but. . . .” Of course, one of my students sent the e-mail to me and we had to process it during the next class period which, of course, was not part of my lesson plan nor a part of my syllabus.

In the e-mail, the student indicated that it is ridiculous to imagine that states’ rights could supersede the rights of unrestricted travel for US citizens, regardless of whether one leaves the state for an abortion or vacation. The e-mail then went on to state that “Statistics show that for every one white abortion there are five to six black abortions. Black persons should view

abortion as a white man's way of trying to limit the population of blacks in the United States." The tone was almost as if Black people should be grateful that White Republicans (this person identified as Republican in the e-mail) loved them so much that they were trying to stop abortions.

There are two predominant ways to think about love paternalism and both come through Pauline literature. The first is the idea of a love that gives up rights. This stems from Paul's use of the terms the weak and the strong. The idea is that the strong give up their right to do something if that thing, in fact, causes the weak to stumble. The classic example is in the case of meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10. A contemporary example can be found in the idea of men telling woman to cover up themselves in case they arouse a man's sexual interest and suffer a rape. This is an instance of victim-blaming and leaves the onus on a woman instead of arguing that a man should actually have self-control.[ii]

Another aspect of love paternalism involves limiting someone's autonomy and freedom for their own good. I see this idea particularly in the student's statement that Black persons should view abortion as a white man's way of trying to limit the population of blacks in the United States. Throughout history White people do whatever they can to justify their understanding of why they mistreat Black people. For example, during the transatlantic slave trade, slaveowners and traders justified trafficking enslaved persons by saying that they were introducing them to the gospel.

What should the African American female professor's response be when love paternalism smacks her in the face in the midst of a semester when she is teaching Greek? Of course, she must confront it head-on and be able to maneuver and be nimble right in the middle of the semester. Pedagogically, I table any theological discussion during Greek translation because the focus during that particular time is on morphology and syntax within the text. However, in this instance I did allow a moment to discuss the e-mail and then connect it to the manipulative ways in which Paul's rhetoric shows up in the letter to Philemon. We tackled the e-mail through power dynamics. We also had to have a frank discussion on why the student only sent the e-mail to White students.

Bottom line: Openness, frank discussions, and nimbleness are required when love paternalism unexpectedly affronts a professor. I do not know if my White colleagues experience such moments in the classroom. However, you never know what your minoritized colleagues are going through when we are teaching our classes, so please be kind.

Notes & Bibliography

[i] See Angela N. Parker. "You Can't Pay Back What You Never Owned: A Conversation on Reparations and Paul's Letter to Philemon," in *Reparations and the Theological Disciplines: Prophetic Voices for Remembrance, Reckoning, and Repair*, ed. M. Barram, D.G.I. Hart, G. Kettering, and M.J. Rhodes, (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023), 91-104.

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[ii] See Roger E. Olson, *Whatever Happened to the Christian Principle of “Love Paternalism?”* (Newstex, 2019).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2025/09/i-love-dr-parker-but-when-love-paternalism-shows-up-in-the-classroom/>