

Camille Cook Howe
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.

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1 Corinthians 3:10-23
Tour de Paul

We stop along Paul's travels in Corinth, the prominent port city in Greece. Today in Corinth stands a small tourist town along with an archeological site. This is a community where Paul moved in and stayed for a long time while working as a tentmaker to save up money for his next travels. After Paul departed from Corinth, he stayed in contact with his friends through many letters. We have two of those letters, but we know several others are missing. 1 Corinthians probably isn't the first letter just the first one we have. I wish we had the others – but I also would love to have the letters written from the Corinthians to Paul. I am not sure if there were letters or if he just heard about what was going on in Corinth by word of mouth. But what we do have is two letters written by Paul to the church he started in Corinth, to his friends, who were clearly having a hard time. Being 'church' isn't always easy! Paul is trying to give them some counsel.

After re-reading 1 Corinthians this week, I have realized that if Paul was a church leader today, or a public figure he would definitely be 'cancelled'. People would not like his straight talking; no mincing of words approach to issues of the day. Paul addressed the issues that were impacting the church and he took a hard line about things. And the lines Paul took then do not translate well to the modern church. Insert Paul's lines about women keeping silent in church just for an example. Or a woman's body belonging to her husband. Words about marriage. Words about what to eat. Words about sexual practices. Words about how to dress. Paul was addressing very specific things that were going on. If we only could have the letters from the Corinthians, it would help clarify things.

I imagine before Paul wrote this letter; he opened a stack of letters from his friends in Corinth asking him for guidance.

Dear Brother Paul, my wife wants to get a divorce, but I still love her and think we can make it work. What should I do? Fondly, Solomon

Dear Paul, Gretchen came into church without a head covering. How rude, am I right? What should we do? Love, Peter

Dear Paul, you know Corinth is like 'sin city' and some of my friends want me to go 'crazy' as they call it. How do I remain holy or righteous with all these temptations? Yours truly, Bartholomew

*Greetings Paul, you won't believe what is happening at communion, the rich people get off work early and they get to the meal first and eat it all up. By the time my friends and I finish work, there are only crumbs left for us. They over there, drunk on the communion wine and we are desperate for a bite to eat. Totally not fair! Help us, Paul. Your friend, Linda
PS When are you coming back to see us?*

Paul gives them straight talking advice for how to handle things in their church. It is easy for us to judge Paul and say how wrong he got so many things – but Paul was doing his best. And we cannot really judge because we know very little about the situations at hand. It is interesting to read what the scholars say and how they debate Paul’s teachings. Unfortunately, Paul’s words have really hurt people as they have been applied to situations throughout history to oppress, to marginalize, and to shame groups of people. I do not believe Paul wanted to oppress, marginalize, or shame. I do believe that using Paul out of context is not faithful preaching or teaching. Paul’s primary goal was to build up the church and help them grow in their faith and understanding of their identity in Christ. He did feel like there were behaviors that encouraged the growth of the church and there were practices that hurt the church community. This was true then and it is true now. But Paul was always trying to instruct them in how to build up their community, not in how to tear each other down. Therefore, using his words in this way does not seem fair.

My godfather died a few years ago and my aunt, his wife, asked me to speak at the funeral. It was to be held at the non-denominational church where they had worshipped for many years. When my aunt met with the pastor to plan the service, she told him that I was a Presbyterian minister and was close to their family and she would like me to have a part in the service. The pastor informed my aunt that I could not speak, not even read scripture in the church because of well...Paul. 1 Corinthians specifically. Paul’s words were pulled out to make a point that it was not appropriate for a woman to speak in church. That is just one low key example of how Paul’s words have been damaging when used out of context. That wound was minimal – we moved the funeral to the local community center, and I officiated the whole thing. But there have been much deeper wounds to individuals and groups of people – people who have had a passage of scripture used to tell them to obey, to submit, to repent, to feel less than.

This is called proof texting. Taking a verse of scripture and using it to prove a point or reinforce a belief. This is not how Paul should be used. This is not how the Bible should be read. We read the Bible to discern God’s voice and seek guidance for our lives. We do not read the Bible to find examples for our way of doing business or to support our ideas. I am pretty sure Paul would be unhappy if he knew this was how his private letters to his friends were being used centuries later. The Bible is too precious and holy to be treated without great care and discernment. We believe that the Bible is a living document. To discern God’s voice in these ancient texts we must hold them with open hands. Not clutch them with a death grip. The situations facing the church in Paul’s time are not the same as the situations in our time. The situations facing the church today will not be the same as those faced by the church in 4022.

Here is an example of a specific church argument and how it would not make a lick of sense in 2,000 years to Christians who are reading about the situation.

During covid, there was a time when we just reopened the building for in person worship services and masks were required in our building. A member of the church disagreed with that policy, and I stood outside asking him politely to put on a mask if he wanted to come inside. This turned into a heated exchange. He argued why he shouldn’t have to wear one and I tried to explain why he did. Eventually he left but not without saying some things that I will not soon forget. This was an on the ground situation, impacting the worship and community life of our church, but it is a very specific situation. Now imagine you fast forward two thousand years, someone is reading about

this situation and does not know why ‘masks’, or face coverings were being used, does not know why the church building was closed, and they read a letter from the pastor to the church about the situation. Would they then discern that face coverings must be worn by their church in perpetuity to worship God? No. That is not how Biblical interpretation works. You understand that we would not expect someone else’s church to read our internal church documents and apply them to their churches – nor should we do so with Paul’s letters.

Theologian Alister McGrath, my professor at Oxford, and perhaps the most famous modern apologist said, “We have to look carefully, I think. We must always examine the texts in their contexts to make sure we get the big picture, rather than tearing a text out of its proper context, trying to make sense of it an atomistic way.”

There is so much of Paul’s writings that are timeless – so much that is good and poetic and profound. But there is also a lot of Paul’s teachings that just do not translate. I would like to believe Paul was doing the best he could, and that Paul was a faithful man who did so much to build up the church and serve the kingdom of God. We must listen to his stories to learn about the early church, and we must study his theology because he spent much time with the disciples of Jesus. But we do not treat Paul’s words as though they were Christ’s words. Paul himself, claimed to be the biggest sinner of them all. If Paul is clear about anything it is that we are NOT to worship him, we are not to imitate him, that role is for Christ alone.

The problems of the early church are different from ours – and they are the same. Division in the church is always a problem and Paul wants to root it out. But the specific arguments are different. Paul urges unity, Paul stresses faithfulness, Paul commends love.

In this letter, Paul begins and ends by reminding the church of their foundation is found in God. It is so easy for us to forget that is our foundation. And when we forget that it leads to all sorts of arguments and complications and petty tiffs with each other and with ourselves.

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.” We have spent five weeks studying the travels and writings of Paul. We could spend forty-five weeks doing this but some of you would revolt. But what I learned on my summer vacation was this - Paul was intelligent and passionate and courageous and tireless. Paul was a good pastor and Paul gifted the church with his letters. They were love letters to the church and love letters to God. If approached with the right understanding, Paul can help us to be faithful in our own walks with Jesus. Paul can help us to be more generous and gracious towards each other. I like Paul and pray his words cease to be used as weapons in the hands of fiery preachers.

Hear the conclusion of his letter, some of Paul’s most famous words, words to his friends, words to help navigate life, words to shape our life together:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Whatever we face today or shall face in the days to come, Paul tells us to cling to three things – faith, hope, and love. The greatest of these is love. This is timeless wisdom, for the life of the Christian and the life of the body of Christ.

Let us celebrate the conversion of the reprobate Paul who became the great the champion of the church. We do not seek to imitate him, but we do seek unity with him in Christ. To God be the glory, for servants so devoted to the gospel. May the church strive to faithfully interpret his writings for the sake of the kingdom. May we strive to be as faithful as Paul in seeking the presence of the living God in our midst.

Amen.