

IN YOUR CHRISTIAN WITNESS, WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT: TO WIN A FRIEND, OR TO WIN AN ARGUMENT?

We have been tagging along with Paul as he traveled out from Antioch, taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus and through dreams¹.

Last Sunday, we noted Paul's life was threatened by rabble-rousers in Thessaloniki, because he proclaimed Jesus as king, instead of Caesar². Paul moves on to Berea where the community of Jews were more noble and welcoming and accepted his teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,³ until once again, the rabble-rousers from Thessaloniki turned up and caused him away.

Paul's travel diary follows a familiar pattern, of travelling to a place where there is Jewish synagogue, assembling the leadership and, using their own scriptures, reveal to them the fulfilment of God's promises and prophecies, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps **the** unique characteristics of Jewish people is that their religion (practice of faith and worship), culture, society and national identity is one integrated, seamless whole. We know from from the story of Samuel, they rejected God as their king.⁴ **IF**, however, God was their King, this would have worked perfectly, because their worship, social customs (i.e. culture) and their identity as a people (nationhood, not the partisan politics we

¹ ACTS 16:6-10

² Acts 17:7-8

³ Acts 17:12

⁴ 1 Samuel 8

are used to), are all rooted in their relationship with God, which is the starting point.

Over several millenia, however, their social customs and culture of worship became more important than God Himself, so much more important, that obedience to the Law was more important than, obedience to God!

Paul's teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ threatened **this model** life. A powerful Jewish leader, who had *gone rogue*, as the saying goes, declared Jesus turned his life around, from persecutor to proselytiser, from an oppressor of the Gospel, to a proclaimer, preacher and promoter of the **SAME** Gospel.

Where did Paul learn this strategy of presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The best communications course today will teach you to focus your energies where you and your message are welcomed; to avoid places where people are hostile towards you and your message!

I think (*until I am corrected otherwise!*), Paul drew this model of communication from Jesus Himself (whom he declared to be his model for everything).

Allow me to digress for a minute. In our Easter narrative, we find two men walking on the road to Emmaus, talking about the meaning of recent events in Jerusalem, when Jesus Himself drew alongside and asked them what they were discussing. *Are you the ONLY ONE who does not know about the death of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed before God and the people, ... whom we had hoped was the one to redeem Israel? ...* Then Jesus, **beginning with Moses (which is the Law) and all the**

prophets, interpreted to them in all the Scriptures, things concerning Himself.⁵

This was Paul's model of presentation in synagogues. Paul is not a sucker for punishment. He does not show up in a synagogue because he loved a good flogging. He reasoned, *If Jesus used our history to convince His listeners, God's word can be trusted to come true, I, Paul should do the same.*

So Paul travels down the eastern coast of Greece via Athens to Corinth where he stayed for about 18 months.

If the people of Thessaloniki gave up work in anticipation of the imminent second coming of Christ, the people of Corinth were so wealthy, they did not have to work! They would happily wait for the second coming of Christ in absolute luxury.

Corinth sat on a narrow strip of land about 4 miles wide, with the Aegean Sea to the east, and the Gulf of Corinth which opened up to the Adriatic Sea and the central Mediterranean to the west. Corinthians provided a valuable, overland portage service, carrying cargo from one coast to the other, providing traders and shipping companies faster delivery and safer shipping by avoid the stormy and dangerous Mediterranean. The elite of Corinthian society owned and employed hundreds of porters, carrying bales and boxes of produce and materials from one coast to the other.

Corinth was proof that the middleman makes the greatest profit!

The problems Paul discovered at Corinth related to a society living in the extremes, of wealth and of poverty, where political structures were oriented to serve Rome, and social customs pleased the Greeks.

⁵ Luke 24:13-35

At the start of the letter, Paul reminds Christians in Corinth, *When God called you to be His own, dear brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise in the way the world judges wisdom. Not many of you had great influence, and not many of you came from important families.*⁶ Many who joined the church in Corinth five years prior when it was established, had done well for themselves, but the Church at Corinth faced serious problems with *new money* imitating the lifestyle of *old money*, and *old money* resenting the bling of *new money* showing off.

This led to serious dissension within the community⁷. Alongside issues of marital relationships⁸, sexual immorality⁹ and legal disputes¹⁰, Paul was alarmed to learn of the abuse of the Lord's Supper¹¹, controversies about the resurrection of the dead¹², and arguments about eating meat offered to idols¹³.

It is absolutely necessary for us to discuss issues in our world which question and challenge our faith, **BUT** such discussion must **always** be undergirded and informed by God's Word, and guided by the only true interpreter of spiritual Truth, the Holy Spirit. Matters relating to the application of the Christian faith to life in the world, **MUST** be founded on, and rooted in the Scriptures that are foundational to our faith in God, the Bible - God's Word.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:26

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:11 and 11:18

⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:1b-40

⁹ 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 and 6:12-20

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:1-58

¹³ 1 Corinthians 8:1 - 11:1

Paul's second letter to the good people of Corinth, written a year after the first, is the most personal of all his letters. It is filled with deep emotion. Paul is defending a challenge to his call to ministry, his approach to communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and his counsel which had been misunderstood and taken out of context, and as a result, torn apart the church.

In 1990, I learned a life-long lesson from Paul's second letter to the good people of Corinth, which I have applied and had the privilege of counselling others to do the same: when there is dissension, where dispute and differences of opinion threaten to either, divide the Church, or bring God's name to disrepute, it is best to withdraw and show mercy, refraining from the natural urge of trying to prove right from wrong. Paul taught me by his example to the Church at Corinth: when the human spirit is troubled, when a person is hurting, it is honouring to God, that the troubled spirit is first restored into a right relationship with God, than it is to try to win an argument, or triumph over a contentious issue, or prevail on matters of right and wrong.

When people are restored into a right and proper relationship with God, it amazes me how contentious and difficult issues are resolved and dissolved.

You have met my friend Lauren Pfister who is professor in Chinese studies at the HK Baptist University. In 1989, Lauren and I spent almost a whole year studying Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, towards the end of which we focused on one verse, which highlights this very principle, and is Paul's *aha!*, or eureka moment.

God is able to make **ALL** grace abound to you, so that, having **ALL** sufficiency (contentment), in **ALL** things at **ALL** times, you may abound in **EVERY (ALL)** good works.¹⁴

God being God, has the power and ability, and is always willing to provide you with every gracious gift and earthly blessing in abundance, so that always, in every way, under all circumstances, you will have all you need yourselves, and from this generous abundance from God, you will be able to provide abundantly for every good cause that satisfies those in need.

We often mistake Paul's teaching as being very directive, a command-and-order type of instruction: do-this, don't-do-that! Paul is not a hit-and-run evangelist; he wants everyone to see Jesus as he did, as the fulfilment of the embodiment of the Law, and the realisation of the prediction by the Prophets.

Paul's real concern is for people to enjoy the rewards of a restored relationship with God, possible only through Christ. When he gets to heaven, Paul does not want to see any empty rooms, prepared for people who missed the opportunity of knowing, experiencing and trusting God

Paul declares this with every ounce of emphasis he can muster. His intention is not to create another set of traditions or rituals, sacrament or liturgy, which would smooth out our problems and make us feel good.

If we were the church in Corinth, Paul would remind us to revisit our faith and ask ourselves, *Are we expressing our concerns for the world around us, in tangible ways, visible to people, who will see what we do, and respond by saying,*

There is something in what they are doing, and I need to find out more about it?

¹⁴ 2Corinthians 9:8

That would be fantastic, because you would be doing exactly as Jesus ask you. The final challenge to us would be to be prepared with an answer when others ask us, what drives us to be Christ-like?, what motivates us to express our concerns selflessly, to the needs of the world around us?, how can we show selfless love when we have problems of our own, **what answer will we give them?**

How will we tell them, about God at work in us, and the Holy Spirit at work through us?

Let us pray... **AMEN**