

The Apostle Paul's Approach to Church Problems

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New Testament Survey

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Introduction

God's best and most dangerous gift to mankind is free will. In free will we have the power to exalt and worship the true savior, Jesus Christ. However, this same gift makes it nearly impossible for man to come to "one accord" on the nature of our Messiah and the functioning of His churches. The Pauline Epistles are God's inspired honing and guiding of the divergent free will of His believers to His purpose for His church. Paul, a tool of God and Christ Jesus, provides much of the basis for our Christian doctrine in these letters. He does this against the backdrop of lovingly guiding a bunch of churches and believers that are a mess. This paper contains some examples from 1 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, and 1 Timothy.

A Problem Dealt with by Paul the Apostle Via His 1st Letter to the Corinthians.

The city of Corinth was a major trade port and the capital city in the province of Achaia. At the time it was a culturally liberal Roman colony of Greece. "One of the great crossroads of the ancient world because of its location on the isthmus linking the Peloponnese to mainland Greece, Corinth was a thriving Roman colony from the time of Julius Caesar. The city is always described as "wealthy" in the ancient sources and this prosperity was due in part to the city's taxation of the north-south and east-west trade routes." (Bolen, "Corinth Area")

Corinth was specially noted as a melting pot of highly diverse peoples, constantly disagreeing, unruly, and sexually promiscuous. The favored practice was to discuss things that were new and different, from philosophical ideas to wide-flung notions of gods and worship. It was common for the Corinthians to selfishly grab for the supernatural in any way they could. (Peterson, "Introduction to 1 Corinthians"). Because of this fixation on the supernatural, based on some Grecian perception of the defiled condition of man, some Corinthians did not believe in

the resurrection of the body [Tenney 342] “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:12 KJV)

Corinth was also known for its extreme cultural practices including the temple to Aphrodite the goddess of Love (which the Romans called Venus) “...and it was enjoined by law, that 1,000 beautiful females should officiate as courtesans, or public prostitutes, before the altar of the goddess of love.” (Barnes, e-Sword® commentary on Corinthians) Sexual problems became so commonplace that Corinthians seemed complacent and accepting of the most perverse practices. “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:1-2, KJV) The problem of this sexual deviance was dealt with by Paul in chapter 5.

In Chapter 5 Paul dealt with the “account of the incestuous person, or of him who had married his father’s wife described above. The apostle reproves the Corinthians for their carelessness in this matter, and orders them to excommunicate the transgressor. [“And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”] (1 Corinthians 5:2-5 KJV) They are reprehended for their glorying, while such scandals were among them, [“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?”] (1 Corinthians 5:6 KJV). They must purge out the old leaven, that they may properly celebrate the Christian Passover, [“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators.”](1 Corinthians 5:7-9 KJV). And finally they must not associate with any who, professing the Christian religion, were guilty of any scandalous vice, and must put away from them every evil person, 1Corinthians 5:10-13.” (Clarke, e-Sword® commentary on 1 Corinthians 5)

A Problem Dealt with by Paul the Apostle Via His Letter to the Colossians.

Colosse was a city in southeast Asia Minor near Laodicea. Based on the Biblical record, Paul had never visited and did not start this church. “Colosse was afflicted by the inroads of some philosophic cults. Most were sporadic and local, with the possible exception of the Judaizing tendency” [that is, to revert to Old Testament Jewish tradition and rituals] (Tenney 342).

Even today those who do not know or understand the full story of Christ can act ignorant or misinformed. Such individuals regularly dismiss Christ by placing him in the company of Budha, Mohammed, Moses, and Socrates. In this way Christ is described as important but not central and His prestige is thought to be considerable but not preeminent among all. Against this type of backdrop in Colosse, cosmic or other forces somehow got equal billing with Christ. Paul writes his letter to the Colossians to restore Jesus Christ to his rightful place of preeminence as the one true God of all. Paul claims the uniqueness of Christ as the Messiah, the center of creation and salvation. Paul, possessing a brilliant intellect, is wonderfully kind, and communicates with humility and considerable love in this letter. (Peterson, “Introduction to Colossians”)

Paul starts his letter with an expression of love and affectionate concern. “For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (KJV, Colossians 1:9-10) He then warmly and articulately reminds them of the omnipotence of God and Christ reaffirming their role as Creator, Savior, and Lord:

“Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the

image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.” (KJV, Colossians 1:12-20)

He warns them regarding the Judaizers and Gnostics and their destructive influences.

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ,” and, “Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind” (KJV Colossians 2:8, 2:18) Paul concludes his teaching by entreating them unto obedience to the will of God.

“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged. Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. (KJV, Colossians 3:12-24)

The most impressive thing about Paul’s method for solving the Gnostic/Judaizing problem is that he is not condemning or arrogant. He lovingly reminds and persuades the

Colossians to re-conform themselves to the correct path. This should be an inspiration to all pastors and all those that lead people in any manner.

A Problem Dealt with by Paul the Apostle Via His 1st Letter to the Thessalonians.

Thessalonica was a city in Macedonia near the first church Paul planted in that province, Philippi. This city was on the main Roman trade route from the West to Asia Minor, the Holy Land and points east and south. Like all cities on main trade routes of the time, it saw diversity in its population, was liberal in views, and full of cultural and spiritual experimentation.

From the time Christ ascended, most Christians existed with the expectation of the return of Christ, which should in all cases bring joy, expectant excitement, and of all things, hope for what is to come. Most Christians live with a strong and focused sense of the future leading to contentment. But for some without this sense of hope for the future, reflection on the future can create paralyzing fear in Christ's wrath. First Thessalonians contains concerns with the future and the second coming of Christ. Those who have doubt about their future may become listless, demoralized or depressed, and in some cases even suicidal. For some of the Thessalonians, they took the immediacy of the second coming too literally and stopped working or feared their life would lead to eternal damnation. Paul, in dealing with this problem, got the Thessalonians to focus on the hope created by the second coming of Christ. To let that focus fill them with a selfless devotion to the will of Christ and the joy-filled hope in the rewards promised to those who believe and follow Him (Peterson, "Introduction to 1 Thessalonians").

"Paul deals with this apprehension regarding the second coming. He starts his first letter to the Thessalonians with lavish praise, 'So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not

to speak any thing.’ (KJV, 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8) He reminds them of his previous teachings and the success of that ministry.” (Henry, e-Sword™ Intro to 1 Thessalonians 2) “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.” (KJV, 1 Thessalonians 2:13)

In chapter three Paul further reminds the Thessalonians of his love for them by sending Timotheus to them and his glowing report of them. (Henry, e-Sword™ intro to 1 Thessalonians 3) Then as if to get to the meat of the issue, in chapter four Paul reminds them of God’s expectations of holiness, retreat from uncleanness (1 Th 4:1-8). He then exhorts them to increase in brotherly love and hard work so they may lack for nothing, hat they may also have a positive witness to non-believers and to keep them from lazy inaction born from an unfounded expectation of the immediacy of the second coming. (1 Th 4:9-12). And finally, he provides a firm understanding regarding the second coming. First, concerning worries for the dead in Christ, he says, “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” (KJV, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14) Continuing on through the end of the chapter he assures them that Christ will descend and gather the dead in Christ and then believers that are then alive. Finally, in chapter five, Paul puts to rest the notion that one can know when Christ is coming. “But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.” (KJV, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2) Again, this has the effect of getting them back to work and removes anxiety regarding the future and the certainty of their salvation.

Problems Dealt with by Paul the Apostle Via His 1st Letter to Timothy.

God is present and sovereign in Christians when they are gathered. God creates and guides, God saves and heals, God corrects and blesses, God calls and judges. With this comprehensive leadership from God, what is Man's role in church leadership in a Christ-led church? Man's leadership is second place – not taking over, no ego, being inconspicuous but not sacrificing conviction or firmness, not being weak in the basic tenets of doctrine. First Timothy is a Pauline pastoral epistle, written from prison in Rome, guiding the Church at Ephesus and Timothy from a pioneering enterprise to that of a more formal and institutional church.

(Peterson, "Introduction to 1 Timothy")

The problems at Ephesus resulted from a combination of the free thinking liberal views and the less than forceful leadership of Timothy. This allowed the church to get sidetracked into patterns of divisiveness and following false dogma or doctrine. Paul's letter encouraged and provided guidance to this young leader based on what he, Paul, had learned in his leadership of churches that transitioned from small congregations to one needing a formal organization to properly serve the larger congregation.

Paul first instructs Timothy regarding false teachers and distracting influences. "Charge certain men not to teach a different doctrine, neither to give heed to fables and endless genealogies" (KJV, 1 Timothy 1:3-4) (Tenney, 335). Paul also urges him to be strong, "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck." (1 Timothy 1:18-19 KJV)

Paul then encourages prayer by saying, "Prayer to be made for all persons, since the grace of the gospel makes no difference of ranks or stations." (Henry, e-sword® commentary on 1

Timothy 2:1-7) “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;” (1 Timothy 2:1 KJV) Paul instructs, “How men and women ought to behave, both in their religious and common life” (Henry, e-sword® commentary on 1 Timothy 2:8-15) “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;” (1 Timothy 2:8-9 KJV)

In chapter 3 Paul instructs, “The qualifications and behaviour of gospel bishops and of deacons and their wives.” (Henry, e-sword® commentary on 1 Timothy 3:1-13) “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;” (1 Timothy 3:2 KJVR) “Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre.” (1 Timothy 3:8 KJV)

In chapter 3 Paul instructs on false doctrine. “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.” (1 Timothy 4:1 KJV) “But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness.” (1 Timothy 4:7 KJV) “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” (1 Timothy 4:16 KJV)

In chapter five of 1 Timothy Paul gives directions as to the elder and younger men and women, and as to poor widows and the respect to be paid to elders. Timothy is to take care in rebuking offenders, in ordaining ministers, and as to his own health. (Henry, e-sword® commentary on 1 Timothy 5)

And finally in chapter 6 of 1 Timothy Paul provides final warnings, encouragements and blessings. “That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.” (1 Timothy 6:14-15 KJV)

Paul takes on the issue of the growing church by writing to his friend and student, Timothy, what amounts to God’s primer on church organization – defining characteristics, roles, and duties. Paul “deals with matters of organizational importance in the church. The corporate devotional, official, and doctrinal problems are aired, and pastoral administrative policies are outlined.” (Tenney, 337)

Conclusion:

Paul provides loving correction to the misguided churches of the first century. In 1 Corinthians he deals with sexual promiscuity and Judaizer/Gnostic ideals by encouraging the Corinthians to return to Christian first principles and to separate themselves from perverse ideals and persons. In Colossians he deals with philosophic cults by returning Christ to his position as the one and only Creator, Savior, and true God. In 1 Thessalonians he deals with laziness and fear of the second coming by exhorting them to holiness, cleanliness, hard work and defining the nature/timing of the second coming for the living and dead. And finally in 1 Timothy he deals with directing the Church at Ephesus from a pioneering enterprise to that of a more formal and institutional church by guiding its appointed pastor Timothy in church organization and leadership.

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