

Paul addresses Corinth: an assessment of his concerns and advice.

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The life and works of the Apostle Paul still resonate through the ages and continue to generate controversy and debate. We have all been made aware of his alleged misogyny and there is frequent allusion to his stated opinions on the role of women in the community of the church (opinions often deployed and decontextualised in a highly partisan fashion to reinforce an argument which, many suspect, begins with visceral prejudice and then belatedly seeks corroborative material to reinforce that prejudice). Further, Paul is often accused (in particular by the Tübingen theological persuasion) of hi-jacking the early Christian church and re-making it according to his own prescription, lending it a structure and theology which is in no way pre-figured in the life and teachings of Christ.

Whilst it may be true that the Christian church at the close of Paul's missionary activity was very different from the early community, it does not follow that the developments that occurred in this Pauline period are alien to the message and the principles enjoined by Jesus. The following that grew up around the person of Christ may well be termed 'a cult of personality underpinned by millenarian expectancy', but Paul, and others, knew that that had to change if the essence of the Christian message were to survive and to avoid descent into faction and internecine strife. He also saw the need to defend it against the attempts of the 'Judaisers' to annex it and to reduce it to the status of yet another cult contained within the imperium of Jewish law and practice. There was also the danger, in a polytheistic society, that Christianity would be vitiated by the introduction of alien elements and practices and, indeed, this certainly did occur with Gnosticism, Manichaeism and Neo-platonism, inter al

gaining ground amongst the more susceptible gentile converts. In part, at least, Paul's greatness consists in his recognition that the Christian message was entire in itself and open to all, whether Jew or Gentile.

In his two epistles to the Corinthians, Paul reveals himself as a supremely practical apostle setting out clear guidelines for the creation of a worthy Christian community which will serve as a beacon and inspiration to its members and remain faithful to the message of Jesus Christ. It does not read, however, as though this was the consequence of a considered strategy based on detailed advance planning; rather, one gains the impression that Paul initially expected the glory of the message to transform those who accepted it and it is only on an ad hoc basis, as he noted, with growing dismay, the downward spiral of the communities into immorality and inappropriate social and governmental conduct, that he decided to respond to this challenge and to issue counsel and gentle reproof where needed.

Corinth, in Paul's day, was a highly diverse city, filled with different races, creeds, languages and temptations and with a pre-existing reputation for a degree of moral laxity and indulgence which one might associate with the transient population and multicultural premise of a thriving seaport. During his first visit to Corinth, the main emphasis was on preaching, mainly in synagogues, supported by Aquila and Priscilla and subsequently by Apollos. When he returned to Ephesus after an eighteen month stay, Paul must have felt that he had set the burgeoning community on the right road but over the next two years, reports of deplorable behaviour and conceit began to trouble him as he indicates in 1 Corinthians. He reminds them of how they began with the words 'Brothers, think of what you were when you were called' (1:26) and then goes on to identify some of the many ways in which they have failed to

maintain this early promise saying ‘Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?’ (3:18). ‘Some of you have become arrogant’, he states (4:18) and ‘it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans,’ (5:1) He urges in ch.5 that the brother who is ‘sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler’ should be expelled from the community. ‘With such a man do not even eat’ he advises. Finally, Timothy is to be sent to Corinth as an emissary to remind the Corinthians of Paul’s teaching: ‘he will remind you of my way of life in Jesus Christ, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church’. (4:17) .

Paul’s advice to this fledgling and flawed community in the midst of debauchery, prostitution, and Oriental vices, is concentrated on remaining true to the message of the Cross and acceptance of minority status and possible persecution. In the face of these trials, the ‘brothers’ must be a living testimony to Christ and teach by example. ‘We are the aroma of Christ’ says Paul evocatively, whose lives must be an open letter, written with the Holy Spirit, to inspire others. In this respect, the leadership role is of paramount importance; the leaders must accept their charge as a trust from God and be a slave to their people, enduring any hardship in order to preach fearlessly and nurture the faith of their community. Paul stresses that mission preaching must be founded upon the Grace of God, the scriptures of the Old Testament as foreshadowing the message of the Gospels, the cross as a symbol of redemption and reconciliation and the judgement that is to come sooner or later. Baptism, according to Paul, signifies commitment and is available freely to individuals and households and not merely to the

elite.

Many would probably not recognise the usual format of worship in Corinth, in the house of Aquila and Priscilla for example. It would have been a simple, unelaborated occasion, without fixed liturgy but characterised by music, teachings, prophetic messages and ad hoc ministry. (Unitarians may well feel comfortable here, however!) Paul did realise, too, that these home services needed some degree of form if they were to avoid the pitfalls of self-promotion, bickering and irreverence hence, in 1 Corinthians ch.11, he provides guidelines for attenders as to the need to look inwards and repent, to look back to the betrayal of Jesus, to love and respect fellow worshippers, to see the Lord's Supper as communion with the risen Lord and to look forward to the second coming and salvation. The church, he tells them, is the visible expression of Christ and all those in the family have a part to play; there is no room for pride or hubris on the part of those who consider themselves more gifted or able to play a more public role and he reinforces this point in 1 Corinthians 12: 21-26. 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it'.

Two chapters in 1 Corinthians are 'keynote' passages, one might suggest. In chapter 13, he underlines the role of love in all its forms in the life of the Christian as the greatest manifestation of God's spirit and the way in which our lives can reflect the love in the heart of Jesus. Chapter 14 deals with the content of worship as Paul hopes to see it in Corinth; praise and prayer are paramount led by joint leadership (in Corinth and Antioch solo leadership was unknown reflecting Paul's opinion that sharing the burden gave support and encouragement in time of crisis and allowed different qualities and gifts to be deployed). Leaders ought to be trained and well-

informed and able to plan services so as to avoid repetitive presentation and to stimulate newcomers with inspirational and effective preaching.

In 1 Corinthians, ch. 1-4, Paul counsels forcefully against too much reliance on the intellect and overvaluing logic and accumulated wisdom to the detriment of the simple faith and the promptings of the spirit. Corinth, of course, was a centre of intellectual activity and scholarship and this may have led Paul to stress the view that the gospel is not conventional wisdom,(indeed, in the world's eyes, it would more likely be viewed as folly!) rather more strongly than would otherwise have been the case and this would certainly fit in with the theory that his guidance is generally reactive rather than proactive. Nevertheless, it sits less comfortably with a Unitarian frame of mind. For example, in ch.1: 19, he states, 'For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Later in ch 2: 4-5, he writes, 'My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom but on God's power'. Paul clearly believes that the Corinthians do not appreciate the limitations of human intellect which cannot comprehend God who is so much superior to our puny intellectual capabilities. Judged from this standpoint, it is possible to conclude that Paul is not anti-intellectual but is making a statement *ad hominem* in respect of flaws that he identifies in the Corinth community.

The frequency of Paul's references to Jesus, throughout the two extant letters to the Corinthians, militates against the suggestion that he was imposing his own agenda rather than that of 'the one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live'. (1 Cor. 8:4). Indeed, it is quite clear that for Paul, Christ

and his example is the principle of coherence and meaning in all aspects of life.

Paul's advice to the Corinthians and his ongoing concern for their welfare, which prompted him to make at least three visits and to send emissaries such as Timothy from time to time to assess the situation there, mirrors the teaching of Jesus with its emphasis upon love, hope and salvation. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 provides a masterly re-working of Christ's emphasis upon God's unconditional love for us and our love towards our fellow men and women. Self-discipline and service allied to effective leadership and the valuing of the diverse gifts which individuals could bring to the service of the church, are all defined and placed by Paul into the context of a structure that would remain true to its founder and could endure over time. Once the expectation of an imminent Second Coming had receded, it was vital to settle down to the long haul of history and that required strength of purpose, clarity of vision and unity of belief. Paul was one of the first to realise this and to address the issues, but not as the result of a preconceived master-plan or long-term strategy; his letters and visits to the Corinthians are normally a response to grave tidings – he learns of a crisis in Corinth, an outbreak of idolatrous practices or immorality and he reacts by offering clear advice and strictures. The epistles do not suggest a coherent, evolving scheme for 'planting' a church or a premeditated modus vivendi but, rather a growing realisation that human nature needed guidance and could not be relied upon to understand and implement Christ's teachings and example unaided. If only for this aspect of his dedication and missionary zeal, Paul deserves the towering reputation that has been accorded to him as a Father of the Church.