

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday July 16, 2023

Lesson 14: Pastoral Care for a Worldly Church

Reference: Acts 19:21-20:6; 1 & 2 Corinthians.

When we last saw Paul, he was in Ephesus, raising the church in a society where spiritual influence and activities were rampant. This was the first major stop on his third missionary journey, taking place sometime in the Spring of AD53. Paul would spend the next three in this city (Acts 20:31) before a riot led him to leave the city towards Macedonia. The year is approximately AD55.

Timeline

Luke did not record much of Paul's third missionary activities in the book of Acts. In fact, there appears to be a big gap between events in Acts Chapter 19 and 20. Paul's whereabouts between these two chapters can be extracted from Paul's letters of Romans and 1 & 2 Corinthians, the following timeline can be proposed: (General outline from Hanna¹, with additional inputs from Swindoll / Clinton):

1. Paul likely would have heard about Apollos, who was sent to the church in Corinth ahead of Paul's arrival into Ephesus (Acts 19:1). Due to his personal care and concern for the church in Corinth, Paul wrote a letter to that church that was not preserved by the Holy Spirit. That "previous letter" (1 Cor 5:9-11) was misunderstood and required clarification.
2. Additionally, Representatives of Chloe's household brought a disturbing report to Paul concerning divisions and cliques formed out of loyalty to Paul, Apollos, Peter, or world cultures in the church (1 Cor 1:11). Timothy was sent to clear up the misunderstanding from that first letter and also to address problems reported by Chloe's household (1 Cor 4:17).
3. Timothy traveled through Macedonia (Acts 19:22) and apparently did not reach Corinth to address these issues before Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 16:10-11). Timothy left for Corinth from Ephesus before Paul wrote 1 Corinthians.
4. A delegation from the church (Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, possibly others – 1 Cor 16:17) visited Paul in Ephesus with a list of questions addressed to Paul by the church (1 Cor 7:1).
5. Paul writes the letter we know today as 1 Corinthians sometime around AD 55 to addresses all the issues reported by Chloe's household (1 Cor 1-4), misunderstandings related to Paul's first letter (1 Cor 5-6), and the questions from the church delivered by the delegation (1 Cor 7-15). Again, this letter likely reached the church before Timothy's arrival (1 Cor 16:10-11).
6. Paul stayed in Ephesus until a riot occurred over his controversial teachings (Acts 19:23-41), prompting Paul to leave Ephesus towards Macedonia.
7. Paul evidently originally planned to leave Ephesus for Corinth, then up to Macedonia, then back down to Corinth as part of this third journey. But God evidently changed his course (2 Cor 1:16-18). The path Paul ended up taking was towards Macedonia, back down to Corinth, then back to Macedonia (see map from Lesson 12). The purpose of these travels seems to be to collect money from the various churches to support the struggling saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1)
8. When Paul ultimately made that visit to Corinth (his 2nd visit), the experience was evidently very painful, one which he describes as "sorrowful" (2 Cor 2:1-4). Paul evidently left the church in haste and penning a "sorrowful letter" (2 Cor 2:3, 9; 7:8). This visit was not recorded by Luke in the book of Acts, and that "sorrowful letter" Paul wrote was also not preserved by the Holy Spirit. This "sorrowful letter" was evidently written with much affliction (2 Cor 2:4).

¹ Hanna, Kenneth G, *From Gospel to Glory: Exploring the New Testament*

9. When Paul was in Macedonia after that 2nd visit to Corinth, Titus brought encouraging news about the church in Corinth (2 Cor 7:5-16; Acts 20:1). This prompted Paul to write the letter we know today as 2 Corinthians; written from Macedonia sometime around AD57.
10. Having encouraged the church in Corinth to make good on its plans to provide a generous offering for the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8-9), Paul returned to Corinth (3rd visit) where he spent the winter. It is during this time that Paul wrote the letter of Romans (Winter AD57; cf Rom 15:23-29). Then on the following Spring, he heads to Jerusalem to deliver the gifts from Corinth (Acts 20:1-4). It was on this trip back to Jerusalem – through Macedonia – that Luke rejoined Paul's ministry team (Acts 20:5-6).

Issues at the Church in Corinth

The Christians in Corinth were effectively baby Christians and a work-in-progress as it relates to their sanctification journey. Though they are new creations in Christ, old habits die hard. This is why Paul openly speaks of them as “fleshly” or “worldly” (1 Cor 3:1-3). Knowing this reality, Paul wrote them a letter as an encouragement and to avoid worldly practices. That letter he wrote evidently created confusion and controversy (1 Cor 5:9), leading to other questions about proper church order and discipline (1 Cor 7:1).

As noted in the timeline, Paul had other reasons for writing 1 Corinthians. The primary reason was to address the serious issues reported by Chloe's household, which includes:

- Divisions and disunity in the church due to cliques formed out of loyalty to Paul, Apollos, Peter, or world cultures (1 Cor 3:22)
- Church culture tolerating sexual immorality that even pagans do not tolerate (1 Cor 5:1-2)
- Confusion over association with immoral people of the world from Paul's “previous letter” (1 Cor 5:9-11)
- Believers filing lawsuits against one another over trivial matters and doing so in pagan courts (1 Cor 6:1-11)
- Christian liberty being mistaken as a license to sin in a manner that is indistinguishable from the world in Corinth (1 Cor 6:12-20)

Paul's secondary reason for writing 1 Corinthians was to address the questions related to proper church order (1 Cor 7:1), to include:

- Marriage and singleness (1 Cor 7:1-40)
- Christian liberty, especially as it relates to food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8-10)
- Proper disciplines in worship and administering Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11)
- Spiritual gifts and the unity of the church (1 Cor 12-14)
- Clarification regarding the topic of Resurrection (1 Cor 15)

Paul closes the letter with an expectation for the church to fulfill its commitment to support the struggling saints in Jerusalem, reminding them to start a collection for these saints (1 Cor 16:1).

The tone and nature of 2 Corinthians indicates that Paul's 2nd visit to the church ended with a fallout between the apostle and the church (2 Cor 2:1-4). The ministry at the church was being hijacked by a minority of leaders (2 Cor 2:6-8; 10:10) who were sympathetic to worldly culture and false teaching (2 Cor 11:4) rooted from various sources, challenging not only Paul's theology, but Paul's authority as an apostle (2 Cor 10-13). Many also seem to take issue with Paul's demand that they start a collection to support the saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor 12:14 cf 1 Cor 16:1).

Taking the two letters collectively, a picture of the church in Corinth emerges that looked to be seeker-friendly, but lacked spiritual maturity, aims to be religious but lacked spiritual leadership / spiritual guidance, and

highjacked by a vocal minority with worldly agendas, but whom may have appeared spiritually knowledgeable. The vocal minority likely have strong personalities and have strong-armed the church to disassociate with Paul – possibly using Paul’s demand for donation to Jerusalem as the ammunition (it’s always about money with false spiritual leaders! Note, the money is for saints in need).

Analysis – Acts 19:23-20:6; 1 & 2 Corinthians

Paul’s major concern for the church in Corinth was that it lacked mature spiritual leaders who can protect the church from the world that the church sits in. This was why Paul sent Timothy and Titus to the church. This was why Paul affirms the ministry of Apollos at the church. This was why Paul encouraged the church to submit to leaders he designated (1 Cor 16:15-18). Between 1 and 2 Corinthians (approx. 14-18 months apart), Paul’s fears were realized when the church (majority) sided with the false teachers (minority), choosing to disassociate with Paul (“sorrowful letter”).

Without giving in, Paul continued to work amongst the majority who were misled by sending emissaries in the persons of Timothy and Titus (good cops) while Paul maintains his disappointment from a distance with harsh language and tone (bad cop). Giving praise to God, the majority repented and sought reconciliation with Paul (2 Cor 4:1-18), dealt with the vocal minority (2 Cor 2:6) though Paul urged for grace (2 Cor 2:7), leading Paul to give guidance on the theme of true biblical practical ministry: Suffering, Grace and Reconciliation.

Taken collectively, the following principles can be observed based on these events with the church in Corinth with respect to how Paul administered his pastoral care:

- **Spiritual leadership involves drawing a hard line between right and wrong.** Paul did not mince words as it relates to the worldly sinful practices that the church had embraced. He fully realizes that their practices were influenced by the culture, and he recognizes the church’s young spiritual state. Young Christians look to spiritual leaders for guidance on right vs wrong. Therefore, it is critical for spiritual leaders, in leading others towards spiritual maturity, to make that clear distinction between what God approves and disapproves. Spiritual leaders should never rationalize sinful behavior.
- **Spiritual leadership must learn to deal with the vocal minority.** Vocal minorities are often cancerous to the unity of the church, especially when they are willing to disrupt the unity of the church to achieve their goal. This was what confronted Paul. The vocal minority in Corinth used deceptive and manipulative means (2 Cor 11:13) that created friction between Paul and the silent majority, causing divisions, disharmony, and disunity. They were able to achieve this goal likely because Paul was absent. Spiritual leaders must not overlook the dangers of a vocal minority who preaches a different message.
- **Spiritual leadership advocates for grace and restoration.** The church in Corinth likely went through a tumultuous period that ultimately ended with some form of punishment inflicted on the vocal minority, the group that caused division and disunity in the church (2 Cor 2:6). Although Paul was a direct victim of the vocal minority’s attack, he nonetheless advocated for grace and restoration not just for the church in general, but he specifically called out for the comfort and encouragement to the vocal minority that created the problems (2 Cor 2:7-8). This is the mark of a true spiritual leader, being always concerned for the spiritual well-being of everyone, including those who attacked him.
- **Spiritual Leadership does not engage in worldly comparisons.** The initial signs of fracture at the church in Corinth came from the household of Chloe, who informed Paul about divisions based on loyalties to various spiritual leaders. Paul addressed this issue in both of his letters, citing how he doesn’t care to be compared to other apostles or defend his ministry against worldly standards. In his letters, Paul was affirming of all the spiritual leaders as if they are equals, including Timothy, Titus, Apollos, and others. Spiritual leadership does not engage in these worldly comparisons.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read 2 Corinthians 10:1-17. This is the beginning portion of Paul's letter where he addresses authentic Christian ministry. In this section, Paul addresses the vocal minority of false teachers who challenged Paul's positional authority and teaching.

1. What can we observe about the characteristics of the false teachers who are trying to take over the church in Corinth, challenging Paul's positional authority?
2. What can we observe about the way Paul handle / respond both actively (in person) and passively (in letters through emissaries) to these challenges?
3. One of the characteristics of the false teachers in Corinth is that they like to compare credentials based on worldly standards. Read ahead to 2 Corinthians 11:1-15. How does Paul instruct the church to identify these false teachers? What is the key word? (2 Cor 11:12 cf 10:17).

Reflecting Upon our World

The church in Corinth was guilty of trying to integrate worldly culture as part of the church culture. Much of this tolerance was due to ignorance though some with full awareness. The vocal minority of false leaders was trying to institute worldly standards to qualify church leadership, applicable to even the Apostle Paul. Much of this was due to sin (pride).

1. Evaluate your church's ministry tolerance for sinful behavior in the church. Are there any areas in your church where you normalize / tolerate sinful behaviors? If so, is it out of ignorance or with full knowledge?
2. Evaluate your church's qualification process for ministry leadership. What is the balance between the qualifications based on worldly standards vs biblical standards? Do all of your leaders meet the biblical standards?
3. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul used the parts of a human body to illustrate how unity and diversity in the church is realized. Does your church currently function in the matter described by Paul? If not, what is the root cause (worldly vs biblical)?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Paul's experience with the church in Corinth was truly an emotional rollercoaster ride from joyful fellowship to deep sorrow to graceful restoration. It is highly likely that some of the attacks against him came from people he did not expect, leading Paul to first react poorly, then respond gracefully.

1. Reflect on a time when your identity or your motives may have been slandered or wrongly attacked, especially by people you did not expect. How did you react to it at that moment? How have you responded to it since? Was there restoration? Would you have done anything different if you can have a do-over? Journal your reflection and, if there had not been restoration, include prayers in your journal entries.
2. The stress of church ministries can oftentimes lead to misunderstandings. In such cases, Paul advocates for graceful reconciliations. Reflect on a time when you may have wrongly accused someone else of wrongdoing. What is the current relational dynamic between you and that individual(s)? Journal your reflection and, if there had not been restoration, include prayers in your journal entries.
3. Reflect on an occasion where God placed you in a position to comfort someone who may be in the sorrowful condition as Paul was in. How did you handle that situation? Did you take sides? Read through 2 Corinthians 13:5-14 and journal your devotionals for how you could contribute to a God-honoring outcome.