

Staying on Message

For me the letters of Paul are—and always have been—the heart and soul of the New Testament. Everything else in the New Testament, including the gospels, I read in the light of Paul's letters. So I was very surprised when this week I suddenly realized something about the letters of Paul that I'd never thought of before, nor even heard anyone else ever mention. Frankly, I can hardly believe that's the case, and surely somewhere along the line someone must have pointed this out to me, but I have no recollection of that whatsoever. You see, as far as I was concerned, his letters were always an integral part of Paul's ministry, his regular means of staying in contact over the years with the churches he had founded over the years, his ongoing method of communication with those churches.

But I realize now there's a problem with that idea, a problem with seeing these letters in that light. The problem is the fact that is only just now dawning on me, which is that almost all of the letters of Paul, at least the letters of Paul preserved in the New Testament, and all of the major letters of Paul, date only from his later years. Most of them probably from the last ten years of his life, at most perhaps the last fifteen. But if that is in fact so, as seems pretty clearly to be the case, why is that? Why with a man who was obviously an extremely prolific letter writer, far more so than anyone else we know of in the early church, do we only have letters from the final years of his ministry and his life, and not before then?

I don't know the answer to that question. But there would seem to be several obvious possibilities. For one thing, it may well be that Paul did write many more letters than the dozen or so we have, but for whatever reason nobody saved those letters. But if that's the case, it only suggests a new question: if Paul did write letters early in his career, why didn't anyone save them? Why only the letters from later in his life?

Another possibility is that maybe early on Paul just didn't have anyone to write to, at least anyone to write the kind of letters that people would later think important enough to save. After all, we know very little about the early years of Paul's life as an apostle, that is, from the time of his experience on the road to Damascus, to a number of years later when he ended up in Antioch, convinced that he was called to be an apostle specifically to the Gentiles, and then set out on a series of missionary journeys. Luke tells us a good deal about those journeys, when Paul founded churches first in Asia Minor and later in Greece, but we have no letters that date from that period. The letters we have only started later, when Paul, for whatever reason, began writing letters to the churches that he had founded years before on those journeys, most famously perhaps those in Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, and Ephesus. Plus the letter to the church in Rome, the only church to which Paul writes that he didn't found.

So, again, why does Paul at least *seem* to have suddenly started writing letters to all these churches, or if he in fact did write other letters, why didn't someone save them? Maybe the letter we call First Thessalonians falls into this category, that is, a very early letter, but if so, that's the only one we have. Why not any others? And why, in particular, the long letters, by which I mean

Romans, and 1st and 2nd Corinthians? Why was it only when Paul was beginning to approach the end of life that he started writing letters?

Perhaps, putting the question in those terms is itself to suggest an answer. Maybe as long as Paul expected to have another chance to visit these churches, and so to deal with any issues that might have arisen at the time of his visit, there wasn't as much need for a letter. Maybe it was only when he began to have the feeling he might never get back to some of these places that he wrote letters. If so, that would suggest that the letters were in some sense his final word to the churches, all of which—again, with the single exception of Rome—Paul himself had founded. One last chance to set things right?

If so, that suggests to me a different way of looking at the kind of problems that Paul does address in these letters. In particular, that they weren't just routine problems that had cropped up from time to time over the years, as much as they were things changing in the churches and changing in ways that Paul was determined to make one last effort to head off. Now I'm a big fan of Paul and his letters, so I'm not suggesting that Paul was just another grumpy old man approaching the end of his career and trying to preserve the church in amber just exactly as he left it. Because it's not change in general that Paul is dealing with in these letters, as much as it is specific changes, changes that he thinks are leading the church dangerously off course.

In *1st Corinthians*, Paul deals with a number of problems, but there's one in particular that he's concerned about, and not surprisingly it's the one he leads off with. After a fairly perfunctory greeting which is standard boiler plate and little more, Paul immediately gets down to business, bringing up reports that have come to him of divisions within the church. In particular, Paul is concerned that a number of factions have formed within the church. These factions, though, haven't formed around the usual things like ethnicity, or religious background, or social class, or gender, but instead, and amazingly enough, were factions that had developed within the church around the fact of who among them had been baptized by whom, as if that single fact—who had baptized you—were somehow the distinguishing mark of one's discipleship.

Paul is obviously more than a little disgusted at this turn of events, disgusted that baptism of all things should have become a cause of division in the church rather than unity. So disgusted that he says something that simply on the face of it is pretty astonishing. After blurting how glad he was, in light of all these problems, that he had only baptized a few folks in Corinth, he goes on to say, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel..." Now for anyone raised on the great commission from the gospel of Matthew, that's an astonishing statement. So astonishing, that like a number of things Paul says in his letters, one gets the strong impression it was written pretty hurriedly, and is something he might well have chosen to say differently if he had had it to do over again.

The fact is that Paul, like every apostle, had been sent into the world to baptize *and* proclaim the gospel, and in fact he did so everywhere he went, including of course Corinth. It's not like there was some apostles who baptized and others who preached, which is what it sounds like Paul is saying. But something apparently was going on in Corinth that in Paul's eyes was making baptism into something that had overshadowed the gospel message itself.

It's difficult to say exactly what exactly they were doing that Paul found so offensive, but it seems like much of the power normally associated with the Holy Spirit in baptism was in Corinth being associated with the power of the person doing the baptism, so that if you were baptized by someone who was noted for being a very powerful and charismatic person, then your baptism was better and more powerful and more spiritual, than if you were baptized by someone less impressive or less famous. Which meant in practice that the one who did the baptizing was becoming more important than the one in whose name you were baptized, that of course, being Christ. That, for Paul, was simply unacceptable. That had to stop. Because nothing could be allowed to compromise or obscure the gospel message of Christ and him crucified. No matter how powerful or charismatic some leader in the church might be. Because no matter how impressive such a person, allegiance was owed to Christ and to Christ alone.

Unfortunately, that's the kind of thing that happens in the church all the time, because it can be very easy for the message, that is, the gospel message, to be overshadowed by the medium, whether that happens to be a very powerful preacher, or the technical wizardry of the presentation, or the sheer impressiveness of the setting. Which is why we have to be just as alert as was Paul to what's going on when that is happening. For just as Paul traced the problems emerging in Corinth back to their practice of baptism, so too do we in the church today have to be alert to anything we do that has the effect of obscuring the gospel message, no matter what that is.

Unfortunately, in a world changing as rapidly as ours, that's often very difficult to do. So much is changing so fast in terms of how we do church in the world today that I'm not sure that any of us is really aware of the long-term effects of what's changing as to just exactly what's being gained and what's being lost. This problem is only going to get worse in the future, because the pace of change in our world, and especially the pace of technological change, is only going to accelerate, and I don't think there's anyone who knows where it's all headed. Nor do we seem to have much say in that either. What especially concerns me is that the whole idea of what constitutes a community is changing, changing in both obvious and not so obvious ways, and those changes are very much going to affect the church and every other religious community down the road. Affect how we do church in some very basic ways. In such a world, it's going to be very hard to know what's a good idea, and what's not such a good idea. Hard to know the things we need to let go of, and what we need to hold onto.

For Paul, the key to that question was the cross. Anything that compromised the message of the cross, anything that obscured the cross as the heart of the Christian gospel, anything that pushed the cross into the background, whether intentionally or not, was unacceptable and could not be allowed. For it was the cross, and the cross alone, that put the lie to all human efforts to stand on our own apart from God; the cross and the cross alone that reminded us where our efforts to build a world in our image would always lead; the cross and the cross alone that is the one thing that can unfailingly point us toward the love of God. Most everything else about our message can change. But not the cross. That has to stay.

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*