

Letters of the Heart

Deep Roots

Christian faith has deep roots in the Old Testament. Jesus was Jewish, and his roots are vital to our understanding his teachings and the significance of his life, death and resurrection. So with greatest of respect to Judaism, we must say that the Old Testament now belongs to the *church*, because only through Jesus can we interpret it properly. Through the Holy Spirit, the letters – the Torah of God is written on our hearts. And it is in our hearts, and in each other’s hearts that those letters from God must be read.

So when we come to the *New Testament*, we get our earliest glimpses of God reaching out to *all* humanity, no longer just the small, Jewish sphere anymore, not just where their had been a long previous relationship. *Now* the apostles take the message to the *world*. Through Christ, is forgiveness and eternal life. Salvation is a free gift for *all through Jesus* and every human culture must come to worship him it’s own unique way, because, in Jesus, God comes to *us*. We call this *grace*.

But as the church reached out, the “little black box” of Jewish Christianity suddenly seemed so small and constraining. Like a potted plant, it was rootbound. The port was far too small; for people like Paul were busy planting the church in new communities – Gentile communities – where its roots could spread and grow in new soil. But an important question arose: what is *truly essential* for faith, and what is merely our cultural flowerpot? What must we continue to draw from our Old Testament roots to sustain us, and what is simply “dead wood” of Jewish culture that must be pruned away lest it hinder the growth of the church?

And after wrestling with this, the conclusion of the apostles was this: We will lay no other burden on the Gentiles except that they “abstain from idols and immorality.” All Christians must recognize the Sovereignty of God and Moral Law, but other than that, just let people live free and creatively in Christ within their own language and culture. This was absolutely crucial, because, Christianity is . . .

Not a religion

All religions of the world have some truth in them, or they would not have survived this long. But the Gospel is different. The Gospel is a revelation and a relationship. Should not people who have experienced the *love* of God through the Cross of Jesus be transformed? Should not such amazing love shown on the cross so grip hearts and minds that you don’t have to make a list of rules, tell people not to lie or steal, kill, commit adultery and so on, because they embody the teaching of Jesus: “*love your neighbour as yourself*”? If people are really living in the Spirit, shouldn’t things *work out just fine* in the Christian community? Should not new doors open for the Gospel all the time? Should not the cultures and communities the Gospel enters become more compassionate and just?

They should. Because we are letters written by Christ to the world. Religions are letters written on the pages of books. The Gospel is written by the Spirit on our hearts.

So how come in the Christian community are there are always so many . . .

Growing pains

In Paul’s *second* letter to the Corinthians he reflect back on a rather *painful* period of his life. Some time ago, while visiting Corinth, he had been openly *insulted* by someone – right in

public. Then there were the rumors of a growing disrespect for Paul at Corinth – a church he himself had planted. So he'd written them a painful letter. He wrote with tears in his eyes. He said he really wanted to see them again, but didn't want to make another *painful visit* to Corinth. Wasn't going to go through *that* again. And in response, the Corinthians had done the right thing by Paul. They had dealt with this particular detractor – punished him - expelled him from the church. But now *with this* letter (2 Cor) a window opens into the tremendous heart of an apostle. We can see how he coped with slander and adversity. They needed to forgive this person. Take him back. *Love him*.

And we should take some lessons from this in the growing pains of the Christian life. We must always be ready to forgive, always be grateful for any positive news. People *can* change! – if they are open to God's Spirit. Always be courageous in trying circumstances. Be ambitious in pleasing God. And accept that life contains many confusing paradoxes. And this will cause us pain. But, like Paul, we shouldn't overly concerned about defending yourself against detractors. Paul says he's *glad* to be called a *fool* – a fool for *Christ's* sake. Yet he's also ready to stand up firm when the integrity of the Gospel is at stake. And it *is*. The whole future of the Gospel mission is now in jeopardy. For now, in Corinth, there are . . .

Fresh troubles

A new threat arises to Paul's reputation. This time it comes in the form of certain Jewish-Christian teachers who have showed up with *impressive letters of introduction* and their own special version of the Christian faith which Paul declares *fraudulent*. In 2:17 he alludes to those who "*peddle*" the word of God. The Greek word refers to "hucksters" in the market who dilute wine with water. They sell shoddy goods. And they must not be deceived by these "snake oil salesmen".

On *their* part, the intruders have accused Paul of being incapable of writing his own letters. Such powerful words, *they* say, could not have come from the pen of such an ignorant, scruffy little man. They scorn Paul for his *bodily* weaknesses. Surely a *real* apostle would have been healed of the nagging infirmities that seem to plague Paul's daily life, for Paul has a "thorn in his flesh." (We don't know what it was, but it is painful.)

But Paul takes it all in stride. That's OK. If I'm weak, Jesus, too was weak on the cross. Christ was gentle and kind. And so am I. And his hope is that he won't be forced to come to Corinth and deal with them in a harsh manner – it's against his nature. (It's like Dad shouting up the stairway when the kids won't go to sleep: "Don't make me come up there!") *But if need be*, the same spiritual firepower with which he writes his letters *will be* backed up with a strong personal reality when he shows up. That's the problem with. . .

Letters

"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, *like some people*, letters of recommendation to you or from you?"

I often write letters of recommendation for people, and I'm always glad to do that.

But in my old town was character named Dougie. We called him the Tupperware bandit because he had once been caught stealing Tupperware out of a boxcar in the train yard. He had also once stolen a cement truck. (And that's just two of a *long* list of real boners.) As far as crime went, he was just not that good at it because his main problem was the bottle. I met him one day, in really rough shape, coming off one of his escapades. He said he really needed help, and could

he come to me for some counseling. I agreed, and we set up a time and Dougie came and we talked, and it was all very preliminary, and we set up another appointment which he did not show up to.

Shortly after this I get a call from a crown prosecutor who asked me if this Doug H. was “in counseling” with me. I said “Well, not really.” The crown attorney explained that this guy was trying to use me to recommend to the judge that he be let him off the hook in court, and that he had done this with quite a few ministers, and in fact I was one of the last in the district that he hadn’t tried this with.

But the other day I was accompanying my wife to her doctor’s appointment and on the wall behind *his* desk there were all his certificates: his degree from U of T, another from a medical school in New York, one from the College of Physicians and surgeon, another about internal medicine. All manner of signature and read and gold seals.

This guy is the real deal.

We can trust him.

Letters of recommendation were even more important for travelers in the ancient world. Before you could pick up the phone and check a person’s references, people needed to carry official letters that said who they were and what their business was. The intruders at Corinth were demanding such letters from Paul. *They*, after all, had come to Corinth had big fancy letters that claimed that *they* had the backing of, *quote*, “*the highest ranking apostles.*” Their letters *claimed* to have Peter’s support. But they weren’t the real deal. This was certain people of influence within the Jerusalem church *using* Peter’s name. And Peter’s name in the hands of those who made use if it was on the brink of ruining Paul’s reputation and jeopardizing the mission of the Gospel.

But Paul has no use for such external witnesses. He doesn’t need any certificates hanging on his wall. It is unclear who would have issued such credential to these intruders. But the point is Paul *doesn’t really care*. Because, he says to the Corinthians. . .

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone”.

The Corinthians themselves are the proof of Paul’s ministry. “Your hearts are my letters of recommendation” he says. The heart is the seat of spiritual activity, where the Holy Spirit works. The centre of our personhood. And that is where we find the real proof of their faith.

Paul’s opponents may have some impressive resumes, but so far they have been spared the trials and tribulations that Paul has gone through. Riding the wave of current success and popularity, they’ve made a big impression, but they’ve also made a miscalculation by writing off Paul as a rank amateur. For Paul’s legacy is open before them like a book. The lives of the Christians at Corinth show unmistakably the results of Paul’s work among them.

“You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

Christ’s Spirit brings new life, into the human heart. Writes a *new story*. Writes in a new *love language*. The language of the New Covenant.

On Mount Sinai, “the finger of God” wrote on tablets of stone. But the old covenant made through Moses didn’t have the power to make people all that God intended them to be. So the people of God waited for a new covenant in which God would deal with their sins and establish the relationship on a whole new footing.

This was what the prophet Jeremiah writes about in **Jeremiah 31: 33,34**

These are the words Paul has in mind as he writes the Corinthians. This promise found fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God *did* something real for us on the cross that could not have been done before. And this gives us

True Confidence

“Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.”

Paul is confident in himself and in his relationship with the Corinthian church. But this is not the cocky “self-confidence” of a huckster. This is confidence “through Christ.” Paul, though a mere mortal, can depend on divine enablement. Surely this is a healthy response to the false teachers who are boasting in both spiritual gifts and impressive letters of reference.

“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

He contrasts the old order of sin and death with the new life of redemption in Christ. In Jesus we can lead truly authentic lives in every situation. Sometimes we face situations for which there is no road map, no rule of thumb, no clear ethical norm. There is just no way on knowing if something is “for” or “against my religion”. But we are called, not to follow a set of rules, but to a radical obedience to Jesus, and *in that*, we are confident that though the path may be difficult, and may even lead us to suffer and even die for Christ, it will lead ultimately lead us to life, to joy, to peace.

But the unbelieving reaction in the same difficult dilemmas believers face is to resort back to the “letter of the Law.” But Paul says that that will kill spiritual life. lead to a dead end religion for those who refuse to enter the new age of the Spirit. “The letter that kills” refers to the *misuse* of the Torah of Moses *as an end in itself*, failing to see it’s true purpose of pointing us to Jesus Christ. .

Only work rooted in true obedience to Jesus, only life lived in obedience to the Spirit can stand the test. The Jewish proselytizers who were seeking to put the yoke of Jewish traditional requirements on the necks of the Corinthians characterize what we might call it

Jesus etc.

Although we don’t know the details, it was undoubtedly along the lines that Gentiles who became Christians needed to be circumcised and begin to observe Jewish dietary rules *etc, etc, etc, etc, etc, etc*.

The essence of a cancer is that something goes wrong in the genetics and the body begins to produce millions of useless cells that do nothing but multiply and rob the body of it’s strength, and, if not stopped, of life itself. Jesus etc is a similar disease can attack the healthy Christian life. To the free gift of salvation, some would try and add some additional requirements. *etc, etc, etc, etc, etc*.

Over time in individual lives and whole cultures, the Gospel can be overcome by etc, etc, etc. . .

In 1932 a young German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to his homeland after studies in New York City. He brought with him a full training in theology and a bag full of black gospel music he’s grown to love while worshipping in Harlem. He returned to land under a dark spell. Hitler was now even using church doctrines and symbols in support of his terrible agenda. It was against this evil that Bonhoeffer threw all his skills energies. This young pastor began to

play a role in what was known as the “Confessing Church.” He traveled to India to study non-violent resistance with Gandhi, and returned to Germany to head a seminary for Confessing Church pastors. The Gestapo first banned him from preaching, then teaching, and finally any kind of public speaking. Yet he continued to openly oppose Adolf Hitler's Antisemitism. He called for church resistance to Hitler's policies towards the Jews.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer joined a secret group of high-ranking military officers who planned to end the Nazi by killing Hitler. (This is the basis of the current Tom Cruise movie *Valkyrie*) But Bonhoeffer was arrested in April 1943 after money used to help Jews escape to Switzerland was traced to him. He was charged with conspiracy and imprisoned in Berlin for a year and a half.

Following the failure of the plot on Hitler's life, Bonhoeffer's connections with the conspirators were discovered. He was again arrested and imprisoned and finally hanged at dawn on April 9, 1945 – just three weeks before the Nazis capitulated to allied forces. Dietrich was stripped of his clothing, ridiculed by the guards, and led naked into a yard where he was hung by a noose of piano wire.

But Bonhoeffer taught and *lived* what he called “a religionless Christianity”. By that he meant individuals and churches must refuse to be bound by traditions, because much more important than being traditional and much more important than people's comfort zones is being in the presence of Christ in the middle of the world – no matter how horrible that world may be.

The problem with church doctrines is that they can be hijacked. “Doctrines express a certain Christian community's interpretation of the Bible, in the light of their experience; they go wrong when they are enshrined as unquestionable authorities that enslave people's minds and forbid all doubt and questioning.”

(Olson, How to Be Evangelical without being Conservative pp 109-111)

And the only treatment for the disease of Jesus etc, the only hope for a cure is in lives like Bonhoeffer's who are willing to live by . . .

Nothing But Jesus

The first Christian churches were located in the largest pagan cities of the Roman empire – like Corinth. They were people surrounded by the moral decay and false religions of the Greek and Roman world. Yet in all of Paul's writing there is not a single hint that they should build walls to keep the ungodly out nor should be uninvolved in their cities. In fact, quite the opposite. Christians are letters from Christ written for all people to read.

Appearances can be deceptive. We should not be overly impressed by the charisma of anyone who would claim to be God's gift to us. Teach God's Word to us. Our question always must be of those who would handle the Word is what is the core of their teachings, their worldview, knowledgeability, competency. And does their *character* correspond to God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

For, in the words of Bonhoeffer:

"One act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons"