

Sermon follow-up

3-25-12

“Paul’s Epistle to the Church at Birmingham: A Call to Faith, Hope, and Love” (1 Cor. 13)

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The sermon imagined what a letter from Paul to the contemporary church in Birmingham would say. Of course, the letter would deal with many other topics I did not get to mention in the letter. I want to give a few more ideas here.

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I’m quite sure Paul would want to address our city’s obsession with sports, especially college football. (I’ve had numerous conversations with other pastors and believers from Birmingham about the question, “What would Paul say to our city’s churches?” Every single time, this issue has come up.) Other than our state’s history of racism, we are probably best known nationally for our success on the gridiron. But it is not a stretch to say that for many in our state and city, especially many men, college football functions as an alternative religion, a rival to the gospel. Football is complete with its hero/messiah figures (great players), priesthood (the coaches), liturgies and rituals, chants, pilgrimages, holy places/cathedrals (also known as stadiums) with icons, vestments, traditions, etc. For many fans there is a significant financial investment that no doubt exceeds the amount given to church and charity. There is level of adulation that only be regarded as worship. There is even the possibility of apostasy, if one turns allegiances to a rival team.

Paul commands that the word of Christ should dwell in us richly. But have we stuffed our hearts full of other things? Many Christians in our city are more likely to know more about the history and tradition of their team than the history and tradition of the church. Many lifetime churchgoers in our city are likely to know more about Nick Saban and Cam Newton than Peter and Paul. The apostle Paul might even point out that another Paul – Paul Finebaum – gets a lot more air time and influence than himself. Paul Finebaum is literally our city’s apostle, as his message is broadcast through the state, region, and country. The apostle Paul might wonder why so many in our city know more gameday chants than psalm chants – especially since he commanded us to sing psalms to each other. Paul might ask us some hard questions about whether or not our 24/7 obsession with sports has crossed over from harmless pastime and entertainment to a kind of idolatry that dominates our city and culture. Do we pray more spontaneously and emotionally for the outcome of a game than for the growth of Christ’s kingdom?

To be fair, Paul would not be against fun and games, and would certainly be glad for us to pull for our teams. Interestingly, ancient Corinth was crazy about games as well, as it hosted an Olympic-like event, the Isthmian games. Paul, drawing on that cultural background, used an athletic metaphor to describe the Christian life at the end of chapter 9. Paul certainly wanted the Corinthians to participate in

the culture and festivities of their city, but without crossing into idolatry. We have to know where to draw the lines and we have to work at keeping our passions in proportion. Are we more zealous for holding to the pattern of sound words in faith or for our team's success? Are we guarding the deposit of faith entrusted to us as the church or we are wasting too much time on passing things?

For more on sports as an alternative religion/liturgy, see Jamie Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*.

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I mentioned the importance of unity, a topic Paul would surely address, given the fragmentation of the church in our city. Henri DeLubac describes Christian unity and love as our best witness in this way:

The Gospel is not announced by word only. It is announced--and to an even greater extent--by living. It is by living by Christ's Spirit that the Church manifests him and spreads his name abroad like a perfume. The Christians described for us in the Acts were not, as a whole, apostles, in the many strict senses of the word. Yet all of them contributed to the spreading of the new "fire", to the degree in which they were truly of the Church, forming "one heart and one soul". And this "brotherly love" has always been, from that time onward, the Church's best act of witness and her most powerful attraction. As St. Ignatius of Antioch was to say: "The Church is a choir; the bishop presides over the making of its music, which, like the music of the spheres, is silent neither by day nor by night." No doubt St. Ignatius here has in mind liturgical gatherings; yet from his viewpoint, those were themselves the symbol of another harmony, both more interior and on a far greater scale, "the harmony of universal charity, in which the singing is of Christ". "The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee."

Outside of the "Bible belt," where evangelical churches are fewer and further between, there is more a sense of brotherhood and cooperation amongst Christians. But in a place like Birmingham, churches have a greater tendency to compete by engaging in turf wars. Churches tend to "market" themselves by focusing more on their distinctives than on what they have in common with all believers. All of this tends to harden the divisions amongst churches and even create an air of suspicion.

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I am quite certain that Paul's hypothetical letter to the church in Birmingham would address our sexual dysfunctionality just as much as he had to address it in Corinth. A lot of the things (if not everything) he says about sexuality, singleness, and marriage in 1 Corinthians could be carried over directly.

In 1 Cor. 13, Paul says love is not rude. Really, he means love is not shameful. Love does nothing shameful. Shame, of course, is regularly associated with

sexual sins. It seems that the Corinthians were confusing love and sex just as much as we do in our culture. Sex outside of a marriage covenant between a man and a woman can never be loving because it is shameful; it is contrary to our God-given design. It is impossible for sex outside of marriage to be genuinely loving because it brings shame to both partners.

Other abuses of sex, e.g., pornography, are shameful as well, but are rampant. I think one reason Christians today have so little strength is because we have wasted ourselves in shameful sexual sin. Our shame leaves us weak and unable to stand up against the world with courage and conviction because we are so lacking in integrity. If there is any area where the church in our day has become just like the world, it's in the area of sexuality. We especially see the effects of sexual sin on our young men, who all too often fail to mature in manhood at appropriate pace.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., from his 1956 speech "Paul's Letter to the American Church" ([http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_pauls\\_letter\\_to\\_american\\_christians/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_pauls_letter_to_american_christians/)):

Let me rush on to say something about the church. Americans, I must remind you, as I have said to so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ. They tell me that in America you have within Protestantism more than two hundred and fifty six denominations. The tragedy is not so much that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that most of them are warring against each other...This narrow sectarianism is destroying the unity of the Body of Christ. You must come to see that God is neither a Baptist nor a Methodist; He is neither a Presbyterian nor a Episcopalian. God is bigger than all of our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to see that....

There is another thing that disturbs me to no end about the American church. You have a white church and you have a Negro church. You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at 11:00 on Sunday morning to sing "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" and "Dear Lord and Father of all Mankind," you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America. They tell me that there is more integration in the entertaining world and other secular agencies than there is in the Christian church. How appalling that is...

I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may....

So American Christians, you may master the intricacies of the English language. You may possess all of the eloquence of articulate speech. But even if you "speak with the tongues of man and angels, and have not love, you are become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." You may have the gift of prophecy and understanding all mysteries. You may be able to break into the storehouse of nature and bring out many insights that men never dreamed were there. You may ascend to the heights of academic achievement, so that you will have all knowledge. You may boast of your great institutions of learning and the boundless extent of your degrees. But all of this amounts to absolutely nothing devoid of love. But even more Americans, you may give your goods to feed the poor. You may give great gifts to charity. You may tower high in philanthropy. But if you have not love it means nothing. You may even give your body to be burned, and die the death of a martyr. Your spilt blood may be a symbol of honor for generations yet unborn, and thousands may praise you as history's supreme hero. But even so, if you have not love your blood was spilt in vain. You must come to see that it is possible for a man to be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. He may be generous in order to feed his ego and pious in order to feed his pride. Man has the tragic capacity to relegate a heightening virtue to a tragic vice. Without love benevolence becomes egotism, and martyrdom becomes spiritual pride.

So the greatest of all virtues is love. It is here that we find the true meaning of the Christian faith. This is at bottom the meaning of the cross. The great event on Calvary signifies more than a meaningless drama that took place on the stage of history. It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power drunk generation that love is most durable power in the world, and that it is at bottom the heartbeat of the moral cosmos.

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On a slightly different note....

Since I am preaching on love, one question that has come up in recent conversation in how to love is situations where abuse is involved. How do we love a drug addict? How does a woman love a husband who physically abuses her? We need to understand that it is never loving to let a person pursue a course of destruction, either self-destruction or the destruction of others. The way to love a drug addict is to get them help so they break free of their destructive behavior. Sometimes an unwanted and unwelcomed "intervention" is the most loving course of action. A wife who has been abused regularly by her husband should know that loving him does mean allowing him to get away with his sin. It rises to the level that she should get the appropriate authorities involved from church and state. The civil magistrate will likely punish the abusive husband. The elders will likely grant the woman the right of divorce since willful, ongoing abuse constitutes a form of desertion and is worthy of excommunication. To be

sure, the wife should still love her husband and be eager to forgive him. But love does not let sin go unchecked. Love lovingly opposes evil. Love lovingly protects the weak. Love rejoices in what is true and good and recoils at what is evil and destructive. We must not confuse love with niceness or with tolerance. Sometimes love has to be intolerant. Sometimes love has to hate. Love for God and neighbor means having a kind of hatred for what opposes God's love and destroys our neighbor.