

Voices: Paul's teaching on churches' responsibility for each other

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The early church was not the immaculate community Christians may think it was.

In Corinth, the church was divided over numerous ethical dilemmas and issues of apostolic authorities. According to Bruce Metzger, the church in Colossae combined the Christian faith with Jewish ritualism and pagan mythology and philosophy. And the Galatian church exchanged salvation by grace through faith for salvation by following the law.

The Apostle Paul recognized these serious issues and addressed them by writing to the churches.

But imagine if Paul's letters had all the tact and gentleness of an irate Christian Facebook user:

To the church in Corinth: I hear you are creating divisions within the church. Great job! Also, if you eat food sacrificed to idols, you are not a Christian.

To the so-called "church" in Colossae: I cannot believe that you all became heretics. It is over between us. Farewell, Church of Colossae.

To the group of people in Galatia: I thought y'all were Christians, but boy, I was wrong. You are all a bunch of legalists. I am revoking your status as a church. You really blew it. Complete buffoonery.

The New Testament would read differently if Paul used this approach.

Paul's response to heretical teaching

The issues Paul addressed were serious, and the truth of the gospel was being uprooted for many early Christians. When Paul addressed these issues, he was acerbic at times. He even wrote that he wished the people who taught the necessity of circumcision would castrate themselves. Paul was unflinching when faced with heresy, and he passionately explained the gospel.

However, Paul's zeal never caused him to excommunicate a church. He never said the Christians who fell for those false teachings were separated from the church.

Paul is an example for the modern church of how Christians should engage with one another when errors and disagreements inevitably arise.

Paul believed in unity

Paul believed all Christians are united with God and with each other, making up the body of Christ on earth. He could have broken ties with the churches in Corinth, Colossae and Galatia, but he was bound to them through Christ, just as Christians all are bound to one another. Therefore, he continued to embrace them as brothers and sisters. Rather than question their faith, he reminded them of the truth they forgot.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul told the church to be united, even though there were disagreements about what is and is not acceptable for Christians. Paul told the Colossians to live the new life given by Christ and not to remain in their old lives. And to the Galatian church, Paul did not erect barriers and prohibit them from being a church. He corrected them so they might know what it means to be free in Christ.

Paul against disowning Christians

The easy way out would be to assert that the Christians Paul disagreed with were not really Christians, but this is not what he did. He claimed them as brothers and sisters in Christ, even though they neglected his teaching. Christians should follow his example.

Many Christians are much more willing to disown their siblings in Christ for much pettier reasons. They draw lines about what the “true gospel” is, based on their ideas and interpretations of the Scripture rather than what Scripture says the gospel is: Christ died and rose again to redeem mankind.

A church or denomination’s stance on a particular secondary issue leads Christians who oppose them to try to exclude them from the community of God. Words like “unbiblical” or “unchristian” are applied when a Christian disagrees with somebody over the interpretation and application of the Bible. These and other descriptors are the subtle anathemas Christians declare against one another, implying some people have an incomplete gospel and are not a part of the body of Christ. And to do so does not reinforce the gospel; it undermines it by scoffing at the unity of Christ.

Unity and accountability

The unity of Christ withstands any tension caused by disagreements, but it does not give Christians license to believe and do whatever they want. What Christians believe and do matters because they are united to Christ and united through Christ to all other Christians. The deeds of one Christian effect all Christians.

Unity makes Christians more accountable because they are aware that their actions affect the entire body of believers. However, because all Christians are united in the body of Christ, to attack brothers and sisters is

to attack one's self. Cutting someone off from the body of Christ is like cutting off one's own limb.

Unity and mutual responsibility

Christ unites his people. The church is not united by congruent biblical interpretation on every issue, Christian ethics, denominational affiliation or one religious leader. Jesus Christ unites the church.

Unity as Christ's church requires Christians to speak prophetically to one another, correcting bad morals and bad theology. Therefore, Christians must hold one another accountable and disciple each other to embody Christlikeness, because even though a Christian cannot determine who is a part of the mystical body of Christ, he or she does shape the health of the body of Christ.

A Christian's duty to the body

Christians are not called to tell people who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ that they are not Christians. Exclusion from Christ's church is a sentence too severe for the church—or even Saint Paul the Apostle—to decide. If a Christian tries to exclude another, they are chopping off a limb of the body of Christ.

Do not cut off parts of the body of Christ. Bend down, and wash their feet.

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