

"IF THE CHURCH WERE CHRISTIAN"

Romans 12:9-21

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Do you ever choose to read a book based solely on the title? I like provocative titles: the ones that make you think; make you laugh; or even make you wonder what in the world the book is about. Sometimes the title is the best thing about a book. These titles caught my attention: "Death by Chocolate," "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," "Running with Scissors," "Saving Jesus from those who are Right," "The Unnecessary Pastor," "Mennonite in a Little Black Dress."

How about this one: "If the Church Were Christian." Indiana Quaker Philip Gulley raises some very profound and maybe even controversial questions in this book.

"If the Church were Christian," he writes, "affirming our potential would be more important than condemning our brokenness."

"If the Church were Christian, reconciliation would be valued over judgment."

"If the Church were Christian, gracious behavior would be more important than right belief."

"If the Church were Christian, meeting needs would be more important than maintaining institutions."

"If the Church were Christian, peace would be more important than power."

"If the Church were Christian, it would care more about love and less about sex."

I think, if the Church were Christian, the Apostle Paul might say, it would look more like Jesus.

We have been spending a few weeks in Rome this summer- at least through Paul's letter to the Christians living there. In the first eleven chapters he explains that God's grace is extended to Jews and Gentiles, to the insiders and the outsiders. He challenges the Christians in Rome to understand that they are the body of Christ.

He tells them that they will be transformed by a relationship with the Living Christ. This letter is often referred to as the "gospel of grace." It is the premier document of Paul's

theology. If you want to know what he believes, what is most important to him, just read this letter.

In chapter twelve we get down to practicalities- because what good is a sound faith if it doesn't change the way you live? Paul answers the question- if all of this stuff about Jesus is true then what difference does it make in the lives of those who believe in him? Last week we heard these words from the beginning of the chapter.

"So here is what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life- your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life- and place it before God as an offering. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit in without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out." (The Message)

Paul is, of course, concerned about the state of their souls. But he may be even more concerned about the state of their living. He wants to make it perfectly clear that if you claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ then your life will show it. If your faith is truly based on the Gospel of Christ then you will be transformed from the inside out. Your behavior, your words, your interaction with others- everything you do and say should reflect the grace and love of Christ.

Paul is giving the Romans, and he is giving us the practical, ethical implications of accepting God's grace. You may think Paul's list of twenty-three do's and don'ts sounds like a nice reminder of how nice people behave. But if you read it closely you will see that it is actually rather dangerous and subversive. Just like Jesus.

Paul's understanding of how to live is based on what he knows about how Jesus lived his life- so you can be sure it will be counter-cultural. We read over and over again in scripture that God's people are called to be "set apart" from the culture in which they live. They are called to be **in** the world but not **of** the world. Probably the most dramatic interpretation of that call would be found in our Anabaptist cousins, the Amish. For centuries they have adamantly maintained a lifestyle outside of the cultural norms- some of which is to be admired and others, not so much.

Our own Brethren ancestors were called "a Peculiar People" by their neighbors because they maintained a lifestyle that was distinct from the larger society. In every generation the church faces the challenge of articulating and living out its life of faith within the context of the culture which surrounds it. In this part of chapter twelve Paul gives us a list of core values on which everything we do as a family of faith, should be built. I wonder how many congregations today see themselves as "alternative communities?" I doubt that most Church of the Brethren folks would want to be known as "peculiar people."

Theologian Eleazar Fernandez writes, *"Throughout the ages, the church has been faced with the challenge of naming, articulating, and living out its life as a distinct community. How the surrounding world is experienced and perceived by the church is formative of its identity and character. The greater the tension between a faith community and the surrounding world, the more sharply defined is the identity and character of the community."* (1)

Of the Christians living in Rome, he writes, *"They wrestled not only with how to stand in contrast to the imperial Roman system of privilege, power, and social conformity, but also how to live differently as communities defined by the life and teachings of the crucified One. As always, conformity to the ways of the domination system is a real temptation. Conformity is a real temptation when the domination system exercises its coercive power with brazen brutality and calloused impunity."*

It is even more dangerous for the church when the dominant system pretends to uphold Christian values all the while implementing practices that bear no resemblance at all to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When the Vice President changes the words of scripture to exclude "Jesus" and insert "Old Glory," we are in dangerous and damning territory.

Fernandez continues, *"It appears that many churches have become so comfortable with the world that they have lost their identity as an alternative community. Driven by their desire for relevance and seduced by the much-coveted three B's of success: buildings, budgets, and bodies, churches have played footsie with the dominant culture without realizing soon enough that they have gone to bed with the culture of domination, privilege, accumulation, and consumption."*

We are called to be different. To promote life-giving relationships, to exhibit vibrant hospitality, to treat one another with energetic love, and to work for peace and justice. As hard as it is to be different in our society, we are called to live by a unique standard- the standard of Christ. You know as well as I that those who choose to stand outside of the "accepted norms" of the dominant ruling class are often punished.

Paul has pretty high expectations. It isn't easy to live a Christ-centered life. Paul doesn't say this is just for Sundays- he says it is for every day of our life. It is to be our way of life. When we claim to live in a covenant relationship with God and with each other we have chosen a new way of life in an old world. We have chosen to be massively and completely transformed. Following Jesus is a radical way of life; it is a subversive way of life.

In the early 1700's, when the first Brethren opposed the governmental and religious institutions in Germany by forming a new faith community, they were pretty clear about who they were and what they believed. They had to be because it was a dangerous time to be different. What they did was illegal. They were persecuted, arrested, and some were even killed because they chose to faithfully follow Christ. Their faith cost them something. Sometimes it cost them everything. Their unwillingness to conform to the demands of the state religion made them outcasts and criminals.

For Christians in the United States today, the temptation is to adhere to the theology of American exceptionalism. We are teetering on the edge of a nationalized Christianity that glorifies violence, oppression, exclusion, and power and looks nothing at all like Jesus Christ. Any church that can make a comfortable home within our current cultural context is not the church of Jesus Christ.

If we are more concerned about fitting in than we are with standing out then we have lost sight of the One who overturned the tables in the Temple.

If we are more worried about "making waves" than we are about making things right, then we have lost sight of the One who walked on water and calmed the raging sea.

If we are more worried about what other people will say than we are about responding to the cries of the oppressed, then we need a refresher course in the One who climbed up on a cross and defiantly walked out of the tomb.

The Reverend Amy Lindeman Allen writes, *"Christians are called not to ignore despair, but to help sow joy in its wake; not to condone hate, but to be all the more zealous in their own loving in its face. The politics of overcoming evil are about neither ignoring nor condoning it, but rather, fighting it with the strongest power possible- God's love."*

If the Church were Christian we wouldn't wallow in a culture of fear but would introduce a culture of joy and gratitude.

If the Church were Christian we wouldn't sit in silence while Black people are shot and killed by police. Theologian James Cone insisted that, *"...it is impossible to do Christian theology with integrity in America without asking the question, What has the gospel to do with the black struggle for liberation?"*

In an essay entitled, "If Not Now, When?" the Reverend Terrence McKinley issues a challenge when he writes: *"Wherever you are, whatever platform you have, whatever sphere of influence you enjoy, the time is now for all of us to do something. The time is now to use our bodies to protect the bodies of those who are unsafe. The time is now to use our influence, to take a stand, to become active, to go to places to demand justice, and*

to disruptively remove ourselves from places. The time is now to raise our voices to be heard and to call on our nation to recognize the effects of racism in our criminal justice system and to reimagine public safety in this country.

We are dealing with a deep brokenness in our society, and it is going to require all of us to bring change. Black Americans are tired, Black Americans are traumatized, and Black Americans are angry, but despite it all,"he writes, "we are resilient. We are sons and daughters of the freedom struggles of the past, and we have a responsibility to the young people, to Jacob Blake's children and their contemporaries. That is why we protest." (2)

Chicago Pastor Otis Moss the third believes that "People of faith, those who claim Jesus, have a moral obligation and spiritual call to resist participation in our complicated social sin of racism. How people of faith answer in this moment will determine the future of the American church. Will believers in Jesus decide to be chaplains for the empire or prophets to the nation?"

Chaplains are in a position to advice those in power, but the proximity to power recuses them from the call to resist, rebel, and join revolutionary movements. The prophet, on the other hand, seeks to disrupt power and has a heart that holds the memory of Rachel's tears, the orphan's death, and the poor's exploitation as sacraments for a faithful journey. People of faith, in this moment, must decide: Shall we follow a dark-sinned Palestinian Jew, who cast his lot with those who had their backs against the wall, or will we march with the advisers of Herod, hoping our presence is enough to keep an arrogant tyrant from harming all the children?" (3)

I believe if the Church were truly Christian that answer would be simple. We are the recipients of a gracious love that we do not deserve. We are loved beyond measure by the God who created us. Why would we think others are loved any less than we are? If the Church were truly Christian, we would believe that everybody counts or nobody does.

As a Church, as the body of Christ in this place, how peculiar are we willing to be? If the Church were truly Christian, we would do whatever it takes to make sure that everyone- **everyone**- has a place at God's table. May it be so. Amen.

End Notes:

- *"Theological perspective," Eleazar S. Fernandez, FEASTING ON THE WORD, PP. 14, 16*
- *"If Not Now, When?," Terrance M. McKinley, Sojourners. August 27, 2020.*
- *"How will Christians Answer this Moment in History?" Otis Moss III. Sojourners. July 30, 2020.*

