

“The Rhetoric of Reconciliation: The Time Is Now”¹

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:1-17; 7:29-31

I was privileged to do my academic work with two of the leading scholars on the letters of Paul. In seminary, I worked with Dr. Margaret Mitchell, and my sermon titles for the next three weeks draw on the title of her dissertation. At Macalester, I realized that computer programming was not in my future, so in a rapid hunt for a different 4th class I stumbled into an early morning class on an Introduction to the Old Testament. And I was hooked. I so enjoyed studying under Cal Roetzel that I ended up in seminary, and named my dog after him. Cal just completed a commentary on Second Corinthians, and I asked him if he would read the passage from First Corinthians today.

Now it is a bit daunting, I should admit, to look out into a congregation and see my college advisor. A sermon is not an academic treatise on a narrow topic, but nevertheless, it should not be intellectually sloppy! I tend to think when I look out and see Cal, how are my footnotes! After talking with Cal about this sermon series, I headed off to the seminary bookstore to bone up on my research. What Cal doesn't know is that somehow he is a motivator for me in areas other than preaching. When I run on the treadmill, I let myself play little mind games to make the time go faster. O.k. thirteen percent done. 16%. You get the picture. But the funny thing is that I always think to myself, you can't quit yet, that's not even a C on a Cal Roetzel test! So, I want to thank Cal for reading today, and for his teaching. If this sermon is any good, significant credit belongs to him – weaknesses in biblical scholarship or theology are mine alone.

Will you pray with me?

Your words, O God, have been transmitted from generation to generation

and from language to language. As we encounter these words,

may we find our lives revealed and illuminated.

Startle us again with the passion of the gospel for life.

In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Corinth was a significant city. Somewhat like Saint Paul, it was a port city, a hub of commerce, as well as a regional capital. Located on a narrow strip of land, it drew most of its wealth from the commerce that passed between the Adriatic and Aegean seas.²

Paul had founded a church there in Corinth, and like all churches, it was a shaky proposition. Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote “religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.”³ How do you institutionalize a feeling? John Wesley described religion as “a warming of the heart.” How do you build a structure that allows hearts to be warmed and not burned? How do you filter out the smoke from all that warming?

Any human structure is going to have problems, and Paul's charisma helped get past some of those early problems. I am sure different people had different ideas about where they should meet, what they should name themselves, but Paul was there about 18 months as their preacher,⁴ and was kind of the glue that held things together. Paul got them going, and then

moved on to start other churches. He was an entrepreneur – a venture capitalist of faith, a mover and shaker. He came, he spoke, he built a church, and then he moved on.

And when he left, the conflicts began in Corinth. They fought over politics – internal leadership at least. They fought over sex. They fought over religion. They fought over who was in, and who was out. They even fought over meals. Conversations would begin with pretentious claims to exclusive truths.⁵ The Bible is not that much different from our times, is it? Does that sounds like a list of conflict topics in your house, or for that matter in our House of Representatives?

Lots of churches, because they are human institutions, are in significant conflict. Luckily, Central is not beset with conflict, at least as far as I can tell. Though it probably does not hurt to mention from the pulpit, that I did make a report to the session this week on the topic that growth is good and growth generates conflict. As new people arrive, old patterns are changed. As new people arrive, long-time members may not be as involved in decision-making as they once were. Something for us to beware even as we are in this exciting time at Central.

But I want us to travel back to Corinth. Troubles are brewing. Paul, now preaching in Ephesus, receives word of the deteriorating situation.

Paul was not a blogger. There are no computer harddrives that have a cache of the email correspondence between Paul and members of the session. Communication was slow – relying on travel, and written correspondence. So Paul wrote letters back to the church that addressed the issues under debate. Like hearing one side of a telephone conversation, we are left trying to piece together what is going on in Corinth from the only thing we have left – Paul’s letters about the situation.

Paul deals with conflicts in this Corinthian correspondence, and for the next two weeks we will use some of these passages to consider the broader situation we find ourselves in. First Corinthians deals with issue after issue over which conflict has erupted. But more important than an issue-by-issue analysis is Paul’s sense that the Corinthian church has broken up into factions – factions that mistrust each other, listen for the worst in each other, argue with each other even when they agree.

And so, early in this letter after some fairly standard greetings, Paul launches right into this topic of factions.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’, or ‘I belong to Christ.’

Their willingness to split up into teams, each following a different leader threatens their community. How do you work together if your primary allegiance is to Paul, or Apollos, or

Cephas. How do you work together if your primary allegiance is to a particular party within the community? Partisan politics were at work in the Corinthian churches. Clearly this is troubling.

Paul then makes a theological move. That the churches' disunity threatens their proclamation of the very identity of Christ. We are baptized into Christ, and with our baptism we become part of Christ's church. But Paul wisely observed that our tendency to divide up into teams for bitter conflict challenges our theological proclamation. And so Paul continues first with a theological question, "Has Christ been divided?" And then he becomes a bit sarcastic.

Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

And throughout the rest of the letter, Paul argues that they do not belong to a partisan leader – they belong to each other, and need to realize that. Like a body, Paul says, you can't all be the same parts! Eyes need noses and ears and arms and legs to be a body. It would be foolish for an eye to say that it has no need of an ear!

We will return to some of the specific issues Paul addresses, but do you see the enduring nature of our tendency to split up into sides and spoil for a fight? It happens in church denominations, Episcopalians and Methodists and Lutherans and, yes, Presbyterians. Right now the flashpoint issue is our centuries old prejudices against ordaining the patient gay and lesbian church members that God has called to lead the church. But below that specific issue is the deeper rift between factions that have grown mistrustful of one another who would rather argue than listen, scapegoat rather than serve.

As I listened to recent confirmation hearings of Samuel Alito, senators on both sides asked tough largely rhetorical questions that exposed a wide rift in worldviews. Abortion is a flashpoint, of course, as is the deference a potential judge would show the president's use of wartime powers. We know something about factions in our country. Paul wrote,

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.'

The rhetoric of reconciliation is necessary, perhaps even more now than when Paul was writing to Corinth. As I talked about in the Children's Time, words are powerful. Letters offering words of peace can be powerful. I think of letters sent with a rose, with honest apologies and hopes for making up. People of my generation remember a letter sent in November 1982, by a fifth grader named Samantha Smith to Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, trying to understand why the relations between the Soviet Union and the USA were so tense.

Dear Mr. Andropov,

My name is Samantha Smith. I am ten years old. Congratulations on your new job. I have been worrying about Russia and the United States getting into a nuclear war. Are you

going to vote to have a war or not? If you aren't please tell me how you are going to help to not have a war. This question you do not have to answer, but I would like to know why you want to conquer the world or at least our country. God made the world for us to live together in peace and not to fight.

*Sincerely,
Samantha Smith⁶*

Andropov wrote back, encouraging her to come visit the Soviet Union and meet with other children and leaders and see that they wanted peace as much as she did.

Now we should ask whether children in the Soviet Union were writing President Reagan with similar questions. But what is clear is that this letter was an attempt at honest reconciliation, much needed in those frosty days of the Cold War when ten year olds like Samantha Smith and Dave Colby were told to practice “duck and cover” under school desks. I remember being told by a 3rd grade teacher that if a nuclear bomb hit Saint Paul it would take just seconds for the blast to reach our Roseville school. I wasn’t the only kid to ask why bother ducking and covering. In the midst of fear and factions, it took a naïve ten year old to offer powerful words of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not cheap peace, shallow agreements that paper over real differences. Reconciliation is honest, reconciliation can be painful, reconciliation takes effort. I thought this week again of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” painfully charging white clergy with urging delays for the sake of a false peace that prevented justice and destroyed dignity.

Reconciliation is an urgent matter in our world. A world in which a church in Saint Paul had a cross burned on its front lawn. A world in which countries still seek the power that comes with nuclear weapons. A world in which we still have the power to blow each other off the face of the earth.

The time, Paul also thought, was urgent. His was the final generation. No time for waiting around, or disagreeing about trivial matters. We see this in this snippet we read from the seventh chapter of this letter. It is part of a much longer argument about sexual ethics and some practices that Paul had heard about in Corinth that troubled him. Almost each sentence of this chapter takes up a new question about sexual ethics, among them: should people marry or not? Is divorce ever justified? What if you are married to a non-Christian? More important than Paul’s individual answers is his overarching belief that time was urgent.

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:29-31).

We may not share Paul's expectation of an imminent second coming of Christ. We may challenge his responses to the practical questions facing the church at Corinth. But his message is an urgent one for us today. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way as he titled his final book – *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*⁷

Interestingly enough, scholars argue that the Corinthian correspondence – what we call First and Second Corinthians is probably 6 partial letters did not lead to a happy ending for the church in Corinth. From what we can tell, despite Paul's overtures for reconciliation, the Corinthian church continued to splinter, and Paul's leadership was insufficient to hold things together.

But when the Bible was being put together, generations after Paul's death, these letters, with their call for reconciliation, were included. Because the sweep of the Bible is from creation to creation restored. Paul had it right: reconciliation is God's gift in Christ, and it is the church's job to model it for our polarized world.

Paul was convinced that God was implementing a plan for the fulfillment of history, that Paul himself had a significant role therein to catalyze communities among the gentiles, and that those communities [those churches] were the beachheads of the new age, which was in the process of dawning in the Christ events.⁸ And that is why Paul cared so much about the Corinthian church. Still today, the church is called to proclaim God's reconciling work. Time is short. That is why we gather. That is why we gather here, as God's servants. May it be so. Amen.

¹ This sermon series is named after my seminary advisor, Margaret Mitchell's published dissertation, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

² Harper's Bible Dictionary, 182-183.

³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers* (Originally published in 1799, this quote is from the Cambridge University Press, 1994 reprint) 102.

⁴ Calvin Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context* (3rd Edition) (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89 "boasts about exclusive truth and pretentious claims to religious "knowledge" had brought on fiery antagonisms.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samantha_Smith#The_Letters. Thanks to my friend Megan Unger for reminding me of this correspondence.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

⁸ Richard Horsley, *Paul and Politics* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000) 3.