

Chapter 29: Maturing the Vision

Paul's Key Issues

1. _____

I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ....You are still not ready. You are still worldly.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Do not be entangled again by a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:26

For in fact the body is not one member but many...Members should have the same care for one another.

1 Corinthians 12:14, 25

By this time some of you ought to be teachers, but you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food... But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Hebrews 5:12, 14

2. _____

I appeal to you...that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be united in mind and thought...One of you says, 'I follow Paul' another says 'I follow Apollos' another 'I follow Peter' still another, 'I follow Christ.'

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

3. _____

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Acts 17:23

You are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

Romans 2:19-20

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.

Romans 12:2

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God...

2 Corinthians 10:5

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

2 Timothy 2:23

4. _____

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23

VS.

hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, and the feeling that everyone is wrong except you...

Galatians 5:20

5. _____

If Jesus was not resurrected then we are all still dead in our sins and our faith is worthless.

1 Corinthians 15:17

6. _____

You should know that your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit who is in you. You have received the Holy Spirit from God. So you do not belong to yourselves, because you were bought by God for a price. So honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

This Week's Equipping Point

What letter would Paul write to you?

You are a letter from Christ prepared by us. It is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on stone, but on human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:3

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the church need to grow up?
2. Can we say there is *anything* more important than church unity?
3. If Paul wrote you a letter today, where would he start?

Teaching Script

The year was 1788. The Constitution had just been ratified, and this radical new idea of a democratic, representative government called the United States of America was forming. But some clarity was needed.

On one hand you had the Federalists, who maintained that because of national security and international credibility, this new government needed a strong federal arm, that would have as much or more power than the states had individually. The Anti-Federalists, on the other hand, argued that putting too much power in the hands of the federal government rather than the states would be tantamount to making the President another King, which was precisely the problem they were trying to address.

So, the conundrum: how to keep the federal government from becoming too powerful, while giving the states the autonomy they needed, and protecting the rights of individual citizens from an overly aggressive commonwealth.

The answer was the Bill of Rights, or the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which provided for enough checks and balances to satisfy the Anti-Federalists. Now individual rights such as freedom of religion, due process, unreasonable search and seizure, trial by jury, excessive punishment, and the right to bear arms were in place.

What happened? The vision of this new venture of democratic government needed maturing. It needed to be fleshed out in practical terms so people understood how to apply its new principles in everyday life.

Chapter 29 does precisely that. This chapter in *The Story* is by far the longest chapter, but it matures the vision as Paul lays out the practical elements of the Christian life in his letters to the embryonic, emerging churches of the first century. Jesus had brought a radical, unexpected vision that challenged people to think in terms of spiritual transformation rather than political upheaval. The key principles of His teachings were still there:

- Love God and your neighbors as yourself.
- Lose your life in order to find it.
- Become a servant.

But how did Christianity work if the person who I'm commanded to love has just divorced me or taken me to court? How do you bring Jews and Gentiles into one Kingdom, when each has a totally different frame of reference? Since Jesus was a Jew, do you have to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian? And what do we do now with the Law? Just toss it after all these years? What happens when people start taking this new religion and, as humans are prone to do, use it for their own ends?

It's not an exact parallel, of course, but this chapter in the Story, in a way, serves as a set of instructions and clarifications to the gospel much like the amendments to the Constitution elucidate and illuminate the principles on which we were founded.

This was especially important because as we see in Acts, God's plan was not to keep the church in a cloistered biosphere, a pristine environment where it could be kept safe from the influences of the world. Quite the opposite: the church was supposed to go change the

world by engaging with it, influencing it, and making disciples of all nations by going, baptizing, and teaching.

What we're looking for today are themes that are interwoven throughout the writings of Paul as he visits, addresses, equips, reprimands, and encourages these new believers.

Jewish converts already understood sin, God, and the long history of His work in their lives. But Gentile converts began at square one. So Paul adapted his methods of teaching, depending on his audience. His letters to each church reveal a wide array of problems; but while he addressed each church differently, there are some common threads that run throughout his letters—issues that do not surprise us, knowing the nature of the new organism that was being created.

Paul's Key Issues

1. Immaturity

When a new organization forms, what's the first thing people do? Create an org chart! Who's in charge? Will we do it your way or my way?

It wasn't hard to see the immaturity of the early church. In Corinth, people would brag on their spiritual pedigree: Peter taught me! Well, Paul baptized me! Later in the book, instead of serving the body of Christ with the gifts they had, they started comparing again: my gift is flashier than yours! People spoke in tongues but without an interpreter—which is roughly like trying to impress a blind person by the kind of car you drive. In Galatia, their immaturity was their inability to let go of the Law to embrace the love of Christ. In Rome, the Jews needed to get off their high horse, considering themselves the last bastion of truth.

And so one of Paul's central messages to the early churches was: Grow up!

I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ... You are still not ready. You are still worldly.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Their immaturity was manifesting itself in diverse ways.

Do not be entangled again by a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:26

For in fact the body is not one member but many... Members should have the same care for one another.

1 Corinthians 12:14, 25

A healthy church will always have believers at every level of maturity on the spectrum. A healthy church will have new converts who are mentored by wiser ones, the more mature serving as the church's rudder. The problem occurs when those who have been believers for awhile continue to subsist on "milk" instead of "meat."

The writer of Hebrews said,

By this time some of you ought to be teachers, but you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food... But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Hebrews 5:12, 14

A couple we know way back from Oklahoma City had a third child when they only planned two. Knowing this was her final child, the mother breast-fed this little boy until he was 3 ½.

The first message was *Grow up!* Setting aside your personal agendas for the good of the body is part of growing up. This leads to the second key problem the early churches faced:

2. Unity

When people are immature and demand their own way, when an eye for an eye is OK because feelings are hurt, unity suffers. Instead of maturing in the faith under the discipleship of the great church leaders that came to Corinth, they splintered into groups **around** the different leaders. Paul said,

I appeal to you...that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be united in mind and thought... One of you says, 'I follow Paul' another says 'I follow Apollos' another 'I follow Peter' still another, 'I follow Christ.'

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

Christian maturity produces unity in the Church. The thing Jesus prayed for the most before he was betrayed and taken into custody was for unity of the body, both then, as He gave His life, and later, as His church was formed. *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples..."* If you use the same language? If you vote the same? If you preach from the same version? If you condemn the same people? No... *"If you love one another."*

Paul said throughout his letters that what will distinguish us from all other self-centered, earthly organizations is if we treat each other differently. How? By not taking them to court, by loving them enough to speak the truth, by forgiving instead of backbiting, by accepting them as believers in Jesus even if they don't look like you, or have your background.

NOTE: Unity is not uniformity. Everyone doesn't have to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. Today the corollary might be you don't have to become a Republican before you become a Christian. Unity is not uniformity—but it is sameness of purpose. And for that, Jesus says, he who is not against us is for us. Mature believers will choose unity over winning.

3. Worldview

The Corinthian world was a stronghold of worldly philosophy, cultural immorality, and pagan idolatry. With Athens only 45 miles away, the Greeks prided themselves on their

philosophical debates and their refined knowledge. The Corinthians wanted to embrace the philosophical wisdom of her Athenian neighbors. In fact, it was in Athens was where Paul found the altar with the inscription, *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*.

Greek mythology believed in supernatural powers that intervened in the course of nature, an existence beyond their ability to understand. But Paul wanted them to see that once you've explored everything that all the best Greek minds know there are still questions only Jesus can answer. *[Read together at the middle of p. 421-422.]* It was as if it was now fashionable to cast out demons in the name of Jesus, since everybody was talking about Him. But what they were doing was playing with fire—they were attempting to leverage the power of God for their own use, without the required transformation that must accompany belief in Christ.

Today the post-modern crowd says hey, we embrace all forms of thought...Oprah says there are many avenues to "God", however you define him. Some say, in fact, isn't "God" the sum total of what Rick thinks, and what Bill, Todd, and Steve all think, rolled into one?

Come to think of it, can we really say any one philosophy is better than any other? Let's sit around and compare. This applies not just to the Gentiles, who loved sitting in Starbucks sipping their lattes and debating existentialism. It also applied to the Jews, whose worldview centered on themselves. After all, WE are God's children...

Paul addressed them in Romans:

You are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

Romans 2:19-20

The Jews, smug in their knowledge of the Law, were appalled that the Gentiles were invited to the party without a decoder ring, without being circumcised, without any credentials that were so important to the Jewish hierarchy.

So repeatedly, Paul had to bring them back to the essentials, which had nothing to do with Jewish accreditation.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Why do many Christian homes look the same as non-Christian homes? Because we haven't focused on the fundamentals. Because we do not trust the sovereignty of God when things turn bad. Because we do not see the Upper Story; because we do not see what happens to us through God-tinted glasses. Because we allow the world to shape *us* rather than *us* shaping the world.

The Jews thought they had all the answers already. The Gentiles liked to argue for arguments' sake. But Paul took them both to task:

Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.

Romans 12:2

In other words, a Christian worldview doesn't require all the answers—it is anchored in one unchangeable, bedrock truth: There are questions and problems in life that only Jesus Christ can answer. And so Paul takes a 2x4 to the pretentiousness of both the Jews and Gentiles and says:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God...

2 Corinthians 10:5

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

2 Timothy 2:23

Our worldview has to be rooted in a mysterious, unfathomable God who we trust as sovereign and in control. Both the philosophical debates of the Gentiles and the prized religious heritage of the Jews are meaningless when it comes to the problem of sin and the need for a Savior. Paul confronts these pretensions head-on.

4. Daily living

New believers had many questions about living out their faith in the real world. They still had to learn to navigate through decisions in daily life in a culture hostile to holy living. Believers were filing lawsuits against one another instead of settling matters privately and justly among themselves. They needed guidance in marriage, divorce, and living singly. They didn't know how to handle dietary problems that were associated with the idolatry around them. Christians were disruptive during worship and made the Lord's Supper an affair of gluttony. They had trouble discerning whether it was the Spirit speaking to them or a worldly or demonic influence. They established and then overthrew a holy "pecking order" to separate the "strong" from the "weak."

When it comes to living out your new life every day, Paul told them:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23

It's really pretty simple. Does the direction you're headed lead to things like peace and goodness between you? Then you're on the right track—that's how you start to make good decisions. Play the tape all the way to the end and think about the outcome. But if your direction will lead to...

...hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, and the feeling that everyone is wrong except you...

Galatians 5:20 NLT

...then you need to reconsider. Romans 14 says shouldn't you consider a more vulnerable brother before you exercise your "liberties?" Sure it may be OK for you to drink a glass of wine, but do you really want to insist on your own way in front of an alcoholic who's been sober for the last five years? Ephesians 5 says to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Do you really want to pull rank on your wife in light of the command to give yourself up for her?

What does holy living look like today? Think less about *your* rights and think more about others and how to serve them.

5. Doctrine

Paul was aghast that some among them had apparently dismissed a crucial aspect of the gospel and its implications on the Christian life. They were denying the resurrection! Paul gave them a written remedial lesson in the essentials of the gospel, including the non-negotiable point that Jesus was raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Based on Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Paul argued that all believers can look forward in hopeful expectation of our own future redemption of our bodies. Just as Christ was resurrected to live forever, so too will all Christians look forward to eternal life in a resurrected body. Paul reminded them that this teaching was THE basis of the Christian faith. If we all will not be resurrected, then Jesus Himself must not have been resurrected because He too is fully man. If Jesus was not resurrected then we are all still dead in our sins and our faith is worthless (1 Corinthians 15:13-17).

But there are also some non-essentials that are important to people. Do we make our opinions doctrine, or do we dismiss them, or do we love others well by respecting where they come from? Paul asked the Christians in Rome, Do you really want to make a federal case out of whether someone is a vegetarian or not? Whether they observe a day as sacred or not? Today we might ask the same about instrumental music or frequency of communion. Do you really want to draw those lines of fellowship, of doctrine, where the Word of God has not? Did not Christ die to set us free?

Requiring new believers to jump through Jewish hoops before they could be considered valid Christians was also a doctrinal issue. Paul asked the Galatians in chapter 3, would you start a work by the Holy Spirit and then finish it by human effort? Of course not!

Christian maturity produces unity in essential doctrines and liberty in the non-essentials. The mature Christian also knows the difference. The essentials according to Paul were:

- the purity of the gospel (death, burial and resurrection)
- salvation by grace through faith
- walking by the Holy Spirit
- Jesus as fully God and fully man, who paid the price of sin through His death and resurrection
- the truth and reliability of the Scriptures

What for you is a non-negotiable and what is a non-essential that we can allow for in Christian love and freedom?

6. Sexual Immorality

What happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth! Just do it! You only live once! Our culture is marked by indulgence, immorality, and self-gratification. But as the wise Solomon once wrote, “*There is nothing new under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 1:9c). The parallels between ancient Corinth and contemporary America are uncanny.

Because of her strategic port location, the immorality of Corinth was legendary. The economy was kept afloat with trade, sailors and the prostitution, gambling and other vices that accompanied the unsavory crowds that frequented this major metropolis. The temple of Aphrodite was known for its temple prostitutes and the term “corinthianize” was coined to describe sexual immorality. It’s here that immorality, the doctrine of grace, immaturity, and unity collide.

In one case, a man was sleeping with his own stepmother—a sin that even the Gentiles in the community repudiated. The Bible says the Corinthians were arrogant or proud—it could be they were proud because they had shown so much grace that they had forgotten the need to remove evil from their midst. But Paul corrects their doctrine, their concept of grace, their immaturity, and the need for unity and holiness in the body of Christ when he tells them to grow up and deal with this.

The Christian life is marked by morality. Like the Corinthian Church, converts into our church are coming out of a culture saturated in sex. Our morals cannot be shaped by the latest Victoria’s Secret ad. Paul had to write over and over again to the new churches that the purchase of Christ was so extravagant, it calls us to an uncommon devotion that requires walking away from the world, from gossip, slander, bitterness, and sexual activity outside of marriage.

How do you nurture along new believers in this radical new way of life? Where do you draw lines and where do you allow for liberties and matters of opinion? What’s okay and what’s not? What will *you* need to die to, in order to preserve the unity of the body of Christ?

These letters of Paul show us there are a million and one ways to live out your faith and the same number of ways to fool yourself. How do you keep your doctrine pure? Walk according to the Spirit? Preserve unity? Keep the right perspective in a confusing, sinful world? The letters to Galatia, Rome, Thessalonica, Colossae, and the rest tutor us to keep faithful.

The only question left to ask is this: what letter would he write to our church? Or perhaps more importantly, **what letter would Paul write to you?** Where would he encourage you to keep it up and where would he admonish and correct you?

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to [insert my name and city]. Greetings in the Lord. I know of your _____. Above all, let yourself _____.

Paul, to the church of God who meets at Bill’s house...I plead with you, brother, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to _____.

Paul, an apostle, to Ken and all the saints that meet with you: We do not want you to be ignorant of _____, but in all earnestness, pursue _____.

Our **Equipping Point** for this week is actually homework. In the next couple of days, write a letter to yourself, but not just any letter.

Set it up right by doing the following:

1. *Confess sins that you're aware of*
2. *Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal what a Paul might write to you personally*
3. *Pray for courage to hear this message without defensiveness*
4. *Sit down and write a letter to yourself*

This is a letter no one else will see, one that you can keep or shred. But to lead well, there is great value, at least once, to ask for transparency and guidance, and then write down what comes to mind. Who knows what God may be waiting to say to you?

Let's let Paul have the last word:

You are a letter from Christ prepared by us. It is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on stone, but on human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:3