

The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
ONE

PAUL AND HIS THEOLOGY



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson One

Paul and his Theology

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a friend you thought you knew really well, only to have something happen to show a side of him you'd never seen before? Something like this often happens when Christians begin a serious study of the apostle Paul. Now, most Christians are familiar with Paul and his epistles. We hear lots of sermons based on his letters, and we often focus on them in Bible studies. In many ways he feels like a familiar friend. But many Christians who dig deeper into Paul's life and theology are surprised by what they find.

In this series of lessons, we're going to explore *The Heart of Paul's Theology*. We've called this first lesson, "Paul and his Theology." We'll begin this study by looking at Paul's life and writings to find the essential elements in his theology.

We'll touch on three main subjects. First, we'll explore some important aspects of Paul's background to see how these deeply influenced his Christian beliefs. Second, we'll look at how Paul's beliefs related to his ministry as an apostle. And third, we'll identify Paul's central theological outlooks, those crucial ideas on which Paul based many of the things he taught to others. Let's begin with a look into Paul's cultural background.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

We all know from common experience that many things influence what we believe about God, about ourselves, and about the world around us. No one has ever developed theology in a vacuum, and this was true of Paul as well. Although the Holy Spirit led Paul into the truth of the Christian faith, the Spirit also used many aspects of Paul's background in the process of leading him to truth. And this means that if we want to understand the heart of Paul's theology, we have to become familiar with his life. Unfortunately, we don't know a lot about Paul's personal upbringing. But we do know that he grew up under two strong cultural influences. On the one hand, Jewish culture greatly affected him. And on the other hand, his exposure to Gentile, Greco-Roman culture impacted him in significant ways too.

JEWISH CULTURE

If we underestimate the influence Paul's Jewish heritage had on him, we're very likely to miss the heart of his theology. We can see how important this heritage was to him in several ways. On the one hand, the New Testament record makes it plain that Paul was very self-conscious of his Jewish heritage before he became a Christian. His own

description of his youth before his conversion reveals that he was firmly committed to Judaism. For example, in Philippians 3:5 Paul claimed to have been

... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5).

Paul was a religious conservative, fully dedicated to preserving and pursuing Israel's traditions. Listen to how he described himself in Galatians 1:14:

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:14).

In fact, before his conversion Paul's zeal for Judaism was so great that he violently persecuted the Christian church as a Jewish heresy. Beyond this, Paul was highly educated in the traditions of Judaism. According to Acts 22:3, he had even been a student of one of the most famous rabbis in Jerusalem, Rabbi Gamaliel. Far from being an ignorant fanatic, Paul was highly trained and sophisticated in his understanding of Jewish theology and Scripture.

Paul's Jewish culture was not simply important to him before he became a Christian; he also remained deeply indebted to this same heritage after his conversion. For instance, even as a Christian he continued to observe many Jewish customs. As he said in 1 Corinthians 9:20:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (1 Corinthians 9:20).

The New Testament records many times when Paul the Christian carefully followed the traditions of his fathers. Even after the Jews had severely persecuted Paul because of his faith in Christ, Paul's ethnic identity and loyalty were so strong that he still wanted desperately to save them. For example, in Romans 9:2-5 he wrote:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised (Romans 9:2-5).

With the importance of Paul's Jewish background in mind, we are now in a position to ask this question: How did Paul's background influence his Christian theology? In many ways, this influence is evident on nearly every page of Paul's epistles, but two items are particularly important to remember.

First, both as a Jew and as a Jewish Christian, Paul believed in the authority of the

Old Testament Scriptures. He trusted and submitted to them without reservation. Paul would never have believed anything that contradicted the teachings of the Old Testament. Unfortunately, at different times in the history of the church, and even in our own day, some theologians have suggested that Paul rejected the teachings of the Old Testament and replaced them with his new faith in Christ. But nothing could be further from the truth. Paul was fully rooted in the monotheism of Old Testament Israel and believed wholeheartedly in the moral requirements of the Hebrew Scriptures. Whatever else we may say about Paul, we know for certain that he never believed for a moment that his Christian faith drove a wedge between himself and the Old Testament. Instead, his commitment to Christ deepened his devotion to these Scriptures. Listen to how Paul instructed his protégé Timothy regarding the Old Testament in 2 Timothy 3:14:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

The Hebrew Bible continued to be Paul's Bible.

In the second place, Paul also held firmly to the Jewish belief that God would one day send the Messiah, the great son of David, who would end Israel's suffering and extend the kingdom of God to all the Gentile nations. In fact, the reason Paul converted to Christianity was that he believed Jesus to be this long-awaited Messiah. That's why Paul did not hesitate to call Jesus the Christ, or *Christos*, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Meshiach* or Messiah. Paul did not see Christianity as a replacement of Judaism. Rather, he believed that Christianity was the branch of Judaism which recognized that Jesus was the true Messiah.

These pillars of Jewish faith — complete submission to the Scriptures, and hope in the Messiah — were essential dimensions of Paul's Christian outlooks. In these and many other ways, Paul's central Christian beliefs depended on his Jewish heritage.

But Paul wasn't influenced by his Jewish heritage only. The Holy Spirit also used Paul's contact with Gentile culture to shape his theology.

GENTILE CULTURE

In the first place, we should note that throughout his life, Paul lived not only in Jewish Palestine, but at different times in his life he lived in the Gentile world as well. According to Acts 21:39, Paul came from the Gentile city of Tarsus in Cilicia. In Acts 22:3 we read that he had been brought up in Jerusalem. But Acts 9:30 and 11:25 indicate that Paul again lived in Tarsus as an adult.

In addition to this, Paul's contact with the Gentile world was enhanced by the fact that he enjoyed full Roman citizenship. In fact, according to Acts 22:28 he hadn't purchased his citizenship but had been born into it. On several occasions in the book of Acts, we read that Paul actively asserted his rights as a Roman citizen in order to promote the gospel and to defend himself.

Beyond this, Paul's letters to Gentile churches even demonstrate his willingness to observe Gentile customs for the sake of the Christian gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9:21 he made a remarkable declaration,

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law ... so as to win those not having the law (1 Corinthians 9:21).

Paul knew Gentile culture so well that he was able to walk the fine line of adapting his behavior to Gentile customs while still obeying Christ's law.

Finally, Paul also showed himself to be knowledgeable of sophisticated pagan literature. In passages like Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12 Paul actually referred to and even quoted pagan philosophers. He was well educated in the philosophies and religions of the Greco-Roman world.

Now, we have to ask ourselves, what effects did Paul's awareness of Gentile culture have on him? How did Paul's exposure to Gentile culture influence him? First of all, we should be clear that Paul's awareness of Gentile culture did not — as some have said — lead Paul to alter Christianity to make it acceptable to Gentiles. He remained distinctly Jewish in his basic orientation. Yet, Paul's contact with the Gentile world affected him in at least two ways. On the one hand, it equipped him to minister to Gentiles outside the church. Better than many, he knew the values and beliefs of Gentiles and was well prepared to bring the gospel to them in effective ways. This is why we read in Romans 11:13 that Paul called himself "the apostle to the Gentiles."

Beyond this, Paul was also prepared to minister to Gentiles within the church and even to fight for them. In fact, Paul's Gentile ministry embroiled him in one of the most serious controversies of the first-century church, namely, the question of whether or not to force Gentile believers to be circumcised. According to Acts 15, Paul played an important role in convincing the apostles and elders that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised. And in his letter to the Galatians, he spoke strongly in defense of the Gentile's rights not to undergo circumcision. But this one controversy represented a much broader concern Paul had for Gentiles in the church. While many Jewish Christians in his day considered Gentiles to be second-class believers at best, Paul insisted that Christ had destroyed the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. As he wrote in Galatians 3:28-29:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:28-29).

A central theme in many of Paul's epistles was that Jesus had flung open the door of salvation to the Gentile nations so that any Gentile who was in Christ was counted as a full-blooded Jew and perfect Law-keeper in God's eyes.

So we see that Paul's background in Jewish and Gentile cultures influenced him in many ways. And with this dual background in mind, we're in a position to see how Paul's theology related to his ministry.

APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

As we will learn, Paul's service to the church provided a constant reference point for his theology and deeply influenced what he believed. And for this reason we should look into several dimensions of his ministry. We'll look specifically at three aspects of Paul's ministry: his apostolic office, his apostolic mission, and his apostolic writings.

OFFICE

On at least twenty occasions, Paul described himself as an "apostle," often with the qualification that he was "an apostle of Jesus Christ." This claim to apostleship was very important because Christ ordained apostles to speak with absolute authority to the church on his behalf. Now, we all know that Paul wasn't one of the original apostles whom Jesus had chosen during his earthly ministry. Still, Paul claimed to be Christ's authoritative representative. Paul insisted that he had received an apostleship equal to the original apostles. But how was this possible? The answer lies in the fact that Paul met a set of qualifications established for apostleship.

As the apostles awaited the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter determined that a new apostle should replace Judas. So, Peter explained that authoritative apostles of Christ had to meet three criteria. First, according to Acts 1:21 they had to have been taught directly by Christ during his earthly ministry. Second, in Acts 1:22 we read that they had to be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. And third, in Acts 1:23-26 we find that new apostles had to be chosen for the office by the Lord himself.

But what about Paul? At first glance he fails to meet the first criterion for apostleship — after all, he didn't follow Jesus during his earthly ministry. But a closer look reveals his qualification. In Galatians 1:11-18 Paul reported that immediately after his conversion he spent three years in the Arabian wilderness. He mentioned the length of this period to demonstrate that it roughly equaled the time which the other apostles had spent with Jesus. During those years, Jesus himself taught the gospel to Paul. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 1:11-12:

The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

Paul also met the second criterion. In Acts 9:1-6 we read that Paul actually saw the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. He had seen the risen Savior. Finally, according to Acts 9:15, Jesus himself ordained Paul to his office:

This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9:15).

And lest there be any doubt about the validity of Paul's apostleship Galatians 2:7-8 tell us

that the original apostles confirmed his call and apostleship. As Paul wrote, the others

... saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7-8).

The other apostles recognized that Paul's apostleship was comparable to Peter's. Listen to Peter's words in 2 Peter 3:15-16:

Our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him... His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16).

According to Peter, Paul's epistles were to be set on par with "the other Scriptures."

In the early church there were many false teachers who contradicted Paul's teachings. So, to counter these false teachers the New Testament made it clear that Paul was a legitimate apostle. More than this, Paul presented outlooks to the church which were difficult to grasp and even harder to accept. Yet, when he served in his role as Christ's ambassador, Paul spoke with the authority of other apostles and wrote with the authority of Scripture. No matter what anyone said, their perspectives had to be judged by the standard of Paul's teachings. His writings actually carry the authority of Christ himself. We cannot follow Christ without following Paul. Even today faithful Christians must conform their theology to his.

MISSION

Now that we have Paul's apostolic authority in mind, we should look at his apostolic mission. What did Paul do as an apostle? What was his job? We can get a good idea of the kind of work Paul did by looking at his three missionary journeys and at his trip to Rome. Let's begin with an overview of his first journey as an apostle of Christ.

First Journey

We learn about Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13–14. It began when God told the church in Syrian Antioch to set aside Paul and Barnabas for a special work. Immediately after this the Holy Spirit led these men through the isle of Cyprus. After several opportunities for ministry there, they moved forward on an evangelistic tour of Asia Minor. Paul's initial practice was to proclaim the gospel primarily in the Jewish synagogues. But after meeting much resistance from the Jews, he began to preach to the Gentiles as well.

Paul successfully planted a number of churches on this journey, including quite a

few in the region of Galatia. After traveling to the east as far as Derbe, Paul and Barnabas reversed their direction. They returned through the cities of Galatia, eventually reaching the sea and sailing for home.

Paul's first journey as an apostle of Christ was relatively short and uncomplicated. But his second journey took him much further from the land of Palestine.

Second Journey

Paul's second missionary journey appears in Acts 15:36–18:22. This expedition began when the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem selected Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter to the churches in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia and Galatia, explaining that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised or to keep the Law of Moses in order to gain salvation.

Now, just before the journey began Paul had a falling out with Barnabas, so they parted ways and Paul teamed up with Silas. These two traveled first through Syria and then through Cilicia until they reached Galatia. It was in Lystra of that region that Timothy joined Paul in his journey.

As Paul continued, he wanted to preach the gospel to the north in Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prohibited him. So, Paul traveled to the coastal city of Troas. There the reason for the Holy Spirit's prohibition became clear through Paul's famous "Macedonian Vision." In this vision a man begged him to preach the gospel in Macedonia, the northern province of Greece. So, Paul and his party immediately responded to this dream by sailing for that province. Paul planted many churches in Greece, including those in Philippi and Thessalonica in the north.

Eventually he moved southward, visiting Athens and planting a church in Corinth. Paul then went to Ephesus, and after a period of time there, he made his way back to Palestine.

Third Journey

Paul's second missionary journey was soon followed by a third expedition on which he traveled far into the west again. Paul's third missionary journey appears in Acts 18:23–21:17. In these travels Paul went from Syrian Antioch through Galatia and Phrygia, and then established a thriving ministry in Ephesus. After this he spent several months traveling in Greece from north to south and back to the north again. He visited churches he had planted in his previous trip to the region. Then the apostle headed back toward Jerusalem by land and by sea.

When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey the Jews falsely accused him of sedition, and the Romans arrested him. After spending two years in prison, Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen to have his case heard before Caesar. This appeal to Caesar led to a fourth journey, which took him to Rome.

Fourth Journey

The record of this trip appears in Acts 27–28. Paul traveled most of this journey by ship. Between Crete and the Isle of Malta, a terrible storm completely destroyed the vessel which held Paul and a number of other prisoners. The crew, the guards, Paul, and his companions were shipwrecked on the isle of Malta for three months before they were able to get passage to Rome. Paul remained under house arrest in Rome from A.D. 60 to 62. He was able to minister freely during this time.

Tradition tells us that Paul was acquitted by Nero and that he then traveled toward Spain preaching the gospel. Some evidence from the epistles to Timothy and Titus also suggests that he traveled eastward establishing and strengthening churches there as well. But probably around A.D. 65 or shortly thereafter, Nero had Paul arrested once again and finally he executed the apostle.

A quick glance at the region between Jerusalem and Rome reveals that Paul visited many different places making contact with thousands of people in more than twenty-five cities. What are we to learn from the fact that he endured such extensive travels? What do they tell us about the heart of Paul's theology?

Needless to say, there are many things we can learn about Paul's theology from his missionary journeys. But one of the most important things we learn is that Paul's theology did not allow him to be an armchair theologian. To be sure, Paul was well educated and was very intelligent. But his theology led him to a life of sacrifice and service. So, as we look into the heart of Paul's theology, we must not settle for a set of ideas or beliefs divorced from practical living. We must be looking for something radical and life-transforming. When we properly understand Paul's theology, it will inspire and guide us, as it guided him, into lives of radical service to Christ, the church, and the world.

We are now in a position to turn to a third aspect of his ministry: his apostolic writings, or New Testament epistles.

WRITINGS

Because Paul lived in the trenches of constant practical ministry, he was familiar with the particular issues that troubled the churches he visited. Now you can imagine that the problems in Galatia were different from the issues in Ephesus. And the problems in Ephesus were different from the challenges in Corinth. Every place he went was different. As a result, when Paul wrote his epistles he was concerned to address the specific needs of those situations.

In the New Testament we have thirteen letters which Paul wrote at different times in his ministry. Now, because Paul's letters were so occasional, that is, written to address specific problems, none of his letters lays out his whole theology in an orderly or systematic way. Instead, his epistles contain pastoral applications of his theology. It's evident in most cases that Paul wrote his letters to address specific issues in the church, and we will explore this reality in detail in future lessons.

But to illustrate how much this is true, let's think for a moment about the book of Romans. Many Christians have mistakenly treated the book of Romans as a systematic, abstract outline of Paul's theology. And so, they have concluded that the themes on the surface of the book form the heart of Paul's theological system. But a closer examination of Romans reveals that Paul wrote even this book to address particular problems. One of the main reasons Paul wrote to them was to stabilize relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome.

An overview of the structure of Romans makes this pastoral focus very plain. In the first three chapters, Paul focused on proving that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners and that neither has a right to claim superiority over the other. In chapters 4–8 he stressed how God has provided the same way of salvation both for Jews and Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing before God. In chapters 9–11 Paul focused on the complementary roles of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan for human history. Then, after stressing these doctrinal themes, in chapters 12–16 he tackled several issues of practical Christian living that were closely related to conflicts between Jews and Gentiles.

For example, in chapter 12 he insisted that despite their diversity Christians should function as a unified body. In chapter 13 he promoted stability by urging Christians to submit even to Gentile civil governments. And in chapters 14–16, before closing this epistle, Paul focused on the need for mutual understanding between Jews and Gentiles with respect to Jewish and Gentile customs.

This brief sketch of Paul's letter to Rome shows that Paul did not intend Romans to be an abstract statement of his beliefs. Instead, this book primarily answered the pastoral issue of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian church. Romans was an application of Paul's theology to some very specific needs.

We are right to believe that Paul had a well-formed, logical set of theological beliefs, or what we might call a systematic theology. But Paul's system of theology remained unwritten, even though it undergirded his epistles. As far as we know, Paul's system of theology never reached a fully written form. Nevertheless, we can reconstruct it to a great extent, based on the letters he did write.

To reconstruct Paul's theological system, we should not look primarily at the topics he mentioned the most. This is because he spent most of his time writing about matters that were of particular interest to the church in his day. Instead, we have to ask: What principles supported the specific things Paul wrote? What coherent patterns of belief best explain his specific teachings? What doctrines connect the various things he wrote to different churches? By answering questions like these, we will be able to reconstruct Paul's theology. And we will understand more clearly how Paul's letters were intended to guide the first century church and how they should guide us today.

Now that we have some basic perspectives on Paul's background and ministry, we're ready to look directly at Paul's theological outlooks.

CENTRAL OUTLOOKS

At this point we need to ask some critical questions: What was the structure of Paul's theology? What kinds of beliefs undergirded what he taught in his epistles? The

answers to these questions are essential to a proper understanding of Paul.

Now, Paul has been influential in so many Christian traditions that it is impossible even to mention every way his theology has been understood. We'll limit ourselves to two basic directions interpreters have gone: the Reformation perspective on Paul's theology, and what we will call the eschatological perspective which has become influential in recent decades. Let's look first at the Reformation outlook on Paul.

REFORMATION

How did the Protestant Reformers understand the structure of Paul's theology? In the centuries prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that salvation required both God's grace and human merit. According to this teaching, justification is a long process by which God infuses grace into the believer, and this grace allows the believer to become more righteous by doing good works. People are fully justified and saved when they have done enough good works to be counted truly righteous by the standard of God's law.

But as leading Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin read the letters of Paul, they concluded that the legalistic Catholic interpretation of Paul was wrong. They followed the teaching of Augustine that justification is imputed all at once and entirely apart from human works, not infused over a long period of time and mixed with human effort. Sanctification, the long process of the Christian life, follows justification and continues for the entire life of believers. But justification is God's once-for-all-time legal declaration that a believer has been acquitted of the guilt of sin and credited with the righteousness of Christ.

This belief came to be known as *sola fide* — by faith alone — because it understood us to be justified solely by means of faith in Christ and not by means of faith plus our good works. Without a doubt, the Reformers were right to find this doctrine in Paul's writings. In the early church some parties of Jewish believers known as Judaizers argued that salvation results from a mixing of divine grace and human works. But Paul opposed this legalism in the early church and insisted that justification was a unique event that occurred apart from works of the law. The parallels between the controversies of the Reformation and the controversies Paul faced are plain enough. The legalism of the Roman Catholic Church roughly corresponded to the legalism of the Judaizers, and *sola fide* of the Reformation paralleled the teaching of Paul.

As a result, by and large Protestants have held that Paul developed his theology primarily around the theme of how salvation is applied to individual believers. In traditional theological terms, Paul's theology was thought to be structured around the *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation, which is the process by which salvation in Christ is applied to you and me. In the tradition of the Reformation, most Protestants believe that the *ordo salutis*, and especially justification by faith alone, is the most central concept in Paul's theology. They believe it's the heart of his theology.

Of course, throughout the centuries Protestants have realized that Paul believed many things other than justification by faith alone. He was very concerned with the long history of God's redemption that climaxed in the death and resurrection of Christ. In theological terms, we call this aspect of his teaching *historia salutis*, or the history of

salvation. But for the most part, until recent years the traditional understanding of Paul's theology was that the history of salvation was less important than the order of salvation. Even now most Protestants don't see the history of salvation as the center of Paul's theology.

ESCHATOLOGICAL

As dominant as the early Protestant view has been in the interpretation of Paul, it has not gone unchallenged. Another complementary point of view has come to the foreground in recent decades, which we will call the eschatological perspective on Paul's theology. This perspective has reassessed the idea that the order of salvation was more central to Paul's theology than the history of salvation.

Now, it's true that many other outlooks on Paul's theology have also been suggested in recent decades. Some prominent theologians have argued that Paul's theology focused primarily on merging his Jewish background with Greek philosophies. Others have seen Paul as primarily endorsing rational ethical living over the passions of the flesh. Still others have argued that Paul's theology was deeply influenced by Hellenistic mystery religions or Jewish apocalypticism. Some of these viewpoints offer some insights into Paul's theology, but none of them has proven to be as helpful as the eschatological outlook on his theology.

To examine the eschatological outlook on Paul's theology we will focus on three subjects: first, the terminology of eschatology; second, the structure of Paul's eschatology; and third, the implications of Paul's eschatology. Let's look first at the term "eschatology."

Terminology

The term "eschatology" comes from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means "last" or "end." Thus, eschatology is the doctrine or teaching of the last things, or the end of time. The Old Testament frequently uses terms like "last days" or "end times" to refer to the great climax of the history of salvation that was to take place when Messiah finally came to earth. And on a number of occasions, the New Testament points to the fulfillment of these Old Testament "last days" or "end times" in Jesus, the Messiah. It is from this use of the Greek word *eschatos* that we derive our theological term "eschatology," the doctrine of the "last days" or "end times."

Now in traditional systematic theology, the term "eschatology" has primarily referred to the Bible's teaching about the second coming of Christ. But when we talk about the "eschatological" approach of Paul, we must expand the term to refer to much more than the second coming of Christ. As we will see, Paul understood everything about Christ, from his first to his second coming, in terms of eschatology, or the end times.

Structure

To see how we are expanding the term “eschatology” to include more than the second coming of Christ, we have to turn our attention to the structure of Paul’s eschatology. How did Paul conceive of the last days, or the end of time? Our exploration of this topic will divide into three parts: the origins, the development, and themes of Paul’s eschatology. Let’s look first at the origins of Paul’s eschatology.

Origins. In Paul’s day, Jewish theologians commonly thought that the Old Testament divided world history into two great ages. The first of these was the present age of sin and trouble, which they termed “this age,” or in Hebrew, *olam hazeh*. “This age” reached its low point in Israel’s suffering the divine curse of exile from the Promised Land. Not surprisingly, Jewish theologians spoke of “this age” in very negative terms.

But the rabbis also believed that there would be a future age of blessing to follow this age of trouble. They called this future age “the age to come,” or in Hebrew, *olam haba*. In the age to come, God would finally fulfill all his promises of blessings to Israel.

Most Jewish groups in Paul’s time believed that the appearance of the Messiah would stand as the crucial turning point between these ages. When the Messiah came, he was to bring the day of the Lord, the day when God would ultimately bless his people and destroy his enemies. This was the day that would usher in the age to come.

When we read Paul’s epistles, it becomes apparent that he also held this same basic two-age view of history. In fact, he directly referred to the age in which he lived as “this age” on at least twelve occasions. For example, Paul referred to Satan as “the god of this age” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. And he spoke of the pagan philosopher as “the philosopher of this age” in 1 Corinthians 1:20.

Similarly, Paul used the expression “the age to come” to refer to the future age when final judgments and blessings will come to the human race. For instance, in 1 Timothy 6:19 Paul encouraged believers to be faithful in order to lay for themselves “a firm foundation for the coming age.” And in Ephesians 2:7 he said that God raised Christ from the dead so that “in the coming ages he might show the . . . riches of his grace.”

Perhaps the best example of Paul’s two-age thinking appears in Ephesians 1:21. There he referred explicitly to both ages when he wrote that Christ was seated

far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:21).

With this basic two-age pattern in mind, we should now turn to the way Paul developed a distinctively Christian eschatology.

Development. You’ll recall that in traditional Jewish eschatology the turning point between this age and the age to come was the appearance of the Messiah. For centuries the Jews had believed that when the Messiah came God’s people would immediately receive his full blessings, while his enemies would meet immediate destruction. As a follower of Jesus, however, Paul faced a serious challenge to this longstanding belief. He knew that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah — but he also knew that Jesus had not brought the

world to a climactic end as Israel had expected. Like Jesus himself, and like the rest of the New Testament, Paul answered this problem by modifying traditional Jewish eschatology.

As Paul explained it, the transition from this age to the age to come was not a simple shift from one age to the next. Instead, it involved a period of overlap when both ages occurred simultaneously. From his point of view the age to come had been inaugurated through the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Paul was also confident that when Christ returned in glory this evil age would end, and the age to come would arrive in all its fullness with ultimate blessings for God's people and final judgment for his enemies. In the meantime, however, both ages — this age and the age to come — exist alongside each other.

With the origins and development of the structure of Paul's eschatology in mind, it will be helpful to describe some themes in Paul's letters that must be understood in terms of the overlapping ages of history.

Themes. It has become common to describe Paul's view of eschatology as "already and not yet," because Paul believed that some aspects of the end times or last days had already become reality in Christ, while other aspects had not yet been realized. Let's unpack what this description means.

On the one hand, according to Paul, the age to come is already here in a number of different ways. We will mention three ways this theme appears in Paul's writings. In the first place, Paul taught that the final stage of the kingdom of God began when Jesus ascended to his heavenly throne. For example, Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:20-21 that when the Father raised Christ from the dead, he

... seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Although at the present time Christ's reign is realized primarily in the heavenly realms rather than on earth, it is still true that Christ already reigns above all rule and authority. In this sense, the reign of God in the age to come is a present reality.

A second aspect of the age to come which is already present with us is the foretaste of our eternal inheritance in the Holy Spirit. Paul taught that when Christ ascended to his throne on high, he poured out the Holy Spirit on the church as a foretaste of the full inheritance we will receive when Christ returns. In Romans 8:23 Paul explained this by saying that believers are those "who have the firstfruits of the Spirit." "Firstfruits" is a translation of the Greek word *aparche* which is itself a translation of an Old Testament term designating the first portion of a harvest. The firstfruits indicated that a greater harvest was coming in the future. So, for Paul, the gift of the Holy Spirit in every believer's life is a foretaste of the great blessings of the age to come.

In a similar way, according to Ephesians 1:14, the Holy Spirit himself is

... a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession (Ephesians 1:14).

The Greek term translated “deposit” is *arrabon*. This terminology points to the Holy Spirit as God’s down payment or deposit to us, guaranteeing that we will receive much more from God in the future. Once again, the Holy Spirit is a blessing of the age to come which God has already given to us.

Finally, Paul also pointed to the fact that Christ had inaugurated the new creation associated with the age to come. Because of what Christ has done, believers now enjoy, in part, the re-creation of the world. In the Old Testament God had promised his people that in the last days he would completely re-create the world, making it as perfect as it was before man’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Listen to how the Lord described the coming age to Isaiah in Isaiah 65:17:

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17).

In Paul’s mind the fact that Christ was already saving people proved that the re-creation of the world had begun. 2 Corinthians 5:17 expresses this idea well:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV).

Even though Paul taught that many aspects of the age to come had already been inaugurated when Christ first came, Paul also believed that the blessings of the last days had not yet come in their fullness. So, he looked forward to Christ’s return as the time when Christ would fulfill the final judgments and blessings. Once again, we will mention three ways in which Paul’s perspective comes into view.

In the first place, as we’ve seen, Paul taught that Christ the King is now reigning from his throne in heaven. But Paul also believed that when Christ returns he will bring in the fullness of God’s Kingdom. Listen to the way he put it in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26:

Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:24-26).

This passage makes it plain that Paul looked beyond the present reign of Christ to the future destruction of all dominion, authority and power that stands against the purposes of God. Christ will remain on his heavenly throne until every enemy is destroyed, including death itself. So, in one sense, Paul believed that Christ’s kingdom was already here, but in another sense, he believed that it was not yet here.

In the second place, as we’ve seen, Paul believed that the Holy Spirit is the firstfruits of the harvest of salvation and the down payment of our inheritance. But the terms “firstfruits” and “down payment” indicate that the full reception of our inheritance is in the future. Listen to the way Paul put it in Romans 8:23:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

Here Paul directly related the present reality of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the future. Because the age to come is already here, we already have the Spirit. But we still groan inwardly because we have not received the redemption of our bodies.

In much the same way, in Ephesians 1:14 Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit is

... a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession (Ephesians 1:14).

The Spirit is a wondrous foretaste, but only a foretaste, of a greater redemption — our full inheritance.

Finally, although the new creation has become a spiritual reality in the lives of believers, we also await the complete renewal of creation and our eternal reign over the new earth. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:21, at the same time that we receive our new bodies,

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

Paul looked forward to the return of Christ as the time when the new creation would come in all its fullness.

We have touched on only a few of the ways Paul handled important themes in terms of this age and the age to come. But we have sketched the basic pattern that underlies all of his outlooks. The age to come is a present reality with many blessings for believers. But this age will not end completely, and the age to come will not reach its fullness, until Christ returns in glory. In the meantime, the troubles of this age and the wonders of the next age exist side by side.

Having seen the structure of Paul's eschatology, we should turn to some important implications of his views.

Implications

As we've seen, Paul expressed his theology largely in the context of pastoral ministry. He didn't focus on abstract theology, but on concrete human experience. Even his eschatology wasn't an abstraction. Rather, Paul believed that many difficulties facing the church resulted from the tension of living during the overlap of this age and the age to come. So, in his writings, Paul explained what God had done for believers in the first coming and taught Christians how to live their lives as they waited for Christ's return.

To unpack this practical focus of Paul's eschatology, we'll look at three topics: first, union with Christ; second, divine purpose; and third, Christian hope. Let's look first at Paul's teaching about union with Christ.

Union with Christ. In Romans 6:3-4 Paul indicated that our union with Christ actually moves us from this age to the next age. Writing of union with Christ again in terms of baptism, Paul asked:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3-4).

Simply put, the shift from this age to the age to come took place objectively in the death and resurrection of Christ. But every time men and women come to Christ in saving faith, they are joined to his resurrection. As a result, we no longer live under slavery to sin and God's judgment against it. We are given new lives, resurrected lives, so that we may live in the freedom of service to Christ. As Paul continued to explain in Romans 6:10 and 11:

The death [Christ] died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:10-11).

Paul's teaching about our union with Christ applied eschatology to the practical lives of all believers. Just as Jesus left this age and its judgment behind, we also have been delivered from sin and judgment. And just as Jesus now lives in the power of the age to come, we now live in that power too.

Once we have grasped how our union with Christ by faith has given us new life, we face a difficult question: Why has God designed a period of overlap between this age and the age to come? What is God's purpose?

Divine Purpose. Paul's own missionary work among the Gentiles testifies to his belief that God's plan for the overlap of the ages included uniting believing Jews and Gentiles into one people of God.

Paul also believed that God had designed the overlap between this age and the age to come so that the church might reach a measure of spiritual maturity. At times he portrayed this idea in terms of building the temple of God, as in Ephesians 2:19-22. At other times, he spoke of it in terms of a maturing human body, as in Ephesians 4:15-16. Paul understood that the spiritual maturing of the church was one of God's central purposes for the overlap between this age and the age to come.

Paul realized that this outlook on history was unusual. It hadn't been revealed in the past. That's why he spoke of it as a mystery which God had revealed to him and which he had to explain to others. In Romans 11:25, Paul wrote these words:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25).

In this passage Paul indicated that God was using this present time when many Jews have been hardened to the gospel to save the “full number” or “fullness” of the Gentiles. As he indicated in Ephesians 3:4-6:

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:4-6).

Paul's outlook on God's purposes provided an orientation for all believers living during the overlap of this age and the age to come. Both on corporate and individual levels, Christians should not look at this period as a time for quietly waiting for the fullness of the age to come. On the contrary, God has designed this period for great activity. This is a time for rescuing many from every nation on earth, and for bringing the church to spiritual maturity. For this reason, Paul devoted his own life to spreading the gospel and building up the church, and he called others to join him in that work.

Paul's teaching about our union with Christ during the overlap of this age and the age to come also provides an essential source of hope for individual Christians as they struggle with the challenges of life.

Christian Hope. Paul knew much suffering in his own ministry as an apostle, and he knew that all Christians suffer in one way or another. But Paul's eschatology offered hope to Christians in at least two ways.

On the one hand, Paul's eschatology gives us hope for the future by pointing out that we have already begun to enjoy many benefits of the age to come. When we look at our lives and see those blessings of the age to come that we already possess, it gives us hope that we will possess even greater and fuller blessings in the future. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day... So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

On the other hand, the blessings that still lie ahead of us are so astounding that they utterly overshadow any trials we experience in this life. It was this belief that led Paul to write in Romans 8:18 that

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Our present distresses are only temporary. Jesus will eventually end this present evil age and re-create the world as a glorious gift for his children.

Paul admitted that we are outwardly wasting away because of the troubles of this life, but he also declared that we are being inwardly renewed day by day because of the blessings of the age to come that are already ours. Freedom from sin and the power of the Spirit enable us to delight in this daily inward renewal so that we fix our eyes on our eternal hope in Christ. Our foretastes of the age to come help us look forward to the full banquet that awaits us at Christ's return.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have taken a brief look into Paul and his theology. We've seen how Paul's background deeply informed his theology, and how his apostolic ministry related to his Christian beliefs. We've also gained some important insights into the central focus of Paul's theology by exploring his eschatology. With these perspectives in mind, we will be better equipped to look deeper into Paul's life and epistles in future lessons. Not only will we have a better grasp of what Paul taught the early church in his day, but we will be able to see more clearly what his teachings mean for us today.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
ONE

Paul and His Theology Faculty Forum



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson One: Paul and His Theology

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Reggie M. Kidd

Students
Andrew Litke
Wes Sumrall

Question 1:

What details do we know about Paul's background?

Student: Reggie, the lesson said that we don't know a lot about Paul's background or his upbringing. I was wondering if there are any other details that the lesson didn't mention that you may know. Or perhaps, in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, if there is anything there, what we can depend on that book?

Dr. Kidd: Well, in the book, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* there is a physical description of Paul being a short stubby little guy with balding and his eyebrows going all the way across his head but that was written late in the 2nd century by somebody who had no reason to know what he was taking about. In fact, he was defrocked for making up this forgery. So for instance, what Paul actually looked like, we have no idea. And we don't know a lot of the specifics of his childhood. He says in the book of Acts that he was raised in Jerusalem, at the feet of Gamaliel. But we know a little bit from outside historians about the Tarsus that he was born in and at least the early part of his childhood growing up in. In fact the Roman geographer Strabo who wrote describing the Tarsus of what would have been Paul's childhood, describes some things about life in that city that do seem to show up in Paul. He says it was a city that highly prized education and Strabo says that one of the things that characterized the orators or the public speakers from Tarsus was that they could speak extemporaneously, that is without a text, without any notes, for a long time. And there is the story of poor Eutychus who winds up falling asleep sitting on an upper story in a room where Paul is preaching way into the night and he falls down and dies, and then Paul raises him from the dead.

And there is another anecdote from Tarsus that talks about the acrimony that civic debates could take on and winds up with people making humor about people's defecating. And then it escalates with excrement being thrown up against a wall and people just really being vicious towards each other. It just kind of reminds you that the world that Paul grew up in, and even in Jerusalem where he studies under Gamaliel, we know that the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Zealots, they're ready to go after each other in a heartbeat. And was Paul himself was a Zealot ready to go after Christians and put them in jail and have them executed if that's what it takes to protect the integrity of God. It's amazing, given that sort of background, to

see how much Paul tries to bring people together. He himself is perfectly capable of being pretty earthy in his own expressions. I mean he talks about his own righteousness being as so much refuse but he uses his powerful ability to communicate. He uses his amazing education, his educational background all in the service of what he calls in 2 Corinthians, “the meekness of Christ”, to try to bring people together and to articulate the loveliness and the wonder of Christ. So it’s really pretty amazing to think about the kind of guy he would have been in growing up where grew up and the kind of man that Christ made him to be.

Question 2:

Did Paul replace the Old Testament with faith in Christ?

Student: Reggie, the lesson talks about how there are those who thought that Paul rejected the Old Testament and replaced its teachings with faith in Christ. Are there some examples that you could give us of people in history that thought this way?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I don’t suppose you guys have ever known anybody like that. I mean, how many times have you heard, “Don’t give me the Old Testament God of wrath. Just give me the New Testament God of love.” I mean, it’s an idea that has been around since the beginning of Christianity. That voice really came to afore in the middle of the 2nd century when around AD 140, a man named Marcion who was originally from the middle of Turkey, Southeast Asia wound up in Rome teaching that there were two different gods, an Old Testament God of wrath and a New Testament God of love. And his main texts were ten of Paul’s letters. He had cut out 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus because they had too much Old Testament in them. And he liked Luke, minus Luke’s Old Testament quotes but there was no Matthew, Mark, or John and there was nothing else in the New Testament, just the ten letters of Paul that Marcion liked. And he used Paul as though Paul had denied the Old Testament God and was teaching a whole new God who was just love, no justice or holiness.

And there is nothing that can be further away from the truth of what Paul taught. Paul taught that the Old Testament God of wrath had sent his Son in love to bear his own wrath. And that’s why Paul can say in Romans 3 that God is just and justifier precisely because he set forth his own Son to be the propitiation or the atonement for our sins because he had passed over all the sins that had been done before and laid out his own Son so that he could pour out his just wrath that we deserve onto his own Son. And what it means for Paul is that when we receive Christ we receive the one who fulfilled the law for us and was totally just and totally satisfied the holy demands of his own Father. And it means that when God looks at us he hasn’t put aside justice and holiness for the sake of love. He has brought love and holiness together, mercy and justice together. And it seems to me like that would make a lot of difference in the way people live if we understand that there is one God who is both holy and just on one hand and merciful and loving on the other. But have you guys run across this sort of idea?

Student: Oh yeah, all the time in my churches and everything like that. But I was wondering, when you are relaying all this information to the people in your churches, should you emphasize more sermons on the Old Testament or should you adjust how we do the New Testament and bring in more of the Old Testament through that?

Dr. Kidd: That's a great question. I think there is a lot of wisdom in preaching from all over the Bible. If you are going to preach from Paul a while then preach from Moses for a while. Then preach from a gospel for a while. Then preach from part of the Old Testament that includes like the Psalms or the Proverbs for a while. And always see the Old Testament as being incomplete apart from Jesus who completes its story. And also, when you preach Jesus and as Paul interprets Jesus as itself, as the whole complex of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as being itself a crystallization and a living out in person of the story of Israel. So I think it's really important to keep going back and forth and seeing one necessarily incomplete without the other. I mean, you can't understand the New Testament apart from its being the rounding out, the cap-stoning, the completion of the story that begins in the Old Testament and will be completed in the book of Revelation.

Question 3:

How has the Reformed tradition viewed the relationship between the Old and New Testament?

Student: In the lesson we talked about some of the reformed distinctive of Paul and how the reformers discussed Paul. Are there any things about the Reformed tradition that bring out the Old Testament and the New Testament that cohere that together?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, one of the things about the Reformed tradition as opposed to maybe some other protestant traditions is the Reformed tradition really always kept a high view of the law. John Calvin in particular, for instance, in his worship services didn't just use the Ten Commandments to convict people of their sin, although that is one of the things the Ten Commandments do and we understand that from Paul because the commandments drive us to Christ by showing us our sinfulness. But in John Calvin's churches, you would also use the Ten Commandments after you had confessed sin and asked God for the power to live those lives because for Paul it's a "both/and". The law does show us that we need a Savior because we cannot be good enough. But for those of us who were redeemed, the law still communicates to us the character of God and describes what the image-bearer of God looks like and gives us a picture of what the Holy Spirit is transforming us into. And so for this particular part of the Reformation movement the law is still what it was for David, something to delight in, something that we lay up in our hearts not just so that we can stay away from sin but so that we can see positively the path that we are supposed to walk on, or walk down.

Question 4:**How can Gentiles be counted as Jews and perfect law-keepers in Christ?**

Student: Reggie, so what do you mean that Gentiles in Christ are full-blooded Jews as well as perfect law-keepers?

Dr. Kidd: The first thing to remember is that Israel's whole mission according to what God told Abraham when he instituted the covenant with him in the first place is God was intending to bless all the nations through Abraham's family. And then God told Abraham, "Look at the sky, look at the stars. Can you count them? No, you can't and that is how many kids you are going to have. Look at the sand can you count the sand? No, you can't cause I am going to give you that many kids and more." And the whole program of redemption in the Old Testament is to undo the mess that Adam had created through this one family. And through that one family, God was going to bring back into family relationship with himself people all around the world. And what was supposed to distinguish Israel, and we see this especially in the covenant given to Moses is that this was to be a people marked as those who love God who all their heart, their soul, their mind, and their strength and they were to love their neighbors as themselves. The problem is, nobody could do that. Adam couldn't do it. Abraham couldn't do it. Moses couldn't do it. Only one person ever did it and that's the one that Paul says was the true seed of Abraham. And he did that obedience that was to be a true hallmark of what it is to be God's, to love God completely and to love your neighbor.

But he went a step further and on the cross, as Paul describes in Galatians 3, he took the curse not just of Israel but of the whole world into himself for the failure to obey, for the failure to love. And when God raised him from the dead, God said, "I am satisfied." And then what happens when anybody comes into an obedient relationship to God by means of having faith in the Christ that God sent, who paid for our sins, for that person's sins, that person becomes a member of Abraham's family. Abraham's line is counted by faith. Abraham himself was justified by faith. And all those... What Paul says in Romans that Abraham became the father of all who believe, not just those who got circumcised but those who would never get circumcised. So what happens is those of us who belong to Christ become members of God's people which means God looks on us just the same as he looks on everybody, whether they are Jew or Gentile, as his own. So it means, what Jews were supposed to be in the Old Testament, a picture of people who were lovers of God and faithful to him, all those who belong to Jesus Christ now are and that means we are member of what Paul would call and did call in Galatians 6, the Israel of God. So yeah, in that sense those who belong to Christ are seen as being the God lovers that the covenant of Moses was all about and those are the ones that God was calling into relationship with himself to be the great family, the great worldwide family of Jew and Gentile who love God and are loved by him.

Question 5:
How do Christians receive Christ's status?

Student: Reggie, I'm not sure I completely understand how it is that we are considered full-blooded Jews or perfect law keepers. How is that applied to us?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think that's exactly the question that Paul himself tries to answer at the end of Galatians 3. He says that, "faith has come so there is no more custodian. In Christ Jesus you're all sons of God through faith," and that would be Jew and Gentile. "For as many of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." And then he goes on to talk about there's neither Jew-Gentile, slave-free, male-female. We are all one in Christ. The picture is we have put on Christ like a garment and because of that garment when the Father looks at us he doesn't see us; he sees his Son. And it means, he sees faithful Israelite. He sees faithful Jew. So whether you are a sinful Gentile woman, whether you are slave or free, no matter what whether you are from a Pagan background or a Jewish background, if you are covered in Christ he looks on you as a male Jew, fully circumcised and fully God's Son and that's just the way he looks at us. He lets us put on his Son and he imputes to us, credits to us apart from anything we have ever done, Christ's righteousness. And the favor that the Father has for that favored Son is ours. So in that sense, his work becomes ours. Our union with him makes us his brothers whether we are a boy or a girl, we are his brothers and he lavishes the whole inheritance upon us because in that respect we are all Jewish heirs of the promise.

Question 6:
If we are counted as perfect in Christ, why did Jesus exhort us to be perfect?

Student: So with that understood, what exactly do we do with Jesus' statements in the Sermon on the Mount to be perfect? How does that fit in with this when we know that it is impossible for us to be perfect?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think those speak to us. They have sort of a pre-cross word for us and a post-cross word for us. On the one hand, they help us understand our inability, that "Who is poor in Spirit? Well, not me." Who really mourns? Not selfishly but for the horrible warp and twist that there is in the universe. "Who is meek? Well, not me." But one came who was poor in Spirit. One came who did really mourn.

It's really interesting when Jesus shows up in the river Jordan where John is baptizing the baptism for repentance and he says, "Baptize me too", John the Baptist knows that this is not a guy who needs to repent. He tells Jesus, "You should be baptizing me, not me, you." But Jesus says, "No, let righteousness be done for now." And what Jesus does is as the repentor who never needed to repent for himself, he goes into the water of judgment saying, "Bring it all on me." Saying let the flood of judgment

against sin fall on me, so that it doesn't have to fall on those who are going to know me. And then he rises so that his life can be ours, so then when we read the Beatitudes we read them the second way. And that is, "Lord thank you that you have committed yourself through your death, through your resurrection, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit to make me poor in spirit, to make me like Jesus. Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit that teaches me not to mourn cause I don't get what I want but to mourn over the residual effects of sin in my life and the residual effects of sin in my friend Andrew, and Wes' life and in every person. And thank you that you came in meekness to take me down off of my high tower of pride and to break me and make me a new person who is humble, loving, caring, and giving."

You run that same thing through the other beatitudes like purity of heart, being a peacemaker, being ready to be humiliated and to endure persecution instead of looking for the easy way out. Because of Christ, his coming alongside me to bear the wrath that I deserve and now to live inside me through the Holy Spirit, those beatitudes don't just become, "Oh, they make me really uncomfortable" but because of who Christ is they make me really genuinely excited that he is making me into that. Because, as Paul will say in Romans 8, we have been predestined to be conformed to the image of God's own Son. He is making us what his Son is and to me that is pretty exciting.

Question 7:

How do the natural and the supernatural intersect in our lives?

Student: Reggie, you've talked about how union with Christ is a supernatural thing and you've also mentioned how baptism is related to union with Christ but baptism is very natural. I mean it's just water. How do both the natural and the supernatural connect to our lives?

Dr. Kidd: You know, that is one of the deepest mysteries of the Christian life, Wes, and I think about it a lot. I don't know how to approach it other than to point to the incarnation of Jesus Christ himself. I mean here is the second person of the eternal deity. I mean, if there is ever a supernatural being it's him. But because the invisible God wants a relationship with people who are made of dirt and dust and because he himself created dust and dirt to be a place that his glory is magnified and that project has taken a detour since the fall. But he is committed to making the earth a place that once again completely reflects his glory and he is going to do it through us, the invisible, infinite God who is Spirit sent his own Son as one of us so that somehow his supernatural world and our natural existence could reconnect. And what goes on in us is this amazing connection between his supernatural power and just the stuff of our humanity. It's a great thing and the early church thought it was so important that the physical be brought into this whole new project of recreation that whenever voices came up that said, "No, the flesh is not very important and it's just going to be left behind" that we declared those people to be heretics, the Docetists, and the

Gnostics in particular because we always understood at bottom that the whole was to be redeemed, to be purchased back, to be made once again to be a platform, a venue for God's glory. And what God gave to the church is things like water that pictures our cleansing and our renewal, and wine and bread that bespeak God's interest in feeding us through his Son to reconnect us to that which is really real, the supernatural.

So, these worlds come together. The Holy Spirit has to wash us and cleanse us or we are not clean. And yet, God uses water to bring me into relationship with that supernatural reality. My inner being is not fed by Coca-Cola and bread but my inner being is fed by Jesus Christ himself coming in and making me new. But God also has this means of making his Holy Spirit touch a very tangible thing through bread and through wine. A rather famous Russian Orthodox theologian named Alexander Schmemmann wrote that the Lord's supper is the one place where you actually do become what you eat because what happens is we take Christ into us by faith and the Holy Spirit invades our being and makes Christ more real and more personal to us. And our whole lives are about doing his work as very natural beings through whom supernatural things are done. Like every time you and I witness to somebody and they come to know the Lord, the Lord is using our very human words empowered by his Spirit to work a change that we could never make and the words themselves could never make. And it's a wonderful thing that God is doing to create this whole new creation in the midst of an old creation that he is not going to turn his back on.

Question 8:

Is God going to restore the earth or destroy it?

Student: You seem to be talking about just now and in the video you talked about how God is not only going to restore us but restore all of creation. How do you reconcile that and passages like that in Revelation with passages that seem to say that God is going to purify the earth by fire or destroy the earth?

Dr. Kidd: Well, he is going to purify it but he is not going to do away with it. He is going to transfigure it. The elements will burn like fire but from out of that fire will come...that is more like what happens when you take ore and put it into a refiner's fire. What happens is the impurities get burned away and the valuable in the midst of it, whether it is gold or iron or whatever, is what is left. So it's not a destruction of the world. It's more a purging of the world so that it can become resplendent and shiny and bright and new again.

So what that means is, what we look forward to is not just our bodies dying going into the grave and then our spirits just going to Heaven and getting halos, angels, and little harps to live some disembodied existence for ever and ever and ever and ever. No, what it means is, our hope is after our bodies go into the grave and our spirits go up to Heaven and enjoy an intermediate state relationship with the Lord

ultimately the trumpets will sound, the dead will be raised and those who are on the earth will be raised up as well. And all of God's people will come back with him and we will receive new bodies that are more physical, if anything, than these bodies we have. And the earth will be like more solid, more dense, more capable of reflecting his glory in its created-ness only now recreated, not done away with but made new. So the picture is a New Heavens and a New Earth that come down as the New Jerusalem comes down.

Question 9: **How is Christ present in the sacraments?**

Student: So in this meantime we are talking about all this spiritual and yet physical and all this kind of stuff. Christ has given us these sacraments and in what way is he present in these physical elements and spiritually? How is all that taking place?

Dr. Kidd: You know, my favorite theologian, his name is John Calvin. And he said essentially (paraphrase), "I more experience it than understand it." And what he would do in his churches 500 years ago is simply point to the elements and say, "Brothers and Sisters, the Lord Jesus has himself invited us to this table. And he hosts it, and he invites us to partake of these things and he lavishes his goodness before us. Receive them in faith. Come. Don't despise these things because they are just bread and just wine but they are his bread and they are his wine. And he becomes present to us."

One of the things that distinguished John Calvin in the reformation is that he had a very strong theology of the Holy Spirit. So as far as he was concerned, the actual physical body of Jesus remained in Heaven, unlike Roman Catholic teaching. But because John Calvin understood what John says, in John 14 and 16, about Jesus not leaving us alone but sending us a comforter so that he would not only be just beside us but in us. And what Paul said about Jesus receiving the spirit, pouring the Spirit out upon us, and the Spirit among us being the Spirit of Christ, Calvin really believed that as the Holy Spirit was among us to bring us to the table, to make the Word of God come alive to us, the Spirit made Christ alive to us and the Spirit made Christ present to us at the table as well in the bread and in the wine, not so much in the bread and wine themselves but in the eating and drinking together before the Lord. So again, how Christ is exactly there, what the mechanism is? He would say, "I don't so much understand as I know in my knower that it's going on." Jesus is there. The Holy Spirit is there, and he is there to minister his presence.

Question 10:**How did the early church feel about the delay of Christ's return?**

Student: Reggie, in the lectures you discuss how the overlap of the ages and the delay in Christ's coming is actually a positive thing. But we often hear that it may have been an embarrassment or struggle for the early church. What do you know of what they understood the situation?

Dr. Kidd: Well Andrew, there is one place in the New Testament where it looks like there were some people who were concerned the Lord wasn't coming right back as soon as people thought, and that's in 2 Peter. And Peter just says, "Don't worry about it. The Lord is not short in patience, but a day to the Lord is a thousand years and a thousand years is of a day. You all need to be busy going out there and telling people about Jesus." And Peter's attitude seems really to be the predominant attitude in the New Testament. It surely was Paul's and I think it is worth underlining, Paul didn't go around worrying about, "Well, when is he coming back?" Paul was so excited that he came and he is coming again and for him the perspective is, "Look what God is doing now. There is this fullness of Jew and God's not going to stop until he's got the fullness of Jew. There is this fullness of Gentile and God's not going to unleash the trumpet blowers until the last Gentile is in."

Sometimes like I just love to sit in airports and I just look at all the people that I don't know and I am surprised at the infinite imagination of God in the way he makes all these different people. Each one is bearing his image in a particular way, and each one potentially one of his special children and I'm kind of glad I'm not the God who has to say, "Hmm, I've had enough." And Paul has this sense of my job, our job, is to go tell cause we never know when that fullness is in. Paul also has this sense that there is this maturity, a rounding-out-ness of perfection even of the church that the Lord is committed to, that Jesus is making his bride radiant for his return. And what is often approached like in the modern world as being a problem of the delay of the parousia that just wasn't in Paul's field of vision at all. What he was about was, "Oh Lord, thank you for this day of new creation. Now is the day of salvation. Now we get to go tell people the resurrection has begun in Jesus and one day it is going to be completed when he comes back. Come on in. Come on down and become a part of it." His robust sense of history and our sense of what it is to be able to contribute to the kingdom is just pretty amazing to me.

Question 11:**How does the delay of Christ's return affect daily Christian living?**

Student: Now, it seems kind of obvious how this should impact missions and evangelism. How does this understanding impact the laity in other kinds of vocations, you know, going to be an office worker, going to be a lawyer, or whatever?

Dr. Kidd: Well, that's a great question because it's important for us to understand that God made a whole creation that he is in the business of redeeming. And he is going to save us in the body. We are not just souls with ears stuck on, even though these bodies are going to give way to glorified, if anything, denser bodies. These bodies as part of the creation that he has not forsaken are the vessels, the means through which we communicate his character. And one of the things that we have the opportunity to do and in fact the obligation to do, going all the way back to God's terms to Adam and Even when he created them, to fill the earth, subdue it. We are supposed to tend it. We are supposed to draw out, as much as we can, creation's potential to reflect God's glory. That means conserving it. It also means bringing out its potential, cultivating the earth, and mining the earth so we can create buildings and edifices and civilizations that, even if imperfectly, nonetheless reflect his glory. So that means if I am an architect, I am doing something that is like what God does. If I am a dentist, it means just even in curbing the decay of tooth decay, I am reflecting his image and I am taking care of the creation he has made and has declared as good and that he will one day make perfect. So it means that whether we are telling the story of Jesus or whether we are living the story of Jesus in our vocations with our hands and with our feet, we are fulfilling what he wants us to do and fulfilling that great mandate to fill the earth and subdue it and to bring it under his dominion.

Question 12:

How far should we go in trying to become all things to all people?

Student: Reggie, in 1 Corinthians 9:20 Paul talks about becoming like a Jew in order to reach the Jews. What are the implications for that verse for us today? How far can we go in enculturating ourselves for the sake of evangelism?

Dr. Kidd: Well Wes, I think what Paul really wants us to think about is less how far should we go because then, you know, it's about rules, you know, making a line and do I step over the line or not step over the line? And that always gets: a) very complicated and then: b) very legalistic. And we wind up living out of fear instead of boldness, and grace, power and love. I think the first kind of thing to think about in those statements where Paul says...well, he doesn't just say, "To the Jew I became a Jew." He says, "To the Gentile I became as a Gentile so that I might win them." I think the thing to see Paul doing in the first place is exercising this amazing lack of self-consciousness. He is not worried so much about an identity that he establishes in one mode or another. What he does is become so focused on the people that he is trying to meet as one whose own identity is shaped far more fundamentally by what it is to belong to Christ than by how he thinks of himself as, well, like me, I am a professor and what do professors do? Well, professors teach or somebody else who says, "Well, I am a preacher, so what do preachers do?" Or "I am an American" and so I project this and I am English or "I am..." whatever. He wants us and this is what he is doing throughout 1 Corinthians, is to get our bearings of what it is to be bought

with a price and to live as those who belong to God and then simply to show up. For him it means a real elasticity in terms of being able to flex with this group and then flex with that group. But it really isn't for him about trying to figure out what the limits are on how Jewish is too Jewish or how Gentile is too Gentile. He is really calling us more to a self-aware lack of preoccupation with self, if that makes any sense.

Student: Could you elaborate on what that means a little bit more for me?

Dr. Kidd: Well, what do you think it means?

Student: I have no clue.

Dr. Kidd: Well, are you in situations where you are kind of, "Well, I don't know if I would do it that way but I can go with it"?

Student: Yeah, I can see that. I think what may get a little weird is when you throw kids into the situation. If you have children and you want to put them in certain situations or you are in a situation yourself and you have brought your children into that, what do you do?

Dr. Kidd: My first job with my kids is to protect them. My first job with my kids is to protect them. My second job is to expand their horizons. So my first priority would be to make sure I don't throw them into such confusion that they are just going to be bad. Or in the first place, I am not going to let them be harmed and in the second place I am not going to let become so confused that they are just like, "What is going on?" But if I have the opportunity to show the love and respect for strangers that are consistent with Jesus' character, I am absolutely going to do that.

Student: Reggie, so the point you are making is that the issue is not about rules or boundaries but really about the ministering to people and how we can do that. So, are there ways or strategies that we can go about doing this in missions and evangelism that are perhaps wiser or better than others?

Dr. Kidd: I think when I work with a particular people group, I am going to find that people group having a certain kind of way of doing things and being. And what Paul is saying is, "I can get out of myself and get into their way of doing and being in order to communicate the gospel." Now, what happens when the gospel takes root there is that we then together are supposed to go deeper into Scripture and into the whole culture of the Bible and then get our bearings as Christ himself becomes more formed in our midst so that we together come to understand what are the places where we need to preserve this way of doing in deed, so that we can reach other people. But then, where are the values and assumptions of that way of being and doing that really kind of stand in tension with Scripture that need to be challenged? And then we need, I think, to develop relationships with other parts of the body of Christ that have different cultural assumptions and become connected, to become a part of the larger

church of Christ. God isn't interested in just coming into a place and getting isolated individuals saved and then just kind of blessing the sinfulness that is in the culture. God is in the business of redeeming, not just blessing and leaving alone. So we need to get the altitude of a deeper engagement with Scripture and the altitude of being connected with the rest of the body of Christ so then we can stay rooted in that particular community but then also figure out where we need to go to city hall and say, "You know, this isn't right." Or to just talk with people about a less greedy, a less glutinous, a less hostile way of living and doing and being and in that way we become a city set on a hill, precisely because we are still part of the community, but we have these larger perspectives from Scripture and from the rest of the body of Christ.

Question 13:

Did Paul embrace the entire Old Testament, or only some of its teachings?

Student: Reggie, it seems apparent that Paul has a great appreciation for the Old Testament of Scriptures as we see in 2 Timothy 3:14 and 16 but at times he seems to pick and choose what he latches onto as we see in Galatians, for instance, where he says, "It's neither circumcision or un-circumcision. It's all about the new creation." How do we reconcile those and what do we do with that?

Dr. Kidd: Well, the mention of circumcision and un-circumcision is a good starting point. Yeah, sometimes it can feel like Paul is being pretty arbitrary. I mean, Peter must have been like, "Whoa, whoa, what did I do wrong?" when Paul got so mad at him because he was refusing to sit with people who were uncircumcised and eat food with them. But what we need to understand for Paul is the Old Testament as God's Word was all about one story and that story has its center point in Jesus Christ and all the commandments, all the warnings, all the threats, all the promises, everything was pointing to Christ. So once you get to the other side of the cross, Paul feels like he has to read everything through the lens of the cross. Take circumcision. Circumcision was the sign given in the old covenant as being a member of God's people. It was a picture of the dedication of the person to God's service. It was a picture through this bloody act of a curse against sin and the penalty of death if you fail to obey the terms of the covenant. It meant being a part of the people of God but it could only be given to males, to little Jewish boys not to girls. And it couldn't in fact make people clean.

But what happened on Good Friday was that the foreskin of the human race hung on a cross and Paul says that we have now been circumcised with the circumcision not made with hands in the circumcision of Christ. So what he sees happening in Christ on the cross is that our circumcision is undergone for us when Christ is cut off from the land of the living and cast away, cursed. But then when God raises him up from the dead and gives us the same Spirit that raised Jesus up from the dead so that we can believe in him, we receive our circumcision because we receive Christ the one

who was circumcised for us. So when Paul says, "Don't get circumcised, Gentiles," it's not that circumcision isn't important to him anymore, it's just the cross of Jesus Christ has so transformed it that Old Testament old covenant symbol has come into its own. So it is just totally inappropriate that literal circumcision be administered anymore. Instead it gets replaced by its greater fulfillment in baptism because baptism pictures the same things. It pictures what is it to be totally dedicated to the Lord. It pictures in a bloodless way what it means to undergo death and then to be raised again. And baptism is what incorporates us into the body of Christ or into the family of God.

And in one matter after another, if we just look more closely at what Paul is doing with Old Testament things that he seems to just cavalierly set aside or to just ignore, I think we would see that he actually ramps them up and gives them even greater significance. Take something like the tithe. Paul never recapitulates or repeats the principle of a tithe. He never goes to a church and says, "You know, you guys need to be giving ten percent because that's what the law said." Well, we know that Jesus articulated the principle of the tithe. He said, "Sure. You need to be tithing your mint and your tithing your cumin," the little garden spices. But he says, "You also need to be not neglecting the weightier things of the law, love, Justice and mercy."

And for Paul, the way this gets carried over to us is, "Brothers and sisters, you were bought with a price. You were redeemed with the most extravagant outlay of resources imaginable. You don't belong to yourselves. You don't belong to yourselves, not just your wealth but the whole of your being belongs now to God. And you know what God wants from you? Everything. And do you know what he wants from me? Everything. So I am here to serve him. And how much of my resources does that mean he owns? Every single dime, not just a tenth but the whole thing." And now what God is looking for is what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians 8, a hilarious giver, a joyful giver, a cheerful giver. And he wants me to look at myself, and he wants me to look at my bank account and say, "How much of that is his? And how can it all be used to benefit his people, to benefit a world that doesn't know him, and to build his kingdom. And what I need to keep back to live on, that's a gift too." But it's just that all of the Old Testament comes over but it all goes through the cross and then we are given the Spirit and grace and the liberty of being his sons and daughters to figure out how those things get worked out, and the counsel of one another. We really need each other's help to figure out what those things are and that's one of the reasons we have fellowship with each other.

Question 14:

Should modern missionary strategies be based on Paul's example?

Student: Reggie, can you summarize for us Paul's missionary methods and how they developed? And should we base our modern mission strategies on what Paul did?

Dr. Kidd: Let me think about that. That's a good question, Wes. I think of three things that come up in Paul's missionary journeys that are worth thinking about for modern missions. One is something that stays consistent all the way through and it is that he tried to minister not on his own but he always surrounded with a retinue, even when he breaks up. When he goes out for the 1st missionary journey, it is Saul and Barnabas and they together are working but even the two of them, they have a retinue that travels with them. And even when they break up at the beginning of the 2nd missionary journey and they simply agree that they can't work together at least for now, Barnabas goes back to Cyprus but he takes John Mark with him, so that becomes a two-person mission. And Paul picks up Silas and takes him with him into Asian Minor and along the way picks up Timothy. And all the way through, and all during Paul's writing ministry, he's talking about the people that are with him that he is ministering with. So it is ministry in community. That's one important takes away from Paul's missionary journeys.

The second thing is something that changes after the 1st missionary journey. In the 1st missionary journey, they simply show up in town and as long as people will stand there, they'll talk. But then what happens is as people in the Jewish synagogues get upset with them, they wind up getting kicked out of town and Paul even gets left for dead. In the 2nd missionary journey, it looks like there is a change of strategy. I think it was occasioned by the one place in the 1st missionary journey where Paul had a benefactor and it was on the island of Cyprus when he goes before Sergius Paulus and proclaims the gospel and this governor believes and Paul is protected. Well, I think Paul does some reflection after the 1st missionary journey. And I say I think that It is an opinion the text doesn't really say, he may have thought about some other things too.

But one of the things that's noticeable in the 2nd missionary journey that's different is that he winds up getting more hooked into, more rooted, embedded in the communities he is ministering too. For instance, in Philippi he winds up accepting the hospitality of Lydia. He winds up accepting hospitality in other cities as well. Also he takes up his trade, or brings his trade with him of tent-making so he is not dependent upon people supporting him financially. So he receives the protection of a local host. He works with his hands. And also in the 2nd missionary journey, he appeals to his Roman citizenship when injustice is being done to him. So he works more carefully, I think, to take advantage of local support, of his own ability to support himself, and then political protection so that the gospel can be proclaimed. So I think there are probably some principles there that we can carry into a mission strategy.

And then the third thing is yet one more thing that I think stays consistent throughout his ministry, and that's the principle "to the Jew first and also to the Greek". Now practically what that meant for Paul is, when he could, he would find a group of Jews to preach to first. Whether it was like Lydia and the women who were meeting at a riverside on a Sabbath morning or whether there was a synagogue to go to. He would go and he would preach Jesus to Jews because Jesus doesn't mean anything except as the Jewish Messiah. And it's that larger story of redemptive history that makes Jesus

make sense. The one place where Paul doesn't have a chance to do that is in Lystra where he and Barnabas, they go into the city and they do a miracle and these Pagans just interpret it for what their own religious background suggests. In that, they think that Zeus and Mercury have shown up again. They were supposed to have shown up centuries ago. People missed it and they were all upset and now these two people come and do these magnificent miracles and they think the Pagan gods are among them so they start to do a sacrifice to them. They have no point of reference to understand what the message is that Paul has come to tell them and what the miracle means that they have done.

So the carry away for us from this is the story that Jesus is the center of is what makes Jesus make sense. Like in the modern missionary world, there are missions organizations that I think have learned well from Paul's strategy. They'll come into a village and instead of just going right to the punch line: "Jesus", they will start to tell the whole biblical narrative of creation and fall, and God's call of Abraham, and his making of a nation through Moses, and then his raising up King David, and the divided on monarchy and the prophets, and then Jesus as the one through whom that whole story gets fulfillment. And so when they get to Jesus, he makes sense because of the larger biblical drama that he fulfills instead of just being this random name that folks can just plug into whatever religious value system that they have.

And by the way, I think that means a lot for the way we do ministry even in areas that we think of as not being missionary but just, you know, the normal world that most people live in in the West. It's so post-Christian that it really is missionary even if we don't think of it and people can do signs, they can speak in marvelous tongues. Miracles can be done but if they are not put in the context of the Bible story of creation, fall, and redemption they just become one more means to get power, naked, selfish, ego-inflating power. And so I think there is a really deep principle involved in Paul's doing to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. It's go tell about Jesus as the Messiah of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish nation.

Question 15:

Can Christians divide from each other in a godly way?

Student: I'd like to backtrack just a little bit. You mentioned way at the beginning of the answer about Paul and Barnabas and then they split. What are some practical ways in church splits or mission organization splits that you can do that in a righteous way and a holy way where there are differing opinions but the gospel still continues in both avenues?

Dr. Kidd: Sometimes the cross can bring immediate reconciliation. Sometimes it doesn't. And one of the things that looks like what happened in Paul's dispute with Barnabas is that they didn't call a church court and they didn't demand that the other one be disciplined. They didn't demand that one guy be proclaimed right and the

other one proclaimed wrong. In this particular situation, they seemed to have decided that the wisest thing to do is just let it go and presumably go about ministering without slandering the other one, without making it a matter of the Barnabas party versus the Paul party but staying focused on we are both serving Christ even though we have hit this roadblock in our own relationship and just letting the Lord over time work it out. And we know that somewhere in the next 10 years there was some sort of reconciliation because we see in Colossians that Paul is speaking warmly of John Mark. In fact, John Mark is with him and when in 2 Timothy Paul is facing his own martyrdom, he wants John Mark to be brought to be with him. And sometimes that's the way the gospel works is just giving us the freedom and the grace not to pull the trigger on each other and saying, "I don't know why you are doing what you are doing. I don't understand it but I entrust you to the Lord and, in his mercy, I trust that he will work in your heart and he will work in my heart, and one day we will understand why the disagreement now and we will understand what Christ's work has done so that once again we can enjoy the fellowship that right now we just don't seem to be able to enjoy."

Question 16:

Should our theology be academic or practical?

Student: You mentioned in the lectures that because of Paul's extensive traveling, he didn't have the luxury of being an "armchair theologian". What exactly did you mean by this and more specifically to our situations today, why would you go to a seminary which seems to be more academic than the daily grind of ministry?

Dr. Kidd: I think by Paul not being an armchair theologian I meant simply that as learned as he was he didn't write his theology just sitting up in some ivory tower just spinning out thoughts like, "What do I think the world needs to hear from my brilliance of mind?" He wrote his theology as answers to people's really pressing questions. I think there was an architecture of thought underneath it but his main interest was not so much in expressing his brilliance but in meeting people at their particular point of need. Now, is it okay to go to an academic seminary to learn his theology so we can apply it and are you necessarily therefore going to become an ivory tower or an aloof snob who is unacquainted with peoples' grieves? Not necessarily. I have known people in the academic world who really care about the people around them and see the whole gift of being able to read and have the time to reflect as being the occasion so that they can have relationships with the people around them and they see the academic place as being a place of ministry, like I think Paul would have.

I've also seen, and honestly I have been there myself, where people and me too have been totally immersed in the reality of life like working on assembly line or something like that where you are surrounded by people and yet you can live in this little bubble where it is only you and your task and you totally ignore the people

around you just because you are, “engaged in real life”, you aren’t necessarily engaged in real life. So it’s not so much a matter of where you are. It’s who you are wherever you are. And a person that gets on the waveband of the Jesus who incarnates God’s love for us and on the waveband of the Paul who says to his followers, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ,” you can live in the kind of world where you have the leisure to study, read, to write, and reflect but not be abstract from real life because caring for the people that you are around. You are reading for them as much as for yourself.

Question 17:

What are some practical ways to maintain spirituality in an academic setting?

Student: Well, what are some practical ways that you found in the academic world to help keep your spiritual life up and very strong as you are growing academically and training yourself for ministry? Or even if you are not going to go into ministry and you are going to stay in academia, how do you maintain and continue to grow spiritually?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I have done it wrong and I have done it right. During one season of time when I was in seminary I was taking as many courses as the administration would let me, and I was dying on the inside because I was just taking in all this information but I wasn’t able to process it. I just had to kind of let it sit just long enough to get it out on an exam but not to filter into my heart and had no time for my new marriage and for friends or for ministry in the church. On a second lap, I committed myself to taking fewer hours and taking more time in investing myself in relationships, in the first place in my marriage and in the second place in ministering in a church and through a church and ministering to the people I was studying with. And you know what? I learned a lot more. The reading that I did got deeper into my being and I had a chance to really live the theology I was studying and that reinforced it. It made it more a part of me as opposed to just some stuff that was passing through me momentarily. So that would be my main suggestion for folks to make sure they take not so much that they are unable, even if they want to, to have relationships. But to really give themselves to relationships in which they are relationships that can reinforce the learning and relationships that can be the place where they live the theology that will be their actual theology.

Question 18:

Is it dangerous to reconstruct Paul’s theology?

Student: Isn’t it a dangerous task to try to get behind the text of Scripture as we have it? If we try to reconstruct Paul’s theology wouldn’t we just be mirroring our

own beliefs and projecting our beliefs onto him rather than really getting a picture of what his theology was about?

Dr. Kidd: Well, the fact of the matter is if you don't try to find out what the theology is that is behind every verse or that's supporting every verse, you are just as likely to import your own assumptions into it, so that the verse will just reflect your own mirror image. You are far better off I think in trying to...all we are talking about is finding the larger context that makes every text have its meaning. And it means some imagination. It means sometimes paying more attention to things that Paul doesn't seem to talk about as much as some other things. But it means and gives us the potential of understanding him in a deeper way. For instance, in the video, we talked about how important his time references are. Well, Paul doesn't sit down and say, "Now, before you can understand anything else about me you need a little primer on my view of history; where it's been and where it's going." But those references to this age and the age to come, they show up in such pivotal places that once you have looked at them closely, it's hard to fail to see that they make a big difference in helping us understand why he says the things that he does. If you don't try to get at the overall architecture of his thinking, which is implicit rather than explicit, you wind up with things that just don't make any sense.

For instance, in videos to come we will talk about the difference between the way he approaches the Galatians on the one hand and the way he approaches the Corinthians on the other hand. Well, to the Galatians he says things like, "Well, circumcision is nothing; un-circumcision is nothing. All that matters is faith working in love" or "all that matters is new creation." Well, to the Corinthians he seems to say exactly the opposite. He says, "Circumcision counts for nothing; un-circumcision counts for nothing. All that matters is keeping the commandments." Well, which is it Paul? Is it faith working in love and new creation or is it keeping the commandments of God? Well, what we have to understand is that these are two groups that are messed up about the whole question of time.

The Galatians are living as though the cross had never yet happened and they needed to add to Christ's work, you know, their own shedding of their blood through circumcision and they are thinking about going back under the law. They're thinking about going backwards in time. And Paul says, "No, don't go back there. There is no life there." The Corinthians by contrast think that they are so far down the line in terms of time that they don't even need a resurrection. They think they have already arrived and they are king's kids. So they think that they are beyond what is written. And to them Paul says, "Oh no, no, no, no. You need to obey the commandments of God." So he says things that seem just the opposite but he says them to people because they are messed up on the question of time. He wants to pull both of those groups into this sloppy overlap period and if we didn't do the hard work of trying to get to the architecture that holds all those texts together we would just be left either befuddled or we would just make those texts say whatever we want them to mean and I don't think that's really very wise.

Question 19:
How can our imaginations help us understand Scripture?

Student: You briefly mentioned the word imagination and that's very interesting. I was wondering if you would be able to flush that out a little bit. How could we redeem our imagination to help us understand Scripture better?

Dr. Kidd: From one perspective, what Scripture is all about is the redemption of our imagination. You know, we live in a world that looks like the strong win and the weak lose. It looks like injustice will always prevail. It looks like evil will always prevail. I look at my own heart and I find myself just capable of doing nothing good. And the Scripture asks us to imagine a whole other kind of reality. The Scripture asks us to imagine that this was all created by a loving God who is just in his character, holy in his character and will inevitably necessarily because of who he is and the promises that he has made, will make everything that has gone wrong, right. The Scripture asks us to imagine, despite our own hardwired-ness for selfishness, that there is another way. There is another way to live beyond ourselves. The Scripture asks us to imagine that there is a greater reality than our worthiness of just being blotted out but that we could be the object of affection of the creator of everything. Scripture asks us to imagine this eternal dance of love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Scripture asks us to imagine that the deepest reality in all of existence is the love and communication between the Father, and the Son and Holy Spirit. And that he is working to reincorporate us though we do not deserve it, back into that eternal communion and to make us family members, to make us fellow dancers, to make us fellow partakers of the wonder of his own existence. And Scripture asks us to engage with a reality that is not immediately apparent to us. So I think the Scripture is all about the reconstruction of the human imagination.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
TWO

PAUL AND THE GALATIANS



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Two

Paul and the Galatians

INTRODUCTION

I once heard a story about a woman who got married when she was just a young teenager. Being so young, she really wasn't ready for her new adult life. Before long, she grew anxious and started missing the familiar comforts of childhood. So, one day while her husband was at work, she sneaked back to her parents' yard and hid in her old playhouse. When her husband finally found her that evening, he held her trembling hands and gently led her back home. He knew living as an adult was difficult for her, but he also knew that she had to leave her childhood behind. A new day had come in her life, and it was time for her to enjoy the wonders and challenges of adult life with her husband.

In the first century something similar happened in the Christian church. Most early Christians were Jews who had grown up under the tutelage of the religious customs and laws of Judaism. But when these Jews started to follow Christ, their relationships with God changed. They reached a level of spiritual maturity because they had received a fuller revelation of God in Christ. But after a while, some of these early Jewish Christians missed the security and familiarity of their old Jewish practices and began to mix their Christian faith with outmoded elements of their heritage and to insist that others must do the same.

This second lesson in our series on *The Heart of Paul's Theology* is entitled "Paul and the Galatians." In this lesson, we're going to see that the Galatian churches had regressed into spiritual childhood by reviving certain practices of Judaism. And we're also going to see how Paul reacted to these backward-looking Christians.

Our study of Paul and the Galatians will divide into three parts. First, we'll look at the Background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Second, we'll look at the content of his epistle to the Galatians. And third, we will examine how the letter revealed Paul's central theological outlooks, his doctrine of the latter days, or eschatology. Let's look first at the background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

BACKGROUND

Paul wrote all of his letters as he traveled from place to place. So, to understand the things Paul wrote to the Galatians, we need answers to some basic questions about the historical situation in Galatia. We'll explore this subject in two ways. First, we'll review Paul's contact with the Galatians during his first missionary journey. And second, we will look at some of the specific problems that motivated Paul to write to them. Let's look first at the background of Paul's first missionary journey.

FIRST JOURNEY

This journey began around A.D. 46 after God told the church in Syrian Antioch to set aside Paul and Barnabas for special missionary work. Paul and Barnabas began their journey by sailing to the isle of Cyprus. Beginning in the eastern city of Salamis, they proclaimed the gospel from synagogue to synagogue as they moved to the western city of Paphos.

From Cyprus Paul and Barnabas sailed to Perga, and then moved inland to Antioch in the region of Pisidia, which at that time was a part of the Roman province of Galatia. After hearing Paul preach the gospel in the synagogue there, many of the Jews responded positively. But within a week, unbelieving Jews incited the city against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town.

From Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas moved further east in the province of Galatia, and stopped first in the city of Iconium. When they preached in the synagogue there, many Jews and Gentiles came to faith, but the church was not firmly established because Paul and Barnabas quickly left the city when unbelieving Jews plotted to murder them.

Their next stop was the city of Lystra, where Paul managed to start another church. In Lystra, Paul healed a man who had been lame from birth. But when the people of the city saw this miracle, they mistook Paul for the god Hermes and Barnabas for Zeus. They tried to offer sacrifices to the missionaries, but Paul and Barnabas explained that they were mere men. Thereafter, some unbelieving Jews arrived from Iconium, and were able to turn the disillusioned citizens of Lystra against Paul and Barnabas, but God spared Paul's life and he moved on once again. Paul and Barnabas traveled east in Galatia as far as Derbe where many people trusted Christ. In Derbe, Paul finally had time to organize the church by appointing elders.

But Paul was still deeply concerned for the Christians in Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. So, at risk of life and limb, Paul and Barnabas returned to each of these cities. They strengthened the fledgling churches and explained that the kinds of sufferings the believers had seen in Paul and Barnabas were the sort of tribulations all Christians should expect to endure as they further the Kingdom of God. From Pisidian Antioch, the missionaries made their way back to the coast, preaching in the cities of Perga and Attalia. And from Attalia, they sailed for Syrian Antioch.

Now, in the book of Galatians, Paul referred to his time in Galatia. So, we know that he wrote this epistle sometime after his first missionary journey. But it is important to note that the epistle to the Galatians doesn't mention the well-known meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, which took place later. The assembly in Jerusalem addressed some of the same issues as Paul's letter to the Galatians, and Paul would have appealed to this assembly to support his views if the assembly had already taken place by the time Galatians was written. So, it seems likely that he wrote Galatians in A.D. 48, within a year or so of leaving Galatia but before the Jerusalem council was held.

Now that we've seen how the book of Galatians relates to Paul's first missionary journey, we should look at the specific problems in Galatia that concerned Paul.

PROBLEMS

What were the conditions of the Galatian churches? What had happened in those churches that compelled Paul to write to them? We'll explore two issues: the influx of Gentiles into these churches, and the rise of false teachers. Let's look first at the way the Gentile Christians flocked into the Galatian churches.

Influx of Gentiles

One of the great things God did through Paul's first missionary journey was to bring many Gentiles to Christ. Much to Paul's surprise, most of the Jews in Galatia rejected the gospel. When Paul faced this widespread opposition, he came to realize that God wanted him to focus on reaching Gentiles. Listen to Paul's words to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, recorded in Acts 13:46-47:

We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:46-47).

This passage reveals a major shift in Paul's ministry. As a Jew, he naturally gave priority to Jewish evangelism. But their negative reactions to the gospel convinced Paul that God was calling him to reach the Gentiles. And this he did with much success. Listen to the way Luke summarized Paul's work in Iconium in Acts 14:1:

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed (Acts 14:1, emphasis added).

It wasn't just Jews who came to faith, but Gentiles too.

In a similar way, in Acts 14:27, Luke reported how Paul summarized his first missionary journey saying that,

God ... had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27).

Now, we might think that everyone would have rejoiced to see so many Gentiles in the Galatian churches. But the influx of Gentiles actually caused serious problems in Galatia. And these problems incited Jewish false teachers to rise in reaction.

False Teachers

Until Paul's first missionary journey, the Christian church had been predominantly Jewish. The early church began in Jerusalem and had held firmly to this

Jewish identity. Consequently, the influx of Gentiles led to all kinds of theological and practical troubles. Did these Gentiles have to adopt Jewish traditions? Did they have to keep the law of Moses as Old Testament believers were required to do? These kinds of questions gave rise to false teachers in Galatia. These Jewish teachers came up with their own ways of dealing with Gentiles in the church by insisting that they be circumcised.

During his missionary journey Paul had not circumcised Gentile believers, but in his absence, the false teachers had taught just the opposite. Now, Paul knew that God had ordained circumcision for Israel, and he was not opposed to circumcision per se. But in Galatia, circumcision for Gentiles had become a very serious matter which Paul could not ignore. It represented a serious departure from the heart of the Christian gospel.

We will touch on three ways in which Paul believed that insisting on circumcision for Gentile Christians reflected serious misunderstandings of the Christian faith. First, it denied the sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection for salvation. Second, it demonstrated an improper reliance on the power of the flesh. And third, it resulted in division within the churches of Galatia. Let's look first at the way the false teachers had denied the sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection for salvation.

From the book of Galatians we may surmise that the Galatian false teachers saw circumcision as a sacrifice of blood that enabled believers to live in a way that pleased God. In their view, Christians had to add circumcision to Christ's saving work. But from Paul's perspective, this belief stripped Christ's death of its true meaning and value. This is why Paul wrote these words in Galatians 5:2:

I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all (Galatians 5:2).

In addition to denying the sufficiency of Christ's saving work, the false teachers in Galatia challenged Paul's gospel by teaching that believers must rely on the flesh to complete their salvation. Paul expressly referred to this problem in Galatians 3:3 where he sarcastically asked these questions:

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:3).

The Greek term rendered as "human effort" is *sarx*, often translated "flesh." Paul typically used the term "flesh" (or *sarx*) to refer to mere human power, and often with the connotation of sinful human ways. So, it is rightly translated here "human effort."

When Paul first ministered in Galatia, his preaching had been accompanied by dramatic displays of the Spirit's power. The Galatians had begun their Christian lives in the power of the Spirit. But now, by turning to circumcision, they had begun to depend on their own human abilities to live in ways that please God. Ironically, this reliance on human ability actually condemned them to impotence and failure.

In addition to denying the value of Christ's work and the importance of the Holy Spirit, Paul was also deeply troubled because the false teachers had created divisions in the church. As Paul put it in Galatians 6:15-16:

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).

In Christ the divisions between Jews and Gentiles had been eliminated.

Disunity in the churches of Galatia deeply troubled Paul. Quarreling and divisiveness among the people of God was absolutely contrary to what Christ had done and against the ideal toward which the church was to strive. But the false teachers followed the Old Testament teaching that circumcision was necessary for full inclusion among the people of God. For many in the church — especially Jewish Christians — it was natural to think that anyone who refused circumcision was at best second class. It is no wonder then that divisions developed between those Christians who were circumcised and those who were not.

So, we see that the false teachers had brought some very serious problems to the Galatian churches. And having heard what these false teachers were doing, Paul could not remain silent. The Galatians were his spiritual children; they were his loved ones. So, he wrote his epistle to rescue both Jewish and Gentile believers from the destructive views of these false teachers.

Now that we've seen some important aspects of the background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we're ready to look more closely at the structure and content of his letter. What did Paul write to the churches of Galatia? How did he respond to their problems? We'll briefly explore the book of Galatians by summarizing each of its main sections.

CONTENT

The epistle to the Galatians divides into six main sections: first, a prescript in 1:1–5; second, an introduction to the problem in Galatia in 1:6–10; third, several historical accounts in 1:11–2:21; fourth, a series of proofs for the doctrine of justification by faith in 3:1–4:31; fifth, some practical exhortations in 5:1–6:10; and last, a postscript in 6:11–18.

PRESRIPT / POSTSCRIPT

The prescript of Galatians is brief and fairly straightforward. It introduces the apostle Paul as the author and identifies the churches of Galatia as the recipients. The postscript is also brief, closing the letter with some final remarks and Paul's personal blessing for the churches. It also highlights some of Paul's more important thoughts in this letter.

INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEM

In the second section, 1:6-10, which we've called the "Introduction to the Problem," Paul immediately attacked the problem of false teaching in Galatia. He expressed astonishment, and warned his readers how dangerous it was to follow the false teachers. In no uncertain terms, Paul insisted that to reject his teaching was to accept a false gospel. Listen to the dire curse he laid on the false teachers in 1:8:

Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8).

To follow the teachings of the false teachers was to reject the true gospel of Christ — it was to reject salvation itself. This section of the letter makes it clear that the problems in Galatia were not insignificant. The Galatians' eternal destinies were at stake.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

The third section of the epistle, 1:11–2:21, is more elaborate. It consists of several historical accounts in which Paul proved his authority. Three different historical events come to the foreground in these chapters: Paul's call and training in 1:11-17; Paul's meeting with church leaders in Jerusalem in 2:1-10; and Paul's conflict with Peter in Syrian Antioch in 2:11-21.

Call and Training

The account of Paul's call and training explains how Paul had the authority to resist circumcising Gentiles. It begins with a description of how Paul had loved the traditions of Israel. Listen to his words in Galatians 1:13-14:

You have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism ... I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:13-14).

But Paul also explained how his attitude had changed. Despite his earlier zeal for Jewish traditions, when he was on his journey through Galatia, Paul had not required the Gentiles to be circumcised. How could he have done this when he had been so committed to the traditions of Israel? Listen to Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:15-18:

When God ... was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man ... I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:15-18).

Paul had spent three years in Arabia learning the gospel and Christian doctrines directly from Jesus. His refusal to require Gentile circumcision did not result from natural reasoning or personal preference. Jesus, the Lord himself, had taught Paul his new views. To disagree with Paul on this matter was to disagree with Christ himself.

Meeting with Leaders

The second historical account in this section of Galatians, found in 2:1-10, reports Paul's meeting with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Simply put, fourteen years after an earlier private meeting with Peter, Paul met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. And in this meeting, they confirmed his approach to bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. Listen to Paul's record in Galatians 2:1-9:

I went up again to Jerusalem ... in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles... They saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles ... James, Peter and John ... gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship ... They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-9).

Paul related this story to the Galatians so that they could see that his work among the Gentiles did not contradict the authoritative teaching of the church leaders in Jerusalem. In fact, the other apostles agreed that God had given Paul the specific role of spreading the gospel to the Gentile world. So, Paul had every right to approach the question of Gentile circumcision as he had.

Conflict with Peter

Paul's third historical account, found in 2:11-21, describes a conflict with Peter in Syrian Antioch. At an earlier time, Peter had freely associated with uncircumcised believers. At some later time, however, Peter began to fear for his reputation among some strict Jewish believers from Jerusalem. So, he separated himself from uncircumcised believers.

Regardless of what Peter believed in his heart, his actions conformed to the false belief that uncircumcised Gentile believers were inferior to Jewish believers. When Paul found out about this, he confronted Peter and reminded him of the gospel which both Peter and he believed. Galatians 2:15-16 report Paul's words to Peter on that occasion:

We who are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners" know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by

faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:15-16).

Paul wrote about his conflict with Peter to prove that even Peter had submitted to his authoritative correction in this matter. If Paul's authority had been sufficient to correct even the preeminent apostle Peter, it certainly was sufficient to correct the false teachers in Galatia.

In these three accounts of call and training, meeting with the Jerusalem authorities, and confronting Peter, Paul built a strong case against the false teachers in Galatia and defended his gospel.

THEOLOGICAL PROOFS

After giving these historical accounts, Paul turned to the fourth section of his epistle in 3:1–4:31. There he offered more direct theological arguments for his doctrine of justification by faith. This material divides into four parts, alternating between the experiences of the Galatians and the biblical record of Abraham's life. First, Paul appealed to the early experience of the Galatians. Second, he turned to the Old Testament account of Abraham's saving faith. Third, Paul appealed to the current experience of the Galatian believers. And fourth, he drew upon the story of Abraham's wives and sons.

Early Experience

Let's look briefly at 3:1-5, where Paul focused on the Galatians' earlier experience of the Christian faith. He wrote these words in 3:2-5:

I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ... After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ... Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:2-5).

In a series of rhetorical questions, Paul referred to his first missionary journey. As Acts chapters 13-14 tell us, the Galatians had received many incredible blessings from the Holy Spirit when Paul had first been among them. Both they and he knew that these blessings of the Spirit did not come because they were keeping the law of God. God had freely given these gifts simply because they had believed the gospel. From this experience, the Galatians should have known better than to think that God's blessings could later be obtained by obedience to the law.

Abraham's Faith

After touching on their early Christian experience, Paul turned to the example of Abraham's saving faith. He argued in 3:6–4:11 that God had blessed Abraham because of faith, not because of Abraham's obedience to God's law. Abraham had not earned the blessing of salvation through fleshly human efforts. Paul's argument in this section is rather complex, but we may summarize it in five steps.

First, Paul pointed out that Abraham was justified by having faith in God's promise that he would have a son. In 3:6-7 Paul referred to Genesis 15:6 in this way:

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-7).

From Paul's point of view, Genesis 15:6 made it clear that Abraham was justified by his faith in God's word and not on the basis of his circumcision which took place years later. On this basis, Paul concluded that the true children of Abraham were those who followed his example of trusting in the promises of God for salvation. Salvation was a blessing which came by means of faith, and not by circumcision.

Second, because controversy had risen over the status of uncircumcised Gentiles, Paul went on to point out that God had told Abraham that the blessing of salvation would spread through him to the Gentiles. In Galatians 3:8-9 Paul referred to Genesis 12:3 in this way:

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8-9).

Paul understood Genesis 12:3 to teach that a time was promised when Gentiles throughout the world would receive God's blessing. This blessing would come to all nations in the same manner as it came to Abraham, through faith.

Third, Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that the bloody cutting of the flesh in circumcision was a symbol of self-cursing, not a way to gain righteousness. Circumcision meant "may I be cut off from the land of the living if I do not exercise covenant faithfulness." Christ had come precisely because nobody else could live up to that standard. As Paul put it in Galatians 3:13:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13).

By hanging on a cross — a most shameful and cursed death in Jewish understanding — Christ took upon himself the awful curse of sin. The Galatians needed to understand that the blessings of covenant faithfulness were theirs totally by faith, because Christ had already taken the curse on himself for their sakes.

In the fourth place, Paul preempted an objection from the false teachers by arguing that the law of Moses did not reverse Abraham's example. As he put it in Galatians 3:17-19:

The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise...What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come (Galatians 3:17-19).

From Paul's point of view, the law hadn't been given to enable the people to gain God's blessings by works, like the false teachers of Galatia had claimed. The Mosaic law had been added to deal with the sinfulness of Israel, and to prepare them for Christ.

In the fifth place, Paul declared that God's blessings came only to those who belong to Abraham's special son, namely Christ. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:16, 29:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:16, 29).

As Paul read the record of Genesis, he noticed that in 22:18 the Hebrew word *zera* (translated here as "seed") was singular, not plural. Abraham's inheritance had not been offered to all of Abraham's children as individuals, but in the first place to Abraham's son who was the representative head of those who descended from him. And in the light of the revelation of Christ, Paul knew that Christ was the great descendant of Abraham who was the final representative head of God's people throughout time. Christ is the one great seed who inherits all promises given to Abraham, and individuals participate in this inheritance only by belonging to him.

In these ways, Paul argued that justification comes only to those who follow the example of Abraham and receive God's blessings through Abraham's son; salvation is by faith in the promises of God and not by works of the law.

Current Experience

After appealing to the initial salvation experience of the Galatians and to the biblical account of Abraham's faith, Paul addressed the Galatians' current experience in Galatians 4:12-20. Listen to what he wrote in 4:15-16:

What has happened to all your joy? ... Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? (Galatians 4:15-16).

Here Paul expressed deep concern for the Galatians' spiritual well-being; he wanted them to recognize their desperate spiritual condition. As the Galatians turned

from the gospel, they lost their joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit that they should have been enjoying. This loss alone should have alerted the Galatians to the fact that there was something wrong with the teaching of Paul's opponents.

Abraham's Wives and Sons

The fourth way Paul argued his case against the false teachers was by focusing on the biblical record of Abraham's wives and sons in Galatians 4:21-31. Paul explained that in Genesis 15, God had promised Abraham an heir through his wife Sarah. But Sarah was barren and past childbearing age, so receiving an heir through her required Abraham to have faith in God's promise. By trusting God to fulfill his word, Sarah had a son, Isaac. Sarah's child Isaac was a child of promise, and he was accepted as Abraham's heir and the representative of all who believe.

But, as Genesis 16 tells us, before Isaac was born, Abraham had grown tired of waiting for God to give him the promised son. So, he turned to Sarah's slave Hagar to have a child. By doing this, Abraham sought to secure his legacy by human effort, by the effort of the flesh. Hagar bore the child Ishmael to Abraham, but Ishmael was a child of the flesh. God rejected him as Abraham's heir and he came to represent all who look to the flesh as the way of salvation. After drawing out this contrast between Abraham's wives and sons, Paul concluded this way in Galatians 4:31:

Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman (Galatians 4:31).

Faith in God's promise is the way of salvation for Christians just as Isaac was born to Sarah because of Abraham's faith. Just as in Abraham's day, believers in every age are justified, included, and empowered to live righteously by means of faith in God's promises, not by their own merit.

So we've seen that Paul offered four main arguments to explain that believers receive all of God's blessings by means of faith alone. He argued from the Galatians' early experience of salvation, from the faith of Abraham, from the Galatians' recent loss of joy, and from the record of Abraham's wives and sons.

PRACTICAL EXHORTATIONS

With the content of chapters 1-4 in mind, we are in a position to summarize the exhortations of 5:1-6:10. In these chapters, Paul addressed a number of practical problems that the false teachers had caused in Galatia.

Paul had much to say in these verses but we can summarize Paul's thoughts here under three main headings: responsible freedom in Christ, in 5:1-15; the power of the Holy Spirit, in 5:16-26; and God's judgment, in 6:1-10. Let's look first at Paul's emphasis on responsible freedom in Christ.

Freedom in Christ

In 5:1-15 Paul called on the Galatians to remain true to their freedom in Christ. His position is carefully balanced. In the first place, he stressed the need to maintain Christian freedom. Listen to his words in 5:1:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

During his first missionary journey, Paul had brought Gentiles into the Christian faith free from burdens, and he wanted them to remain free because the burdens of legalism are so dangerous. As he wrote in Galatians 5:2-3:

If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law (Galatians 5:2-3).

The false teachers in Galatia had introduced a legalistic system of righteousness. They had taught Christians to rely on their obedience to the law rather than on Christ. But in so doing, they actually obligated these Gentile Christians to a standard that was impossible to keep, obedience to the whole law. Their choice was between freedom in Christ and bondage to the law. The one led to salvation, the other to judgment.

Even so, in the second place, Paul balanced his defense of Christian freedom with an affirmation of Christian moral responsibility. He warned the Galatians not to use their Christian freedom from Jewish traditions as a license for disregarding God's moral law. In 5:13 he wrote:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature (Galatians 5:13).

Christ had released the Galatian Christians from bondage to the law as the means to justification and power for righteous living, but he still demanded that they follow the commands of God. Paul did not want the Galatians to think that their freedom from circumcision included freedom to violate God's holy character, which was the very foundation of the law.

Power of Spirit

Having established this two-fold orientation toward the importance of freedom in Christ and righteous living, Paul addressed the importance of the power of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26. How could the Galatians be empowered to resist sin if not by legalism and human effort?

In a word, Paul answered that every believer must rely on the Holy Spirit for leading and empowerment rather than on the flesh. Listen to the way he put it in 5:16 and 25:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25).

From Paul's point of view, the only way to live a holy life in Christ was to depend on and follow the Spirit of God.

Now, it is always important to remember that Paul never set the Holy Spirit over or against the Scriptures. For Paul, living by the Spirit could not be divorced from written revelation. The Spirit of God always led God's people to live according to the written Word of God, as it had already been revealed in the Old Testament and as it was progressively being revealed in Paul's letters and in other writings that would become the New Testament. But living by the Spirit was not merely to conform to the teaching of written texts. It also involved a conscious dependence on the power of the Spirit to fulfill what God had commanded. Christians have nothing to fear from God if they rely on the Spirit to produce the fruit of righteousness in their lives.

Divine Judgment

In the third place, Paul summed up these practical matters by speaking of God's judgment. Listen to his serious warning in 6:7-9:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9).

Paul was deeply concerned with the ultimate destiny of the Galatians. He knew that true believers in Christ can never lose their salvation. But he also knew that not everyone who professes faith really has saving faith. So, he warned the Galatian churches not to forget the coming judgment of God. He hoped that this warning would encourage them to rely on Christ and the Holy Spirit for salvation.

From this brief overview of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we can see that Paul refuted the false teachers in Galatia in several ways. He engaged the Galatians with deeply personal appeals and urged them to believe the true gospel, and to live according to that gospel he had preached to them years before. In short, Paul exhorted the Galatians to reject the false teachers and to embrace again the gospel of justification by faith apart from works.

So far, we've explored the background of Paul's letter to the Galatian churches and the basic content of his epistle. Now we're in a position to look at our third topic: how the book of Galatians reflects Paul's central theological outlooks.

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

You'll recall from our first lesson in this series that we have to distinguish between the specific teachings in Paul's letters and his underlying theological system. Paul repeatedly corrected the false teachers in Galatia for calling Gentile Christians to submit to circumcision. And he spent a great deal of time discussing circumcision and justification by faith.

Paul's direct statements about circumcision and salvation were actually expressions of more basic theological convictions. His teaching in the book of Galatians was an application of his central eschatological views. You will recall how the apostle Paul taught that the great age to come had begun with Christ's death and resurrection, even though sin and death would not completely vanish until Christ returned in glory. And this means that Christians live in what we might call the "already and not yet," a time when the age of sin and death overlaps the age of eternal salvation.

But the fact that this age and the age to come exist simultaneously gave rise to some critical misunderstandings in Galatia. Paul believed that the Galatian specific controversies over circumcision, justification and the like were actually symptomatic of a more basic problem. The more fundamental error in Galatia was that the false teachers seriously underestimated the degree to which Christ had brought the age to come through his death and resurrection. They failed to realize just how much of the age to come was already present. As a result, we might call this false teaching "under-realized eschatology," meaning that their views diminished the significance of Christ's first coming.

Now, in one sense, Paul attacked the false teachers' "under-realized eschatology" in every portion of the book of Galatians. But we'll focus on six areas in which Paul clearly applied his central theological outlooks to this problem: first, his description of Christ; second, his focus on the gospel; third, the law of Moses; fourth, the doctrine of union with Christ; fifth, his emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the Christian life; and sixth, his final appeal to his doctrine of the new creation.

CHRIST

Paul's appeal to his doctrine of the latter days becomes evident in his description of Christ in the introduction of the book of Galatians. Listen to how Paul described Jesus in Galatians 1:3-4:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age (Galatians 1:3-4).

Notice that Paul did not simply wish blessings from the Father and Christ for the Galatians. Instead, he drew attention to the purpose for which the Father had sent Christ. As he put it here, Jesus was sent “to rescue us from the present evil age.”

The expression “the present evil age” corresponds to the standard Jewish terminology with which we are already familiar. “The present evil age” is synonymous with “this age,” the age of sin and judgment before the coming of Messiah. Paul described Christ in this way because he wanted to point out at the beginning of his letter that the Galatians had lost sight of the reason Christ had come to this earth, namely to deliver Christians into the age to come.

The false teachers in Galatia had caused many believers to lose sight of the great changes that Christ had brought to the world. This is especially evident in the fact that the false teachers insisted on their returning to the outmoded covenant sign of circumcision. The Christian faith taught that Jesus came to this earth to deliver believers from this age and its old ways. To deny this truth in theory or practice was to deny the essence of the Christian faith.

GOSPEL

A second way Paul revealed his concern over the Galatians’ under-realized eschatology was by describing his disagreement with the false teachers as a matter of the “gospel.” Listen to the way Paul summed up the matter in Galatians 1:6-7:

I am astonished that you are ... turning to a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-7).

Now, we can be confident that the false teachers in Galatia had not stopped talking about Jesus. They still claimed to be Christians. So, why did Paul call their message a different gospel, or no gospel at all?

To catch the significance of this statement, we have to remember that the term “gospel,” or “good news” as it’s sometimes translated, comes from the Greek word *euangelion*. This New Testament Greek terminology was based on the Old Testament Hebrew term *mebaser*, especially as it was used in Isaiah. Listen to the prophet Isaiah’s words in Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).

In this passage, Isaiah spoke of the time when the Old Testament exile of Israel would end. And he used the term “good news” to describe the announcement that the exile was over, that God had established his reign in human history, and that God had

begun judging his enemies and blessing his people. As Isaiah said here, the good news of salvation is “Your God reigns,” the reign of God. This reign of God after the exile is what the New Testament calls “the kingdom of God,” which is also another term for “the age to come.”

So, when Paul said that the false teachers had “no gospel at all,” he implied that they denied that Christ had brought the age to come, the age of salvation, the age of the kingdom of God. By teaching circumcision and implying justification by works of the law, the false teachers rejected the true significance of Christ’s first coming. They had no good news or gospel to offer anyone because they didn’t believe that Christ had brought the Kingdom of God, or the age to come, in any significant way. Here again, Paul understood the root of the problem in Galatia was that the false teachers had an under-realized eschatology. The Christian gospel is the announcement that the Christ has indeed brought the Kingdom of God to earth; he has introduced the age to come.

LAW

A third way Paul’s eschatology influenced his letter to the Galatians was in his assessment of the Mosaic law. Paul touched on the subject of the law several times in this letter, but in chapter 3 he dealt clearly with its purpose in relation to this age and the age to come.

Now, we’ve already seen that receiving God’s blessings by faith was not some new doctrine Paul had brought to Gentile evangelism. Faith had always been the way of salvation throughout the Scriptures. But Paul’s emphasis on faith raised a serious question: if God’s blessings for Jews and Gentiles have always come by means of faith alone, then what was the purpose of the law of Moses? Why had God given the Mosaic law to Israel? Paul answered these questions in 3:19:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come (Galatians 3:19).

Notice how Paul put it. The law was given “because of transgressions,” and “until the Seed ... had come.”

At first glance, it might look like Paul simply brushed aside the moral relevance of the law of Moses, consigning it to an age before the coming of Christ. Several passages in Galatians show that this was not so. In Galatians 5:14 Paul appealed to Leviticus 19:18 to explain why believers should pursue love:

The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

A similar appeal to the law appears in Galatians 5:22-23. As he put it there:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

But if Paul wasn't teaching Christians to throw away the law of Moses, then why did he write in Galatians 3:19 that the law was given "because of transgressions," and that it was to be effective "until the Seed ... had come"?

To answer this question, it helps to recall that the problem in Galatia was that the false teachers thought the law was even better than it really was; they thought obedience to the law was the way to receive salvation from God. But Paul taught that God always blessed his people through the means of faith. That's why in 3:19 he said that the law was "added because of transgressions." The law wasn't instituted to give God's people salvation or to empower them to live righteously; it was instituted to reveal their sin.

But the law had this important function in God's plan "until the Seed... had come," that is, until Christ had come. The Mosaic law was given to condemn men and women for their sins. But the law's authority to condemn was only temporary. Now that Christ has come, he has inaugurated a new age, and because believers are united to Christ, they are ushered into the age to come. And in the age to come, the law's authority to condemn has been abolished. True followers of Christ are free from the condemnation of the law.

UNION WITH CHRIST

A fourth way Paul's writing depended on his central outlook on eschatology was by focusing on believers' union with Christ. The false teachers in Galatia encouraged the Galatians to think of their salvation in individualistic terms. Their focus on circumcision and the stipulations of the Mosaic law had reduced salvation to an individual attempt to live righteously, and implicitly to earn justification, by obeying the law. In effect, men, women, and children were left to stand before God on the basis of their individual merit.

But Paul insisted that neither justification nor righteous living could be gained this way. Justification and righteous living had to come through union with Christ. In Galatians 3:26-29 Paul put it this way:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

The false teachers in Galatia actually taught that some believers in the church were better than others because everyone stood or fell before God on the basis of their own merit. But they were wrong. The truth is that we are "clothed ... with Christ," we are "in Christ Jesus." Because we are united to Christ in this way, God looks upon Christians as if they were Christ himself. And because Christ is totally righteous and holy, justified

and deserving of all Abraham's blessings, God sees us as righteous and holy and justified and deserving of blessing too.

Once again, Paul's perspective rose out of his eschatology. Paul taught that the transition from this age of judgment to the coming age of blessing takes place through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. By his own obedience to the law, Christ fulfilled the law's requirements for all believers. By his death in place of believers — enduring the curses of the law on their behalf — Christ had fulfilled the requirement of the law that sin be punished by death. By his resurrection on behalf of believers, Christ and those for whom he died were vindicated by the Father as worthy of glory. As a result, when believers are united to Christ by faith, God looks upon them as if they were Christ himself, and on that basis considers them to have died to the curse of the law with Christ and to have been raised with Christ into the new life of the age to come.

To follow the false teachers of Galatia was to reject this central role of Christ as the heir of Abraham's promise — it was to require every individual to pursue the blessing of righteous living by his own human effort. But Paul saw Christ as Abraham's seed through whom every aspect of salvation comes, making it clear that believers receive all God's blessings only as they are joined to Christ.

HOLY SPIRIT

A fifth way Paul's eschatology guided his writing of Galatians was in his discussion of the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian life. In fact, the role of the Holy Spirit was one of the main ideas Paul had in mind as he wrote this letter. This emphasis can be seen in Paul's first description of the false teaching in Galatia. Listen to what he wrote in Galatians 3:1-3:

**You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Are you so foolish?
After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal
by human effort? (Galatians 3:1-3)**

Paul was amazed that the Galatians, who had begun their Christian lives by relying on the Holy Spirit, had somehow been tricked into relying on their own human effort.

One place in which Paul called great attention to the contrast between the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of fleshly human effort was Galatians 5:16-26. There, he developed a strong contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. Paul contrasted the acts of the sinful nature, or of fleshly human effort, with the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:19-21 he listed the works of the flesh as including: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and orgies. But in Galatians 5:22-23 he listed the fruit of the Holy Spirit as: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The false teachers wanted people to believe that by fleshly human effort they could submit to circumcision, and that they could be empowered to live righteously. But as Paul showed here, the only thing human effort could produce was sin. Joel 2:28 is one

prophecy which clearly expressed that during the age to come God would pour out his Spirit in ways that he had not done in the Old Testament.

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions (Joel 2:28).

The Holy Spirit had been present with believers even before Christ came, and he had empowered believers to remain faithful to God. But back then his greater filling and special gifts were reserved, with few exceptions, for a limited number of people, such as prophets, priests and kings. In this sense, the Holy Spirit's presence was less dramatic and overwhelming in the Old Testament. But Joel prophesied that in the age to come the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all classes and groups of believers. And as we learn in Acts 2, Joel's prophecy began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. At that time, God began pouring out his Spirit on all his people in a dramatic way, indicating that the hope of the age to come had become a reality.

But in Galatia, the false teachers had instructed the Galatians to rely on their own human efforts to live righteously, indicating that they denied the Spirit's abundant gifting and enabling in the New Testament era. They failed to realize the great blessing of the Holy Spirit that Christ had brought when he inaugurated the age to come. In response, Paul reminded the Galatians that those who belong to Christ already possess the Holy Spirit in the fullness of his power. When followers of Christ rely on the Spirit's power; he moves within them to produce the fruit of righteousness.

NEW CREATION

A final place in which we may see Paul's heavy dependence on his doctrine of the latter days is his appeal to the idea of the new creation. This doctrine appears in the postscript of his epistle. Listen to the way Paul put it in Galatians 6:5-16.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).

In many respects, these words summarize the entire point of view presented in the book of Galatians. In Paul's outlook, his opponents were making far too much out of circumcision, because with the coming of Christ, it does not matter at all if a person is circumcised or not. Instead, what matters is that every person become a part of "the new creation."

You will recall that one way Paul believed the *eschaton*, or end times, had come with the first coming of Christ was that Christ had begun the renewal of the entire universe into a new creation. This new order of things brought such enormous blessings to the people of God that it completely overshadowed the ways of the old creation. Rather than going back to the ways of life prior to the coming of Christ, living in the new creation is to be the preeminent concern of every believer. From the days of Paul until

Christ returns, the chief concern of every follower of Christ is to be life in the new creation. And as Paul put it, those who make this their choice are indeed “the Israel of God.”

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the churches of Galatia. We have explored the background of the false teachers in Galatia, the content of Paul's letter to the Galatians, and finally we have seen how Paul depended on his central doctrine of eschatology to address the problems in Galatia.

As we reflect on Paul's response to the Galatians, we not only see how he guided them through their own very serious problems, but also how Paul speaks to us today. Time after time modern Christians live as the Galatians. We forget how much Christ's first coming has changed human history. Like the Galatians we turn back to the failures and frustrations of living as if Jesus has done very little. But the heart of Paul's theology speaks to us as it did to the Galatians. Christ has brought us out of this present evil age so that we may live in the blessings of the age to come. As we turn our hearts toward the ways of the new creation that has come in Christ, we will find that the gospel of Christ is good news indeed. Christ has brought salvation to the world, and we have been granted the privilege of living in that salvation, even today.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
TWO

Paul and the Galatians
Faculty Forum



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Two: Paul and the Galatians

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Reggie M. Kidd

Students
Graham Buck
Dusty Hart

Question 1:

How is our interpretation of Galatians affected by its date and original audience?

Student: Now Reggie, in the lesson, you said that Galatians was probably written after Paul's 1st missionary journey but before the Council of Jerusalem. Now, I've heard some people have different takes on when the letter was actually written. How would our interpretations of the book differ if say it was written at a later time or perhaps even to a different audience?

Dr. Kidd: So in the first place if it was written not to the southern folks then we don't have as much information about what the background issues are. We have to kind of just do some guesswork from the letter itself but if we can locate it right after the 1st missionary journey to the folks that were involved in the 1st missionary journey then we can better piece together exactly what happened. In the second place, if it was written later and to the northern Galatian people, we have a challenge in just trying to figure out why, if the council in Jerusalem in chapter 15 dealt so straightforwardly with the whole question of should Gentiles get circumcised, why Paul didn't just end the conversation by citing that letter when he wrote this, why he didn't just talk about that decree when he wrote this letter. So if we date it later, the scholars who do that think it would have been written right around the time of the letter to the Romans so what interpreters then do is just read Galatians more like side by side with the letter to the Romans. And that is interesting in its own regard but still I think it makes more sense of the whole scenario between Acts and the letter to the Galatians to see this letter as coming after the 1st missionary journey before the Jerusalem council and several years before the letter to the Romans. And that's interesting because it means Paul's whole concern about works of the law as opposed to faith in Christ is an abiding one that carried through his ministry.

Question 2:**Why did Paul reject the unbelieving Jews in Acts 13?**

Student: In Acts 13 Paul turns from the unbelieving Jews and begins to direct his ministry toward the Gentiles. Isn't it a bit harsh that Paul rejects the unbelieving Jews in this way?

Dr. Kidd: Well Dusty, I think the tone that we should hear in Paul's voice when he says, "We turn to the Gentiles," is not really so much harshness as it is profound disappointment. Now we need to note that Paul never turns decisively away from his Jewish countrymen. His program continues to be throughout his ministry to go to whatever Jews he can find to talk with first. Whether it's Lydia and company alongside the river in Philippi or whether there is a synagogue, he will go. And what his hope is is that his fellow Jews will see what he has come to see, quite to his own surprise, that all their hopes and dreams for being the bearers of God's grace and mercy and justice and holiness to the world has been realized through the Messiah Jesus. And he is going to go to the Gentiles with or without them. He always hopes that he can take Jews with him on that mission. And he is somebody who has always understood God's promises to Israel are the matter of God's promise to Abraham, to bless the nations through Israel. He thought that that was some far off thing. He certainly wouldn't have thought it would happen through a crucified Messiah and his world just gets turned upside down, and he is just insistent on continuing to go to his people when he can to bring them the along, to fulfill...well, the terms that he uses in Acts 13 are those of Isaiah 49, to be a light to the Gentiles and he just hopes throughout that his people will get it about the Messiah and come with him.

Student: So is that kind of almost like over-speak in such a way, saying like "I'm shaking the dust off my clothes to the Jews and turning to the Gentiles" as a way of urging his Jewish brothers and sisters to see?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, very much so. It's like, "Okay, if you don't get it now then I am going to go and I'm going to pursue this ministry as hard as I can." I hope that as he writes in Romans 11 later on that his people will be provoked to jealousy to say, "Wow. Look what we are missing out on. We need to get in on this." You know folks like myself who are from a Gentile background really need to take a hard look at Paul and recognize that the impatience that Westerners eventually developed about Jews not getting it about the gospel and the whole history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, pogroms and violence against Jews and shunning who has no basis in the New Testament at all. And especially in this one who said, "I would just as soon be cut off from my people" and never wrote them off and never wrote or spoke harshly even when he was writing and speaking with great profound disappointment. But it was always a disappointment that was tense with "Oh lord, have mercy on me and have mercy on my countrymen."

Question 3:**Why did Paul use such strong language in his letter to the Galatians?**

Student: Now Reggie, Paul uses some pretty harsh language in the letter to the Galatians.

Dr. Kidd: Oh yeah. “Oh, you foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”

Student: Yeah, I mean it's some pretty hard stuff. Is there anything particularly heinous about what the Galatians were doing? Is he just talking in a way to make it sound big or is there really something that's nasty going on here?

Dr. Kidd: Well, hello! Jesus hung on the cross, shed his blood to cover our sins and these guys want to have believers shed their blood to express their solidarity with Jesus. And Paul's going, “Don't you get it? Your blood would never suffice and that's why he had to shed his blood because your blood would never be enough.” And to think that it would call upon anybody else to shed their blood after Christ has shed his blood is just, well, it gets the big anathema. It gets the big, “Don't go there.” So in this respect he thinks a lot like the writer to the Hebrews who goes, “All the other priests have to keep doing their job over and over and over again. And what marks our priest is that his work has been done once. He underwent the whole curse.” For him that means whatever is going to undo that work really needs to be done away with.

Question 4:**Are any modern errors comparable to the errors in Galatia?**

Student: So Reggie, is there any similar false teachings today that compare to the magnitude of those teachings that Paul was addressing in Galatia?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think the rule of thumb, Dusty, is if I am being told that what Christ did on the cross was good but not quite enough and that I need to add to it then, you know, you are in this Paul danger zone. And that means, how do I confess my sin? Because I continue to sin but how do I express my sorrow over my sin? Do I simply acknowledge it? Well, Paul I think would say “Okay.” But do I go punish myself? Do I take a knife and cut myself? Do I take some sort of whip and beat myself on the back? And unfortunately, I have known people that they kind of feel like they mess up so bad, how could God love them anymore? And what can they do to get themselves back into God's favor? That kind of thinking is a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation that exists because now we are sons and daughters. We are accepted in the beloved and we are loved not because we shed our blood but because he shed his blood for us. And another thing is these people want to go back under the law and what they are going to wind up doing is adding to God's commandments. And whenever you add to God's commandments and make our

relationship with him a matter of following a code instead of pursuing a relationship, then I think you are going to have Paul coming down on you. When it becomes not a matter of his work in us through the Holy Spirit because we are now clean and he indwells in us then I think you are going to have Paul getting all upset.

Question 5:

Why did Paul oppose Peter so strongly in Galatians 2?

Student: So what Paul is talking about is that it's not about us shedding our blood in addition to Jesus shedding his blood for our sins and it's not about us adding rules to God's law, that those things are separate from his gospel. But there is a section when he is talking about his interaction with Peter that Peter was eating with the Gentiles and having a great time and then these guys from Jerusalem come up and then he separates from the Gentiles. And Paul seems to lay into them pretty good. Is there something else going on there as well?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, I think that's very perceptive because that really does become the occasion for Paul to get all over the Galatians. Because he connects some dots, the implication is if you haven't gone all the way and shed your own blood and come under the law in this respect you are not a true citizen of Israel. And God had already dealt with Peter about who his true Israel is, who his true people are. They are all those who belong by faith to Israel through Israel's Messiah, Jesus, Jew and Gentile alike. That was straightened out for Peter back in Acts 10 and 11 when the angel appeared to him and showed him that God declared all foods to be clean. And he went to Cornelius' house, the Gentile Roman centurion, preached the gospel. God baptized those people in the Spirit, gave them faith and didn't require them to become circumcised. And as far as Peter was concerned, they are just as much Jews as I am and Peter understood that.

And then he comes up to Antioch where Paul has been ministering and he has full table fellowship with Gentile Christians. And thereby fully accepts them into the people of God just like him under the same terms, the shedding of Jesus' blood. But then when certain people come from Jerusalem out of concern, or concern for their consciences, out of fear of them, or whatever, he withdraws from table fellowship with these Gentiles. And Paul realizes the implications of that are Christ's blood was not enough for them. Somehow they would have to add to that work and become like full ethnic Jews. And what has happened in Paul's whole theology is his whole view of God has had to be reconfigured to realize that Jesus Christ is just as much Lord as the Father. So he has re-juggled his conception of God himself to include Jesus in the deity. He has had to adjust his sense of how Israel fulfills her destiny to reach the nations. It's through Jesus. And he realizes now that Israel has always been a spiritual concept, a root, a tree that includes natural branches and now grafted in branches. So it's very, very important for him that there be this picture of one people of God, the true Israel made up of all who trust in Christ Israel's Messiah.

Question 6:**Did Paul believe that God had different plans for Israel and the church?**

Student: So there's not like you've got Israel on the one hand and then the church on the other, sort of two roads kind of headed the same direction that someday will meet up again?

Dr. Kidd: No, for Paul he sees it completely differently than that. He sees the whole narrative of Old Testament history being the bringing together of all of God's promises for his people through Jesus the Messiah. And now everybody who belongs to Jesus the Messiah belongs to the Father because Jesus the Messiah is the one true obedient, faithful Israelite who receives God's favor for his obedient life, for his keeping the moral law keep the Mosaic law, living in obedience to his heavenly Father. All of those who belong to him are covered by him and are just as much citizens of the kingdom of God, just as much citizens of Israel as those who are ethnically so.

Question 7:**Why did Paul reject circumcision in Galatians but later allow Timothy to be circumcised?**

Student: Reggie, in Galatians 5, Paul says that if you receive circumcision then Christ will have no value or benefit. But yet later in his ministry he allows Timothy to be circumcised, can you help me understand that?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, well when we were talking about how if you add the shedding of your blood to what Christ did, well, that just doesn't work. For Paul, once we are clear about not needing to shed our own blood and we got that straight, then he is perfectly happy to talk with Jews about continuing the practice of circumcision. In fact, Paul is accused time and again of going around telling Jews to stop being Jews but Paul never does that. It's important to understand that Timothy is a Jew on his mother's side. So I guess the real question is why he was never circumcised in the first place and what Paul does is have him regularized in the eyes of the Jewish community. Now it's not like Timothy has to get circumcised to be saved but in order for Paul to gain any sort of access to a Jewish community that's already hearing him wrongly saying that Jews should not practice Judaism. It's really important for him to have a half-Jew who is part of his ministry team to show that he is a pious Jew even at the same time that he is a follower of Christ.

Student: So is that kind of like later on in his ministry towards the end when he is in Jerusalem and he takes the Nazirite vow, that he is not doing away with Judaism per se more that Christ is that fulfillment of the Jewish faith?

Dr. Kidd: Yes, he would have Jews understand that the fulfillment of the story that they have been birthed in, that they have been immersed in, and that has shaped them is Jesus the Messiah. And they don't have to step out of that story to have a relationship with Jesus the Messiah.

Question 8:

Should the modern church blend and reconcile its various cultures?

Student: So Reggie, this letter then seems to be written to a church that's having a hard time mixing cultures. You've got the Jews in the church and you've got the Gentiles, and trying to really figure out what does it mean to be the church? It's not just something that the early church dealt with is it? I mean, we have a lot of different cultures in the church today. How should we go about blending?

Dr. Kidd: Well Graham, it is important I think to realize that for Paul the blending of cultures wasn't secondary. It was at the heart of his gospel. And that is why he says so strongly here in Galatians 3, "All those who have put on Christ, all those who have been baptized in him have put him on and are heirs." And that means there is no Jew/Gentile, male/female, slave/free. And he really did expect that to get worked out in the hard stuff of life, of Jews and Gentiles learning how to love each other, of slave and free learning how to love each other, slave and free, rich and poor, and people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds, and certainly that does mean different tastes and different preferences. Because part of what he was seeing was this great vision that goes back...like at the end of Psalm 22. All of the ends of the earth, all the families of the earth as well as the faithful sons of Jacob and Israel, those who are rich, those who are poor, those who have already died, those who have not been born being this great assembly that the Messiah would bring together. And yes, it's no different today. People are called in the skin that God gave them, with the color hair, the color eyes, the same ethnic background that they have. But they are also called to relate to people who look, think, feel, speak a lot differently than they do around the person of Jesus Christ and to have a higher loyalty than just those backgrounds.

Student: So it's kind of like we are who God has made us to be and each one of us being different can see a little bit different perspective of God and when we interact together we get a more full picture of who he is.

Dr. Kidd: Well, as long as Jesus is at the center of it. I mean I have been in fellowships throughout the course of my years as a Christian where there have been really deep differences. You know, some of us are tongue speakers and some are not tongue speakers. Some of us feel like we should only sing Psalms and we shouldn't have instruments to them and others feel like we need to sing the hippest music around. Some of us really feel called to a ministry of evangelism and others feel that we are called to ministry of social justice. Some people seem to have the gift of no matter what they do they make money, and other people can't, you know? They

would know how to spend it if they had it but they don't know how to make it. And it's so easy for us to develop our spiritual relationships around lines of affinity and common likes and common stations in life. But the whole call of the gospel is to orient our lives around something else. It's not just gathering people around me that are different just for the sake of difference. It's a matter of finding that which really binds and that's the cross of Jesus Christ.

And so it means being committed to relationships of heroic forbearance and saying, "You know, I really don't, you know. I suspect I know how you are going to vote for in this coming election and that person stands for things that I think are totally wrong. But because you and I are brothers in Christ I want to understand what it is about that person that attracts you. I might have something to learn from you." And across the board, if we define our relationship primarily around the blood that we share that Jesus shed for us, and the Spirit who taught us, as Paul says, "to love one another and in that love finding the law being fulfilled," well, then I think we sense his pleasure and we know the kind of community that he has called us to be. And you know what? And then we become a city on a hill the light of which can't be hidden.

Question 9:

What is the relationship between law and grace?

Student: Reggie, I have heard people say, "I am under grace so I don't have to obey the law." Can you help me understand the relationship between law and grace? What the expectation is and how Paul helps us understand that in Galatians?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah Dusty, people who say that have kind of a distant memory or faint echo of what Paul is doing in Galatians but it's really off. In the first place for Paul, the law itself was a gift of God's grace. It was the law that helped people see their need for a redeemer. It was also the law that gave the charter for, well, here's what a people looks like when they are formed into the image of God and when they together are living as his people, as his kingdom, as his society, as his city, as his family. For Paul the concern is the way that the law's gracious function of being the incubator for the birth and the career and the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's done its job. It's brought us to Christ. And to the extent that it convicts us personally of our sin by showing us that we can't keep the commandments, it's done a very gracious job for us.

On the far side of that, for Paul, the law still stands because he can sum up the whole law in "Love your neighbor as yourself." And he's got this sense of the direction that our lives are going to go as they are transformed by God's Spirit who has made us alive and is making Christ's life active in us is that it is going to be in the direction of doing what the law calls for. But with the Galatians in particular, it's important for them to understand that the dynamic of that transformation, the transformation of the person into one who bears the image of God, is not through this, "I must keep these

commandments.” It’s through responding to the person who has embodied God’s love for us, receiving his work of redemption on the cross and the grace of forgiveness that we get because of his sacrifice. And then walking in the Holy Spirit who comes to live in us and to make Christ’s life effective in us. And so that’s why he talks in Galatians 5 about the fruit of the Spirit being love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control. Then he says, “Against these things there is no law.” He wants these folks to lean into the person and work of Jesus Christ, and his presence among them in the Holy Spirit and to learn to live in love. It’s like, you know when you first learn to drive you read the driver’s handbook but the point is to learn how to drive. And at some point you need to get behind the wheel and drive. And these folks have all that they need in order to drive and they are going like, “Okay, I am going to read the driver’s manual while I drive.” And he goes, “You guys are going to crash if you do that.” All that the law needs to teach you is in you. The text is there and now it’s been embodied in Jesus. So live in him. And you know what? You will fulfill the law and you will find that you are being made over into the image of Christ.

Question 10:

Is it possible to place too much emphasis on grace and not enough on law?

Student: So in that sense law isn’t like this bad thing. It is good but the Galatians are having a problem with following it when they should be living by faith. Is there any place where Paul kind of does the other thing, where people are living too much without the law and so he tells them go back and look at that and do that?

Dr. Kidd: What we will see two lessons from now when we get to the Corinthians is people who are doing exactly the opposite. They think that they have so much arrived at the great *eschaton* that they don’t need...In fact, in 1 Corinthians 4 he says, “You need to be careful to not go beyond what is written.” And throughout 1 Corinthians, he is drawing them back to lessons that they need to glean from Israel’s experience in the wilderness and particular commandments that God had given them. And by contrast in Galatians 5:6, he says, “Look folks, the only thing that matters is faith working through love.” With the Corinthians, in chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians he is going to say, “Look, the only thing that matters is keeping the commandments of God.”

And here is where we kind of get back to Paul’s whole eschatology thing. What makes him so profoundly good as a pastor is that he reads people’s hearts and he reads their hearts in light of his sense of God’s timeline. And the Galatians are trying to turn the clock back and go back under the law as though Christ had not come, as though it was necessary for some other shedding of blood. And he’s going, “You guys don’t get it.” And to come at them with a lot of ordinance keeping would just be to confirm them in their sickness. With the Corinthians, they think that they are so far beyond the constraint of the Scriptures that he has to remind them of how much

wisdom there is for us in Scripture. And so he calls them out of a, sort of a pretend future that they are in and he says, “No you need to get back into the sloppy already not yet” where because we are still sinners, God’s law still tells us what we need to know about who God is. And if we think we need to live apart from his rules we are kidding ourselves.

Question 11:

Did Paul inappropriately interpret the Old Testament in light of Jesus?

Student: Now Reggie, I’ve heard people say that Paul does some kind of funky stuff with Old Testament in Galatians. Like in chapter 3, he is talking about Abraham’s seed saying that he wasn’t talking about plural seeds but only one and obviously that can only mean Christ. But then they say but the original meaning was plural and Paul is just reading Jesus into the Old Testament. Is that what he is doing here?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think he has learned to read the Old Testament in light of its fulfillment in Jesus. But when you go back to Genesis, I think you find on a closer read that he is reading the text for what happens in Genesis. In Genesis 12 and 15, God gives the promise of seed. And you know, it’s a singular noun but it’s got a multiple meaning. It’s got a plural meaning. He tells Abraham, “Your seed is going to be like the stars in the sky, the sand on the seashore,” you know, innumerable. But Abraham understands immediately that that promise of multiple seed is going to have to be done through a singular seed. Thus the little scenario that plays out where he has Ishmael through Hagar because he won’t wait for the son through whom it’s going to get done. And then by Genesis 17 and 22 it’s very clear that we are talking about a singular seed. It’s Isaac and that is why the scene on Mount Horeb in chapter 22 is so dramatic because the means by which God would fulfill the promise “plural seed” looks like it’s just going to be aborted because God has told them to kill the one seed through whom it can be done. Now, you know, fast forward and Paul finally sees that the singular seed through whom God is going to bless the nations has been Jesus. And so he takes that dense complex idea and packs it all together in Galatians 3. But it’s not because he’s not reading the original context. He does see that that original context was a tremendously fertile one itself.

Question 12:

Why did Paul allegorize the stories of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4?

Student: Now that kind of makes me think about another question because Paul then goes to talk about the seed through the children. He talks about Hagar and Ishmael, and Sarah and Isaac and you’ve got the bondwoman and then the free woman. Is what seems to be kind of a funky thing that he does talking about allegory and that driven by his reading of the singular and the plural seed?

Dr. Kidd: Again, what Paul is seeing is that in the history of redemption, the actual story as it unfolded in its original context is pointing to truths that are being realized right in Paul's own lifetime. And the irony is, he sees in those who are championing physical Israel, earthly Jerusalem in his day, as being the culmination of the spirit that was at play in the attempt to bring about God's promises through the flesh in the Hagar-Ishmael relationship. And what you have back in Genesis is the attempt to force God's hand to fulfill his promises through the flesh and not through God's own time and God's own way, through God's own Spirit. So you know, Ishmael goes out and winds up recipients of his own line of promise. He was promised that he would be head of a great nation, in fact where Paul had spent time in Arabia during his three year school in the discipleship of Christ, so to speak. There are a number of levels of irony here. It so happens that Mount Sinai, where the law was delivered, is down in Arabia. So Paul was able to set up this contrast between these two Jerusalem's, an earthly Jerusalem and a heavenly Jerusalem. And the people of promise who are in the line of Isaac are now the church. And the people of the flesh, the people who think that God's plan for redemption has to be forced by us and not done by God that we respond to in faith, originally that was Ishmael. And now it's those who are paying a lot of attention to the earthly Jerusalem.

Student: So the people that once were truly of the faith who looked to physical Jerusalem having not lifted their eyes now to Jesus almost become slave children like Ishmael?

Dr. Kidd: Yes, and that's part of Paul's heartache for his fellow countrymen.

Question 13:

Are there any problems with under-realized eschatology in the modern church?

Student: Reggie, are there examples in the modern church today where churches under-realize the kingdom of God? And just thinking through that, are there problems? What kind of problems would that bring up?

Dr. Kidd: Well, you guys may have some thoughts on this as well. I mean, in the US church scene, I think there is a lot of legalism. I think there are a lot of churches that are happy for people not to learn Scripture deeply enough for themselves to make a lot of informed decisions. And it almost seems like I try to keep people in spiritually infancy. "Don't worry about that. We'll make all those decisions for you."

Student: Yeah, I've been to churches where you kind of get this feeling like if you start digging into the Scriptures and start using all these theological terms like it's almost elitist. And so don't use any words except the words that are in the Bible. Even if we try and like explain what those mean we are going beyond what the Scriptures say and we need to stick to that.

Dr. Kidd: And do you feel like you have ever seen stuff that is under-realized? I know that is kind of a different way of thinking about things for a lot of people?

Student: I'm blank. I mean, I'm trying to think of...The only thing I can say to connect with that is a lack of discipleship but I don't know how that connects, so...

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, well for a long time believers were not really challenged to learn Scripture for themselves and to be able to read it. The Scripture was thought to be a closed book with too many possible interpretations. And so you needed a magisterial church to tell you what it means. And for instance, as lovely as stained glass is in big cathedrals, if stained glass is there to tell the story but doesn't invite me...but I'm kept illiterate and I am not brought into a place where I can read Scripture for myself and experience what Paul values in the letter to the Galatians about the spirit of God working in you, and not just in the aggregate but in the individuals personally, people are just stunted in their growth and he says "It's for freedom that you have been set free." And so a lot of people's experience of Christianity around the world and over history has been just locked into permanent infancy because the church has not assumed the task and the responsibility of teaching and training people so that they can make wise informed judgments, so that they can take on the work of the ministry for themselves.

Student: I think another way that I have seen it work out too is that when you have this belief that the kingdom of God is something that's going to come primarily in the future, there is almost like this sense that we are just going to sit around in our huddles and wait for that to come. And there's really not that much interaction in the world because if the kingdom is something that is coming later we just need to be prepared for it, rather than kind of having this thought that the kingdom is in a very real sense here and now, and going out and working is part of God's call in our lives.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, the whole mentality that says, "The ship is going down and there is no point in polishing the metal on a sinking ship," says that the kingdom has not come in enough of the fullness that Paul is talking about in the letter to the Galatians. And it's interesting that in this letter he talks about doing good to all people, especially the household of faith. But it does include doing good to all people and Paul's sense of fulfillment of God's promises in this day would, I think, create more of a climate of going into the public square, exercising civic virtue and responsibilities as citizens and people who are called to different kinds of vocations and seeking to impact the world in the name of the king whose kingdom has in large measure come.

So yeah, there is a place where that's an area in which eschatology is under-realized in our church. Often in churches there is this assumption that here is what a Christian culture would look like and we sort of freeze Jesus into this mold. The second commandment about not making graven images is not just a literal thing. It's a call for us to consider everything about what we do in church as a creating, as a construct

of a certain image of what God looks like, and what the Christian life looks like. And many churches will take on sort of their own little folk culture, where it's setting boundaries that keep different people kind of out. There may be churches that are very republican in their feel and make people who like are more democratically oriented feel very much on the outside. And there are also churches that feel such passion for kind of more justice and mercy issues that make like business people feel really weird and not welcome. I think one of the marks of the church that has this...and that is an under-realized eschatology that is afraid to let the Spirit bring together people of vastly different kinds of persuasions on particular kinds of social and life issues. And what Paul wants for us is to make Christ the center of our relationships and then go together to the Scriptures to keep examining what his wisdom would be for us today. And that's part of what is it like to like in this "already not yet" overlap.

Question 14:

What problems are associated with over-realized eschatology?

Student: So we have been talking about under-realized eschatology just makes me curious, you know like what sort of problems that would arise of an over-realized eschatology in the church today. How would you address that?

Dr. Kidd: Well, we will see a lot of that when we talk about the Corinthians. But whenever the church feels like, "Oh, we're beyond Scripture and we can make up...not in "you're too ignorant so just let us tell you" but when we don't feel compelled and constrained by this particular story and we can kind of make up our theology for ourselves and recast God in our own image and then go live as though there are no rules and therefore, you know, lots of misbehavior, then you are in that over-realized sort of setting.

Student: So it's a real tension that we are called to, that we shouldn't be too much over on this under-realized side nor should we think more highly of ourselves than we ought but that we live in this really fine line tension that some of the promises have come true and some are yet to come. And so it just takes faith.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, it takes a lot of faith. It takes boldness and humility. It takes graciousness and audaciousness at one and the same time, and it's a life that has to be lived out on our knees.

Question 15:

How do we live in light of the new creation?

Student: Reggie, Paul in Galatians 6 talks about the new creation that that's really what matters. Practically speaking, could you speak about what does that look like

in our everyday life, at our work, at home, with our friends? What does this living in light of new creation really mean?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think Dusty, Paul has a couple things going on in Galatians that are really pretty spectacular. One is the sense that we individually have been personally made alive. We were dead. Now we are alive. So he can say back in Galatians 5:6, “Circumcision is nothing; un-circumcision is nothing. What counts is faith working through love.” He really believes that we are different people. We have this whole new capacity to be loving, to be patient, to be kind, to be good that this was not true of us before. And then the second thing that he wants the Galatians to see is that beyond just themselves in the world things are different. And that’s where he says like what you just quoted, Galatians 6:15, “There is neither circumcision nor un-circumcision but a new creation.” And just before that he’s talked about how to me the world has been crucified and I have been crucified to the world. So, I’m dead and I’m alive. But also there is an old world that is dead and what has happened is that the Holy Spirit has been set loose on planet earth in a way that just wasn’t the case in the old covenant. So I think for Paul new creation is his shorthand for the coming of the kingdom to the extent that it has come as opposed to being not yet here in its fullness.

It’s a shorthand for the invasion of the Holy Spirit showing up on the earth that once was, well, C.S. Lewis would call, “the silent planet.” Now the earth is the place where the Holy Spirit has been put in play to bring redemption through the preaching of the gospel as we go and we do evangelism and we consider the incredible history of missions since the 1st century church from Jerusalem in Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. That process is just going on and on and on. And Christ is taking people captives and nations captive and people groups captive. We are still seeing new creation being played out and it also means not only do I as an individual live a life, faith working through love in every aspect of my life, but I live out that love out in the world, in the marketplace, in my calling, in the law courts, on Wall Street. And I can expect the Holy Spirit to be with me effecting in some measure as I seek to live out what it is to bear God’s image, his new creation.

So my call...I mean, I’m not going to save the world. The church isn’t going to just save the world by political means and by taking control but in ways that are really subtle and often really hard to see. And sometimes in ways that are profound like when William Wilberforce felt called not to be minister of the gospel in church but to minister the gospel in parliament and year after year after year would put forth legislation calling for the end of slavery in England and finally got to see this measure of justice being brought into effect. That’s part of new creation, is believers believing that we can expect to see God taking ground in our day.

Student: So there is a real sense in which — cause we were talking about under-realized eschatology and over-realized eschatology earlier — that we as the church through our actions and our words and just our everyday life, we are in a sense trying to push that coming of the kingdom, if you will, kind of push that forward.

And that God is actually using us to make his kingdom more real in the world than it was before.

Dr. Kidd: We pray it and then we live it knowing that it's for him to decide what he is going to do and you know we can see an ebb and flow in history. Sometimes the kingdom seems to be on the rise and sometimes the kingdom seems to be in the retreat. And we just don't have God's vision. All we have is his heart and his spirit in us. And sometimes we are privileged to live in a time of great suffering, which is building the foundation for what God may do in the future. And sometimes we live in these scary moments when we look around and we go, "My goodness, we are like in charge." And we have to be stewards of this responsibility and use the power that's ours for good instead of for evil, to serve others instead of to serve ourselves.

So new creation I think along with the idea of faith working through love are a really nice short-hand in Paul for the way that he wants the Galatians to understand that despite their obsession with the commandments that they are misunderstanding in the first place that God wants to work on this personal level and then out there in the world. The Corinthians that we are going to get to in a couple of lessons down the road, they have a very different problem. They are sure they've been remade. They are sure that Christ rules and Christ reigns. So they have these perspectives down here, the personal then what's going out there in the world. They think they got that but they are doing it totally detached from the specifics of what God says about what life is supposed to look like. So interestingly, when Paul does his "not circumcision, not not circumcision" thing he doesn't talk about faith working through love. He doesn't talk about new creation. He talks about he talks about new creation but it's in another...it's in its own way. What he talks to the Corinthians about is the need to keep the commandments of God, to read the Word and to live it out. But again, back to the Galatians, they need to understand that a whole new force is in play, that Jesus' death and resurrection means life and history and everything is different. And we can live with a much more vibrant robust ethic about what it is to be his people in the world around us.

Question 16:

What is the connection between the Holy Spirit and living by faith?

Student: It sounds like, and correct and me if I'm wrong, that the Galatians were legalistic and they were stuck in the law. Is it in a mechanical kind of way?

Dr. Kidd: Yes, I think so.

Student: Okay, so it makes sense...

Dr. Kidd: And, I think they were wrestling with — and I alluded to this in the lesson — I think they were really wrestling with, how do I tame the beast? How do I gain

control over my life? And they had been turning to the law and to circumcision as a means by which to get assurance of their salvation, to feel okay. And they were trying to do it by rules and the law instead of leaning more radically and more boldly into the finished work of Christ on the cross for them and the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit in their lives to enable them to live boldly, freely and as forgiven sons and daughters. But I interrupted.

Student: No, what I was thinking is in order to do that, to live in light of this new creation that Paul is calling the Galatians to, that it would take great faith. I am just curious how the Holy Spirit plays into that. Like can you help me make the connection between this faith that Paul is essentially asking them to get away from, this legalistic bent to begin to live in boldness, and how does the Holy Spirit...?

Dr. Kidd: That is a great question. Paul is going to articulate this more straightforwardly in 1 Corinthians 15 and there he talks about how the second man or the last Adam, Christ has become life-giving Spirit. And that's a condensed way of talking about a transition in Jesus' own ministry to his church. On the earth, he ministered in bodily form and was confined to one place at a time. And he talks about this in his final discourse in John's gospel and he tells them, "Don't be sad cause I'm going away. I am going away so that you can do greater things than you have been able to do because I'm not going to leave you alone. I'm going to send a *paraclete*. I'm going to send an advocate so that I can be not just beside you but I can be in you." And then Peter talks about the way — Peter in his sermon in Jerusalem at Pentecost, talks about how at his ascension Jesus goes to the right hand of the Father and receives the Holy Spirit and then pours the Spirit out on the church. Well, for Paul that is the Spirit of Christ that is on the earth. When the Holy Spirit gets poured out on the church then the Holy Spirit starts to dwell in us and make us new. The Holy Spirit isn't some entity apart from Christ. What the Holy Spirit has done is to come and to bring the things of Christ to us to use John's language.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to make us new and to make Christ alive in us and so, back to Galatians, Paul, his anxiety, his prayer, his desire for the Galatians is that — remember what it says in Galatians 4 — that Christ be more perfectly formed in you. Well, what he is talking about is the Holy Spirit at work in us, making us new and, it's like he says, it's faith working through love and that's the work of the Holy Spirit and then we are called to live out the new creation. And that is as those were indwelt by the Holy Spirit and we are called to live in a world where the Holy Spirit is at work bringing a measure of justice, bringing people to himself, folding them into the church and then ruling and governing the church. That is Christ dwelling in the church. So the Holy Spirit has everything to do with it because the Holy Spirit is the means by which and the way in which Christ himself is present to the church and working in the world.

Question 17:**What is the role of the Holy Spirit at the present time?**

Student: So when the Paraclete typically is translated as “counselor”, does that do it justice in terms of what that really means?

Dr. Kidd: Well, it says part of it as it's a legal term. It's one who will come and be our advocate and for Paul — that's John's language — for Paul we are ones who were unrighteous and now we have been made righteous. And so it's the Holy Spirit. For John the Holy Spirit is going to come and convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. And that's part of the Holy Spirit's work and that's an Old Testament concept of God coming to press his case against the...his covenant lawsuit against a wicked and sinful world. For Paul, the presence of the Holy Spirit is there because we are no longer convicts as far as God is concerned. Jesus has taken the wrath for us. He has been cursed as he laid out his arms on the cross. And because we are now seen by God as being righteous, the Holy Spirit can dwell in us. Now we are holy as far as he is concerned. He is, if you will, taking back ground in our hearts and making us new, sanctifying us and then working out in our lives.

Question 18:**Why did Paul emphasize his authority so greatly in Galatians?**

Student: Reggie, in the first part of Galatians, Paul spends a fairly large portion defending his own authority and you can kind of get the feeling like he is almost being a little macho and saying, you know, “It's my way or the highway.” But earlier on in his ministry, he submitted to the authority of the church, whether it's at Antioch or Jerusalem. Where does the final authority lie in when it comes to the church?

Dr. Kidd: Okay Graham, in the case of the Galatians, if we have the timeline right, it's important to realize that God is dealing with some brand spanking new Christians who are really confused about where they should go. Paul had ministered to them. They had heard his message, believed it, received Christ, received the Holy Spirit and then he is gone. And now they are hearing people saying, “Yeah, Jesus is good, really good. But Paul didn't really tell you everything you need to know. He was kind of playing favorites with you and he wanted you to like him too much so he didn't really tell you what bold obedience required. And Paul knew that he should have told you there was some fine print and that the boys in the congregation need to get circumcised.”

And a lot of what Paul is doing is reestablishing their confidence in listening to him and, like you say, Paul is not a lone ranger. Even as he writes this letter he has agreed to go down to Jerusalem to have the church talk it out and I think that he has every confidence that they are going to decide the right thing about circumcision. And yet at

the same time, he knows that he has been called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He knows that Gentiles do not have to get circumcised and he is just out of his mind concerned that some of the folks back in Galatians are going to pull the snippers out before this council takes place. And so he wants to remind them of who it is who has preached the gospel to them. He wants to remind them of what they have experienced of the goodness of the Lord and he wants to remind them of the slavery that they would be going back under if they would let themselves do this.

Question 19:

How do we resolve tensions between the gospel and the teachings of the church?

Student: So if you are talking about the timeline that he is going down to the council at Jerusalem, which ultimately does side with him, right?

Dr. Kidd: Yes.

Student: So he is not trying to be a maverick but he is really trying to be faithful to the gospel. So if we think about it for ourselves today when we find ourselves in tension between what's going on and what the church is saying and what the gospel says. How do we work those tensions out?

Dr. Kidd: Well, you make a good point. Paul had, himself, indicated to the Galatians, "Look, I told you what the gospel is, and if anybody comes and tells you something beyond, besides what I have told you already, an angel or even I myself, let them be cut off. Let them be an anathema." And what Paul is doing is saying, "Look, in Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah, the whole biblical storyline, which is really the final court of appeal even for these people that want you to get circumcised. They are doing it because they have a wrong read of the story. But that story, the story of Creation, Fall, redemption, is the normative story. And I have come to tell you that that story has come to a culmination point and a renewal point and a new creation point. And once that is set, and it is established, and it is fixed, and it means you don't need to shed your blood because he shed his blood for you. And now that you have been baptized, you have received all the benefits that are being promised to you. They are already yours. And we together are being called to be this new people of God, I can tell you that I have told you the truth and whenever you hear countervailing voices, even if that voice would be mine, you can take it to the bank that voice is wrong."

So Graham, I think there's the lesson for us. Once the gospel has been put out there, the story of God's redeeming his planet through his Son who is the one that God had been ordaining all along to undo Adam's mess through the line of Abraham as anticipated in the covenant community under Moses' governance in revelation and then through the first united and then divided monarchy of Israel, all that culminating

in the person and work of Jesus. Once that's out there then that becomes the standard against which everybody, Paul himself, measures everything. So for us today too, we have to listen to the voices around us in our culture and in the churches and keep coming back to the Word of God as it tells us that story and it explains it to us. And is the means by which Christ becomes personal to us in the Holy Spirit.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
THREE

PAUL AND THE THESSALONIANS



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Three

Paul and the Thessalonians

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I heard about a father who attended his son's university graduation. After the ceremony, he proudly approached his son and asked, "So, what are you going to do with the rest of your life, son?" The graduate smiled broadly and said, "Well, Dad, I've given my future a lot of thought, and I think I'm just going to head straight for retirement." Now, most of us can sympathize with that young graduate. But nearly everyone realizes that to be responsible, we have to work hard for many years before we retire.

Now, as strange as it may sound, that young man's attitude came very close to the attitudes of some Christians living in the first century. They became so zealous for Christ's glorious second coming that they abandoned the responsibilities of living for Christ in this life.

This third study of *The Heart of Paul's Theology* is entitled "Paul and the Thessalonians." And in this lesson, we're going to see how some Christians in the church in Thessalonica had caused serious problems because they believed that Christ's return was extremely close at hand. And we're also going to look at how Paul responded to this misguided belief.

Our study of Paul and the Thessalonians will divide into three parts. First, we'll investigate the background to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Second, we'll examine the structure and content of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. And third, we will see how Paul's letters revealed one of his central theological outlooks, his doctrine of the last days or his eschatology. Let's look first at the background to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

BACKGROUND

As we have emphasized throughout this series, the Apostle Paul wrote his letters in order to address particular issues that arose in different churches. So, as we look at 1 and 2 Thessalonians, we need to ask some basic questions: What was going on in the Thessalonian church? Why did Paul write to them?

We'll answer these questions first by exploring Paul's second missionary journey, and then by delving into some particular problems that developed in the church of Thessalonica. Let's look first at Paul's second missionary journey.

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul's second missionary journey is recorded in Acts 15:36 through Acts 18:22. There Luke states that Paul traveled mainly in the regions of Asia Minor before continuing on to several regions of modern-day Greece. Like Paul's first missionary journey, this trip also began in Syrian Antioch, probably around the year A.D. 48 or 49. Paul and Barnabas planned to minister together, but they came into conflict because Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany them. Paul objected because Mark had abandoned them during their first missionary journey. Consequently, Paul chose Silas as his traveling companion, while Barnabas and Mark made their way to Cyprus.

Paul and Silas first went through Syria and then into Cilicia. Although we don't know the particular towns they visited, the book of Acts does tell us that they strengthened a number of churches in these regions. From Cilicia, they traveled into Galatia where they visited the churches Paul had planted during his first missionary journey. They stopped first in Derbe, and then in Lystra, where Timothy joined them. From Lystra the party continued through Galatia and into Phrygia.

Now, at this point, Paul wanted to preach in the province of Asia, the westernmost portion of Asia Minor, and in Bythinia to the north. But the Holy Spirit did not permit him. So, the company went from Phrygia to the coastal port of Troas about 300 miles away, where the reason for their hasty move to the west became clear. In a dream, Paul saw a man who begged him to come to Macedonia, primarily to areas that now lie within the northern regions of Greece.

In response to this dream, Paul and his companions immediately sailed for Macedonia. They passed briefly through Neapolis before arriving in Philippi, where they remained for some time and saw a good number of people come to Christ. Eventually, however, the people of Philippi incarcerated Paul for exorcising a demon from a slave girl. But even in jail the gospel spread. In the middle of the night an earthquake shook loose the prisoners' chains and opened the prison doors. Although the prisoners could have escaped, they remained in their cells so that the jailor would not be punished for losing them. The jailor was so impressed by this act of charity toward him that he and his entire household came to faith.

From Philippi, the missionaries moved through Amphipolis and Apollonia before arriving in Thessalonica, where Paul preached the gospel in the synagogue for three weeks. Through this evangelism, a number of Jews and many Gentiles received the gospel. Paul worked to support himself during this time, and also received gifts from the Philippian Christians that helped meet his needs. These facts suggest that Paul may have remained in Thessalonica as long as a few months. Eventually, however, some unbelieving Jews became jealous of the gospel's success and formed a mob against Paul and Silas, forcing them to flee to Berea.

At first, the Bereans received Paul's gospel message eagerly. But soon, unbelieving Thessalonian Jews found out about it and aroused that city against him too. Paul fled once more, this time making his way to Athens, where he preached not only to the Jews in the synagogue, as was his custom, but also to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill.

From Athens, Paul traveled to Corinth, where he spent at least a year and a half, perhaps more, planting and raising a church. After this, he headed east, stopping briefly

in Cenchrea, then sailing to Ephesus in Asia Minor. From there he sailed to Caesarea and then made his way home to Antioch in Syria, perhaps stopping briefly in Jerusalem along the way. His journey ended probably in the year A.D. 51 or 52.

It was during this second missionary journey that Paul wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians. According to 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, while Paul was in Athens he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the believers there. This would have been around the year A.D. 49 or 50, shortly after Paul and his company had left Thessalonica. When Timothy returned, probably in A.D. 50 or 51, Paul was most likely in Corinth. Apparently, Timothy had told Paul about a number of serious misunderstandings and practical problems that had arisen in the Thessalonian church. Paul most likely wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth shortly after Timothy's arrival in order to address these issues. 2 Thessalonians was probably written a few months later, also from Corinth.

Now that we have seen how Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians fit within the broader context of his second missionary journey, we should look more specifically at the problems that came upon the church of Thessalonica.

PROBLEMS IN THESSALONICA

What issues concerned Paul? What was so serious that he wrote to the Thessalonians not once but twice? As in any situation, there were many interwoven difficulties in Thessalonica. But as we read Paul's letters to this church, three main problems move to the foreground: first, the struggle of persecution; second, the rise of false prophets within the church; and third, some issues of practical Christian living that the false prophets brought to the church. First let's turn our attention to the problem of persecution.

Persecution

When Paul had first brought the gospel to Thessalonica, the believers there had become the object of violence, enduring serious, life-threatening persecution. Listen to Luke's description of events in Thessalonica recorded in Acts 17:5:

The Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, seeking to bring Paul and Silas out to the crowd (Acts 17:5).

In fact, the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica were so aggressive that they were not satisfied simply to drive Paul and Silas out of their city. Instead, they followed the missionaries to Berea to trouble them even further. Luke recorded this fact in Acts 17:13:

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds (Acts 17:13).

The Jewish opponents of the gospel were tenacious, and they even inspired Gentiles to oppose the Christian faith as they pursued Christians from town to town.

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians indicate that this suffering continued after his departure from Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Paul described their trials in this way:

You suffered the same things at the hands of your own countrymen that those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, who displease God and are hostile to all men, keeping us from speaking to the Gentiles in order that they might be saved (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

From the time Paul first preached in Thessalonica until he wrote his epistles to them, persecution had been a prominent feature of living for Christ in Thessalonica. And as Paul wrote to the believers in that city, he was very concerned about this persecution and the effects it was having on them.

False Prophets

In addition to suffering persecution, the Thessalonian church had also come under the influence of false prophets. In some ways, this is not surprising. In the first place, throughout history, when Christians have suffered persecution for long periods of time, they have often longed for Jesus to return to deliver them from their trials. Simply put, suffering Christians tend to orient their entire lives toward the second coming of Christ. When this life offers little more than disappointment and suffering, we turn our eyes toward the day when Jesus will rescue us.

In the second place, when Christians are highly concerned with the return of Christ, they often become susceptible to false teachers or false prophets who have extreme views regarding the second coming. And this is precisely what happened to the Thessalonians. False teachers came into the church with misguided beliefs about the nearness of Christ's return.

To appreciate how much trouble the false teachers in Thessalonica stirred up, we will touch on two matters: the conflict that developed between the false prophets and Paul, and the content of the false prophets' teaching. Let's look first at the challenge of false prophecy.

It is apparent in many sections of 1 and 2 Thessalonians that false teachers strongly opposed Paul's teaching. For example, when he received Timothy's reports on the condition of the Thessalonian church, Paul learned that false prophets had entered the fellowship of believers and had spoken against some of his teachings. One of Paul's responses to this problem was to remind the Thessalonians to examine every prophecy they heard. Listen to his words in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21:

Do not despise prophecies. Test everything; hold on to the good (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).

Paul instructed the Thessalonians to “test everything” and to “hold on to the good” because he wanted them to evaluate the content of every instruction they received. They were to retain only the good, disregarding everything that did not comport with what they knew to be true from the Scriptures and from Paul’s teaching.

But the false prophets did not give up easily. Instead, they continued to teach and preach their false doctrines. In fact, they may have gone so far as to forge letters under Paul’s name in an attempt to persuade the Thessalonians of their views. Paul was clearly worried about this type of activity when he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2:

We ask you brothers, that you not be easily unsettled or alarmed by a spirit, report or letter supposed to have come from us (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Paul’s concern with the problem of forgeries is also apparent in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, where he wrote:

The greeting of Paul by my own hand. This is a sign in all my letters; this is how I write (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Paul added words written by his own hand as a signature that distinguished his letters from forgeries, helping the Thessalonians to identify letters that were genuinely his and to reject false prophecy.

This conflict with the false prophets raises another issue for us as we read Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians. What were these false prophets teaching? We cannot be sure of everything they taught, but when we recall the ongoing persecution in Thessalonica and examine the content of Paul’s Thessalonian epistles, we may surmise that the false prophets had a variety of misconceptions about the second coming of Christ. Their central problem, however, was that they believed that Jesus would return almost immediately. In fact, as incredible as it may seem to us, some false prophets had even proclaimed that Christ had already returned. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3:

With respect to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask, brothers, that you not be easily unsettled or alarmed by a spirit, report or letter ... saying that the day of the Lord is already here. Do not let anyone deceive you (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

Evidently, at least some of the false prophets had taught that the church of Thessalonica had already missed Christ’s return. It is possible that they drew these ideas from the civic cult of Thessalonica that worshiped Cabirus, a murdered local hero who was said to return to the world periodically. The false teachers may have applied this kind of outlook to the Christian faith by telling the Thessalonians that Christ had already returned.

Whatever the source of these errors, Paul strongly condemned the false prophets, instructing the Thessalonians to hold fast to what he had told them about the return of Christ.

Christian Living

Now that we have seen how persecution and false prophecy had come to the Thessalonians, we should look at some practical ways these problems impacted the church. A number of significant concerns appear in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, but we will focus on two: discouragement and irresponsibility. Let's look first at the Thessalonians' discouragement.

Usually, when Christians have believed that Jesus' return was just around the corner, they have inevitably been discouraged because Jesus has not appeared. In Thessalonica, many believers had oriented their entire lives around the immediate return of Christ. They had suffered and given up much for the sake of Christ. Yet, as the months went by, not only were they disappointed, but to make matters worse, a number of believers passed away. Those who remained alive worried about the eternal fate of the departed believers. This confusion led to doubts, and doubts to discouragement. Listen to the way Paul gently corrected them in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14:

We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who are sleeping, lest you grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

Paul assured the Thessalonians that although the departed saints had died physically, they were still alive with Christ, and they would accompany Christ when he returned.

In addition to discouragement and confusion, the message of the false prophets had led to irresponsible living. It really isn't hard to understand what happened at Thessalonica. Put yourself in their situation. If you believed that the world would end next month, would you still go to work, or repair your house, or build schools? If you were highly confident that Jesus would return in just a matter of days, normal activities would no longer seem very important.

This is precisely what happened in Thessalonica. The false prophets convinced some of the Christians there that they no longer needed to support themselves. Their attitude was "Why bother with work when Jesus is coming back so soon?" This is why in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 Paul wrote that they should return to work:

Endeavor to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you behave properly toward outsiders and so that you lack nothing (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Unfortunately, even after Paul had encouraged attention to daily affairs, some believers in Thessalonica still did not return to their responsibilities. So, Paul addressed this subject again in 2 Thessalonians, but this time more strongly. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 he wrote:

We command you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother who behaves lazily rather than according to the teaching you received from us... For even when we were with you, we commanded this of you: “If someone does not want to work, he is not permitted to eat.” We hear that some among you are behaving lazily. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to live quietly, earning the bread they eat (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

False prophecies about the imminent return of Christ had encouraged the Thessalonians to become lazy and idle. And idleness had led to other problems.

So, we see that in Thessalonica the problems were manifold but interrelated. Persecution had opened the door for misconceptions about the immediate return of Christ. And those false beliefs led to practical problems such as discouragement and irresponsibility. Paul hoped that his letters to the Thessalonian church would help them deal with these difficult problems.

Now that we have seen some of the important issues that form the background to Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians, we are ready to look at the content of these letters.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

What did Paul write to the Thessalonians? How did he respond to their complex problems? We will briefly explore each letter to the Thessalonians by summarizing the contents of their major sections. Let's begin with 1 Thessalonians.

1 THESSALONIANS

First Thessalonians divides into five main sections: first, a salutation in 1:1; second, a report of thanksgiving in 1:2–2:16; third, a discussion of Paul's absence in 2:17–3:13; fourth, Paul's instructions for the church in 4:1–5:22; and fifth, some closing remarks in 5:23-28.

Salutation/Closing Remarks

As in many of Paul's letters, the first and last sections of 1 Thessalonians are fairly brief and straightforward. The salutation simply states that the letter is addressed to the Thessalonians and that it comes from Paul. Interestingly, it also mentions Silas and Timothy as co-authors. Of course, Silas and Timothy did not share Paul's apostolic authority, so it is on the basis of Paul's authority alone that this letter is included in the Bible. Nevertheless, the mention of Silas and Timothy points to the fact that Paul wrote this infallible letter from a truly human perspective. The closing section is also rather

simple, including a benediction, a request for prayer, and a final greeting. But when we move to the second section of 1 Thessalonians we come to a more complex portion of the book. This entire section reports Paul's gratitude to God and divides into three main parts.

Thanksgiving

First, in 1:2-10, Paul explained that he thanked God for the Thessalonians' endurance through suffering. As we have seen, unbelieving Jews and Gentiles persecuted the believers in Thessalonica. But the believers did not waver in their commitment to Christ. Instead, their hope in him grew strong. Listen to Paul's praise for them in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the message with joy from the Holy Spirit, despite your severe suffering, so that you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

The Thessalonians responded to persecution joyfully, and their faithfulness was exemplary.

In 2:1-12, Paul continued by expressing gratitude for the Thessalonians' firsthand knowledge of him. This was important because false prophets had subsequently challenged Paul's motives. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9-10 he wrote these words:

For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil; working night and day in order not to be a burden to any of you, we preached the gospel of God to you. You and God are witnesses of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed (1 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

The false prophets had tried to discredit Paul by claiming that he had taken advantage of the Thessalonians and that he had misled them and abused his authority over them. Apparently, at least some of the believers had begun to believe these false rumors. For this reason, Paul told them how happy he was that they had seen him with their own eyes. And of course, he did so in order to remind the Thessalonians that they knew him well enough to reject the false accusations.

In much the same way, in the third section of thanksgiving found in 2:13-16, Paul gave thanks that the Thessalonians had recognized his authority. Listen to the way he put it in 1 Thessalonians 2:13:

We also thank God constantly because when you received the word of God, which you received from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it truly is, God's word, which is working in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The Thessalonians had received Paul's teaching as the very Word of God, giving him confidence that they would remain faithful to his teaching and reject the false prophets.

Having motivated the Thessalonians to further faithfulness by telling them how grateful he was for them, Paul moved to the third major section of the epistle, 2:17–3:13. In this material, he addressed the separation created by his travels. This section also divides into three main parts.

Paul's Absence

In 2:17-3:5, Paul assured the Thessalonians of his continued heartfelt concern for them. And he demonstrated this concern by sending Timothy to visit them. Listen to Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2:

When we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left by ourselves in Athens, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen you and to encourage you in your faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

In addition to heartfelt pastoral concern, in 3:6-10, Paul expressed his grateful joy at the news that Timothy brought from Thessalonica. The believers were standing firm in their faith, and they missed Paul as much as the apostle missed them. This news thrilled Paul so much that in 1 Thessalonians 3:8-9 he wrote:

For now we live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God for you enough to repay him for all the joy we have ... because of you? (1 Thessalonians 3:8-9).

Hearing the good things Timothy reported turned Paul's worry into joy and confidence.

In the third place, in 3:11-13, Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, asking the Father to "direct the way" for him to visit them again.

Instructions

The fourth major section of this letter runs from 4:1–5:22. As we have already seen, many Thessalonian believers had been so distracted by the idea of Christ's immediate return that they had lost interest in life in the present world. So, Paul gave them a number of instructions meant to correct existing problems and prevent future ones. He did not want the Thessalonians to give up hope in Jesus' return, but he did want them to recognize that Christ might not come back right away. In the interim, he wanted them to live as the Lord had commanded. This section is relatively long and is composed of a brief introduction followed by the main body of Paul's instruction.

First, 4:1-2 introduced the section. Here, Paul commended the Thessalonians as a whole for obeying his earlier commands. Of course, he knew that the temptation to disobey his instructions was strong because his opponents implicitly — perhaps even explicitly — promised freedom from earthly responsibilities and boundaries. So, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that his teaching carried the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ; God himself would take the Thessalonians to task if they neglected his words.

Second, in 4:3–5:22, Paul mentioned a number of specific arenas in which he hoped the Thessalonian Christians would guard against sin and increase their obedience to Christ. As we have mentioned, he paid particular attention to sins that might be promulgated through the false teaching in the Thessalonian church.

Paul began in 4:3-8 with commands to be sexually pure. Historically, sexual immorality has characterized many groups that have believed the end of the world to be at hand. Perhaps the most relevant example can be found in the civic cult of Thessalonica itself, which celebrated the supposed return of the god Cabirus in worship that involved sexually immoral behavior. Paul ended this section with great emphasis by including another assertion of the divine authority behind his words.

In 4:9-10, Paul praised the Thessalonians for their brotherly love, and encouraged them to love all the more. The context of this chapter implies that one concrete way to demonstrate love is to be self-supporting so as to avoid becoming a burden to others.

In 4:11-12, Paul commanded the Thessalonians to engage in meaningful labor and daily work. Some Thessalonian believers had become so enamored with the idea that Jesus would come back in the immediate future that they had ceased working their daily jobs. Because these people were not independently wealthy, they rapidly became a financial burden on the charitable Thessalonian church. Moreover, the laziness they displayed damaged the credibility of the church in the eyes of unbelievers.

In 4:13-18, the apostle exhorted the Thessalonians to encourage each other with the hope of future reunion with their loved ones who had died in the Lord. Sadly, the false teaching in Thessalonica had caused some to fear that no one who died before Jesus returned would be saved.

In 5:1-11, Paul reminded the church that the Lord would condemn the disobedient and reward the faithful when he returned. Far from being a cause for laxity and immorality, Paul wanted to make it clear that the return of Christ should motivate all believers to live holy lives.

In 5:12-13, Paul reasserted the authority of the rightful church leaders in Thessalonica. He had left men in charge who held to sound doctrine, and these men were presumably opposing the false teachers. As a result, the Thessalonian church was receiving mixed messages from its true leaders on the one hand and from their usurpers on the other. Paul made it clear that the teaching of the established leadership was to be followed, and the teaching of the false prophets rejected.

In the remaining verses, Paul dealt with a variety of subjects, all designed to reassert his earlier teachings in this section and to prevent people from overreacting to the problems caused by the false teachers. In 5:14, he indicated that the church should warn rather than coddle those who were lazy. But he did not want them to ostracize everyone who could not support himself, so he also reminded them to minister to the truly needy.

In 5:15 he headed off mistreatment of believers who had fallen under the influence of the false teachers by instructing everyone to repay harm with kindness.

In 5:16-18, Paul encouraged joy in the midst of the difficulties the church was facing, and once again asserted the divine authority behind his teaching.

In 5:19-22, he made it clear that his opposition to the false prophets was not a rejection of all new prophecy and teaching. Rather, all such utterances were to be tested, and only the false discarded.

These extensive instructions touched on many different practical concerns. In each case, Paul's attitude was very positive. The Thessalonians had done well, and Paul commended them for this. But he also urged them to continue growing in their faith and service to Christ.

Now that we've seen an overview of 1 Thessalonians, we should turn to the content and structure of 2 Thessalonians.

2 THESSALONIANS

Second Thessalonians also divides into five main sections: a salutation in 1:1-2; another report of thanksgiving and encouragement in 1:3-10; Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians in 1:11-12; Paul's instructions in 2:1-3:15; and closing material in 3:16-18.

Salutation/Closing

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians begins very much like his first. The salutation is short and direct, and it indicates that the letter was written to the church in Thessalonica. And just as with 1 Thessalonians, the salutation explains that the letter comes not just from Paul, but also from Silas and Timothy. Now again, Silas and Timothy were not infallible and did not write with apostolic authority. Nevertheless, Paul's authorship insures that everything in the letter is true and his authority requires us to obey and believe everything that the letter teaches. In fact, as we look at the letter's short closing, it's clear that Paul is really the primary author. We can discern this because Paul, and only Paul, physically signed the letter in order to authenticate it against counterfeits.

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

In the second section, consisting of 1:3-10, Paul once again reported his thanksgivings for the Thessalonians' faith and love, especially in the face of persecution. Although he had to write to them a second time to address some of the same problems he had confronted in his first letter, Paul was still deeply impressed with the Thessalonians. He also encouraged them by telling them again how exemplary their faith was, and how he had boasted to other churches about their perseverance. Listen to his words in 2 Thessalonians 1:4:

In the churches of God, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

Prayer

In the third section, found in 1:11-12, Paul explained that he constantly prayed for the Thessalonians, and that they were not alone in their struggles. He, Timothy, and Silas prayed day in and day out that God would work powerfully in them to make sure that they were faithful and fruitful in their service to Christ.

Instructions

The fourth section consists of a series of instructions, running from 2:1–3:15. This long section makes up the major portion of the letter. Paul's instructions divide into three parts. First, in 2:1-17, Paul instructed them about Christ's return. We will look into these verses more carefully later in this lesson, so here we will simply note that Paul denied that Christ had already returned. As he put it in 2:3:

That day will not come unless the rebellion occurs first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

Next, in 3:1-5, Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for safety and success in ministry for him and his co-workers. Third, in 3:6-15, Paul issued a warning against irresponsibility, telling the Thessalonians to return to work and to earn their own livings. As he put it in 3:10:

For even when we were with you, we commanded this of you: If someone does not want to work, he is not permitted to eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

As we can see, Paul's two brief letters to the Thessalonians are similar in many ways. Both express his confidence and joy in this church, as well as his gratitude for their faithfulness in his absence. Yet, Paul also knew that serious problems had arisen during his absence, so he instructed the Thessalonians not just once, but at least twice, by writing these two letters. His chief concern was that they be faithful to Christ and to his teaching, living responsibly in their daily lives, and gaining a proper outlook on the Lord's return.

Up to this point we have explored the background of Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica and the basic content of these epistles. Now we are in a position to look at our third topic. How did these epistles reflect Paul's central theological doctrine of the "latter days" — his eschatology?

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul addressed specific issues related to their lives. He wrote about false prophets, and about faithful and responsible living, and he also corrected their views on the second coming of Christ. But as we have seen in previous lessons, it is helpful to distinguish the specific teachings Paul included in these letters from the more basic, underlying theological commitments that undergirded everything he taught. As in his other letters, Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians grew out of the heart of his theology, which we have called his eschatology.

You will recall that Paul's eschatology stemmed from common Old Testament outlooks on God's design for history. The vast majority of Jews in the first century believed that history divided into two ages: "this age" and "the age to come." "This age" was a technical term designating the present age of sin, judgment and death. But "the age to come" was the age of ultimate judgment against the enemies of God and final blessings for the people of God. In this perspective, the coming of the Messiah, or Christ, was the turning point between these two ages. When the Messiah came, he would bring the end of this age and introduce the wonders of the age to come.

Now, as followers of Christ, Paul and the other apostles modified this straightforward two-age pattern of history. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah, and that Jesus had inaugurated the age to come. But they also realized that the age to come had not arrived in its fullness and that this age had not ceased to exist. So, they explained that followers of Christ live in a period that may be described as "already and not yet," a time when the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness.

This pattern of eschatology presented some difficult struggles to the early church because it naturally raised the question: How much of the age to come is already here? As Christians sought to answer this question, some of them took rather extreme positions. As we saw in the lesson "Paul and the Galatians," some Christians acted as if the age to come had not arrived in any significant way, underestimating how much Christ had accomplished in his first coming. We called this imbalanced outlook "under-realized eschatology."

In Thessalonica, however, another extreme prevailed. The Thessalonians developed what we might call "overheated eschatology." Under the influence of false prophets, many believed that the consummation of the age to come had already occurred or that it was just around the corner. And because of this, they treated many matters pertaining to life in this age as inconsequential. Paul realized that this "overheated eschatology" had led the Thessalonians into serious problems. So, he wrote to them in order to give them a more balanced outlook on the overlap of this age and the age to come.

Paul responded to the Thessalonians' problem by trying to balance their view of the end times. He did this in at least three important ways. First, he explained the doctrine of salvation in a way that balanced the Thessalonians' eschatology. Second, Paul related his understanding of the end times to Christian morality or ethics. And third, he showed the Thessalonians their historical position relative to the events preceding Christ's return.

Let's look first at the ways Paul's doctrine of salvation helped the Thessalonians find balance in their eschatology.

DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Paul attempted to cool off the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology by drawing their attention to dimensions of salvation in Christ they had largely ignored. Under the influence of false prophets, many Thessalonians had almost completely identified salvation with the blessings that will come with the return of Christ. Nothing else mattered except the salvation that would come at Christ's return. To counter this overemphasis on the future, Paul pointed out that the salvation that will be applied when Christ returns depends upon the salvation that has already taken place. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 offer a helpful statement of the outlooks Paul wanted the Thessalonians to have. Listen to his words there:

But we should always thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation through the holiness of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Much could be said about these verses, but we will take note of three dimensions of salvation presented here. We will first see how Paul drew attention to salvation in the past, then we will turn our attention to his concern with future salvation, and finally we will explore how this passage touches on present or current dimensions of salvation. Let's look first at the way Paul described salvation in the past.

Past Salvation

With regard to past dimensions of salvation, Paul spoke of God's choice, or election, of the Thessalonians. Paul said that God "chose" the Thessalonians, meaning that before the Thessalonians came to faith through Paul's preaching of the gospel, God had already decided that he loved the Thessalonians and was going to save them. This choice was actually made even before God created the world. Listen to how Paul talked about God's election of people to salvation in Ephesians 1:4:

He chose us in [Christ], before the creation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless in his sight (Ephesians 1:4).

This idea seems to be present also in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul wrote:

God chose you from the beginning for salvation through the holiness of the Spirit and through belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Paul's point is clear: the Thessalonians' were saved because God chose them for salvation. Salvation is not founded on choices that human beings make in history, but on the eternal will of God.

Now, it's important to realize that, for Paul, election was not a disconnected, capricious act. As we have already read in Ephesians 1:4, God's choice was made "in Christ." And as we have seen in other lessons, to be "in Christ" is to be in union with Jesus, so that as he passed from this age into the next through his death and resurrection, we too, because we are united to him, pass from this age into the age to come. So, when Paul reminded the Thessalonians of their election, he had in mind that God had chosen them to be united with Jesus and to pass with him out of this age and into the age to come.

This is why Paul also wrote of another dimension of the Thessalonians' salvation that had occurred in the past: their conversion. Notice that in 2 Thessalonians 2:14 Paul said that "God called you to this through our gospel." Paul had "called" the Thessalonians to salvation "through [his] gospel." Here Paul referred to the time when he had preached the gospel of Christ to the Thessalonians during his second missionary journey. They had heard and believed the good news of Christ, and this initial reaction to the gospel had brought salvation to them.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, Paul spoke of salvation as something that took place both in the eternal choice of God and also when the Thessalonians first believed.

We know ... his choice of you, because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in the power of the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

The Thessalonians' conversion proved that God had already chosen them for salvation. By mentioning these past dimensions of salvation that had already been realized in the lives of the Thessalonians, Paul reaffirmed the gospel he had already preached to them, and assured them that they had already experienced certain aspects of salvation.

Future Salvation

A second way Paul drew attention to salvation in his letters to the Thessalonians was by focusing on the future dimensions of their salvation. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul wrote that believers are

To await [God's] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, the one who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

In much the same way, in 2 Thessalonians 2:14, he indicated that the ultimate end of divine redemption is

Obtain[ing] the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Despite the fact that the Thessalonians were overly concerned with the return of Christ, Paul acknowledged that Christ's future return would bring salvation to its completion. As the Thessalonians knew all too well, the ultimate goal of salvation is final deliverance from divine wrath and the glorification of Christ's followers. Paul was not afraid to admit that in the future we will experience a radical and complete transformation into a state of unimaginable honor and glory as we reign with Christ in the new heavens and new earth.

Present Salvation

In the third place, in addition to mentioning the past and future aspects of salvation, Paul also spoke of salvation as an ongoing, present reality. He mentioned this dimension of salvation in two ways in 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

God chose you to be saved through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit and through belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

On the one hand, Paul pointed out that salvation was coming to the Thessalonians "through the sanctification of the Spirit." As we have seen in other lessons, a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit among God's people occurred when Christ ascended on high. And Paul pointed out that this was a blessing of the age to come. In fact, in Ephesians 1:14 he called the Holy Spirit the "down-payment" of our future inheritance in the great age to come. So, when he mentioned the Spirit at work in the Thessalonians, Paul drew their attention to the astounding fact that they were already experiencing a measure of the inheritance they so eagerly awaited.

The ministry of the Spirit is extremely important during the time when this age and the age to come overlap. The corruption of this age of sin and death continually seeks to destroy believers. But as our foretaste of the age to come, the Spirit constantly purifies us and separates us from the corruption of the world.

On the other hand, Paul also pointed to present dimensions of salvation by mentioning that we are saved "through belief in the truth" in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Here he spoke of the responsibility of all believers to maintain their commitments to God and the Christian faith, encouraging the Thessalonians to turn from false prophecy and to love the truth that he delivered to them. Continual belief in the truth was an essential dimension of Christ's present saving work in their lives.

Throughout the history of the church, there have been groups of Christians who, like the Thessalonians, have focused so much attention on the second coming of Christ that they have failed to realize the privileges and responsibilities that result from the past and present dimensions of salvation. Although we never want to lose sight of the return of Christ in glory, we should always remember how much God has already done for us and realize how much he continues to do for us.

MORALITY

Paul countered the overheated eschatology in Thessalonica not only by emphasizing the past and present aspects of salvation, but also by stressing ethical Christian living. To see how his ethical teaching reflected his eschatology, we will look at two topics: the process of salvation, and the implication to live ethically. Let's look first at the way Paul's eschatology demonstrated a progression from past and present dimensions of salvation to future blessings.

Process of Salvation

Paul revealed a rather full picture of the process of salvation in 2 Thessalonians 2:14.

He called you to this through our gospel, that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Paul wrote that the Thessalonians were sanctified and believed the truth in order that they might "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul expressed a similar idea in his prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:13:

May [the Lord] strengthen your hearts to be blameless in holiness in the presence of our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones (1 Thessalonians 3:13).

The Thessalonians yearned for Christ's return with all his holy ones, and Paul affirmed this desire. But he also prayed that they would be strengthened in their daily commitment to Christ so that when Christ did return, the Thessalonians would be found acceptable in his sight. Future salvation in eternal glory is the end or goal of a process. God designed our past and present experiences of salvation to lead to the future stage of salvation. And without the past and present stages, future salvation cannot be reached.

Ethical Implications

In describing the past, present and future aspects of salvation, Paul indicated that one necessary step in that process was day-to-day ethical living. In short, he wrote that professing believers who do not live righteously cannot complete the process, because they have never really begun it. By pressing this point, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that, although they were right to hope for the blessings of Christ's return, they also needed to concentrate on the present circumstances of their lives if they hoped to receive those future blessings.

Now, we can be sure from other passages that Paul did not believe it was possible for true believers in Christ to lose their salvation. For instance, in Philippians 1:6 Paul assured the Philippians in this way:

He who began a good work in you will continue to perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

Yet, listen to the way Paul exhorted them in 1 Thessalonians 5:5-9:

You are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night or darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep like the others, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But we are of the day, so let us be sober, having put on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer his wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:5-9).

Paul's basic threefold view of salvation appears again in this passage. In the past, the Thessalonians had become "sons of light and sons of day." They had already received this special status in the eyes of God, and they had become faithful, loving and hopeful of salvation. Because they had experienced salvation in the past, Paul insisted that they had an obligation to continue in salvation in the present: "let us be alert and sober." And beyond this, Paul stated that the reason Christians must remain alert and sober, steadfast in faith, hope and love, is that our future salvation depends upon it. God has not appointed us to suffer his wrath, but to receive salvation. But he has also appointed our present faithfulness as the means to obtaining our future salvation.

In light of this, Paul included many moral instructions in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. For example, as we have already seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5:22, he exhorted them — obtain gainful employment, abstain from sexual immorality, love and encourage each other, repay harm with kindness, and live holy lives.

These and other specific instructions to the Thessalonians rose out of Paul's firm conviction that Christians live in a time when salvation is already a present reality. Paul's eschatology demonstrated a progression from past and present dimensions of salvation to future blessings.

HISTORICAL POSITION

A third way Paul sought to correct the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology was in his description of their historical position relative to the events preceding Christ's return. You will recall that a number of believers in Thessalonica were confused about historical events that were to accompany the Lord's return. Some of them had even been tricked into thinking that Christ had already returned, and that they had missed his coming. Others believed that although Christ had not yet come, he would certainly arrive in the immediate future.

Paul responded to these mistaken ideas by reminding the Thessalonians that several events had to precede Christ's return — and that these events had yet to transpire. Listen to what he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8:

With respect to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... That day will not come unless the rebellion occurs first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction ... For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but the restrainer will hold it back until he is taken out of the way. Then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will do away with by the breath of his mouth and destroy by the appearance of his coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8).

This passage has fascinated interpreters since the earliest days of the church and there have been many different opinions on what it means. In general terms, we may say that Paul taught the Thessalonians that their overheated eschatology was misguided because certain events had to take place before Christ returned in glory. According to this passage, at least four things had to happen before Christ returned: the mystery of lawlessness had to be working and restrained; a rebellion or apostasy had to occur; the restrainer had to be removed; and the man of lawlessness had to be revealed.

Interpreters have understood these four elements in many different ways, and we will not be able to settle every matter to everyone's satisfaction here. So, at this point we will simply present some widely held views that seem most convincing to us.

Mystery of Lawlessness Restrained

In the first place, Paul stated that the “mystery of lawlessness” was already working, and that it was restrained. But he did not identify this mystery or the restrainer. However, in 2 Thessalonians 2:7-9, Paul explicitly associated the mystery with the church's archenemy, Satan. This gives us a hint that it may well be demonic in nature. Consider also that Paul described the church as being in conflict primarily with spiritual beings, and not with earthly rulers. As he wrote in Ephesians 6:12:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers ... authorities ... world powers ... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

Paul did not deny that demonic powers have earthly counterparts, such as wicked human governments and individuals who turned from Christ. But he encouraged believers to think first in terms of demonic activity and to view earthly conflicts as an extension of spiritual war.

Moreover, throughout his letters Paul frequently mentioned details of spiritual warfare that parallel the mystery and the restrainer. For example, in Colossians 2:15-20 and in Galatians 4:8-9, he taught that Christ's crucifixion had “disarmed” the demons that had held power over many believers before they had come to faith, and that the Holy

Spirit's ministry had freed believers from these weakened false gods. Essentially, these demonic forces were still active, but they were restrained by God's power.

For these reasons, it seems best to view the "mystery of lawlessness" as a demonic force that exercises power in the heavenly realms, opposing God, empowering false teachers, and promoting false religion. Correspondingly, the "restrainer," or perhaps the "restraint," would also be active primarily in the spiritual world, being perhaps an angel or group of angels, or even the Holy Spirit himself.

Rebellion or Apostasy

Secondly, Paul assured the Thessalonians that Christ would not return until the time of the "rebellion" or "apostasy." Because the restrainer was still active when Paul wrote, the rebellion had not yet taken place; therefore, Christ had not yet returned. It seems best to understand this "rebellion" or "apostasy" as equivalent to what John calls "the battle" throughout Revelation. In Revelation 16:14 it is "the battle of the great day of God Almighty." In Revelation 19:19 it is "war against the rider on the horse." In Revelation 20:8-9 the battle is "[against] the holy camp and the beloved city." This rebellion consists of the massing of the forces of evil against God on the final Day of the Lord. It will not occur until the end of the age. And at that time, Christ will utterly destroy all who have risen up against him.

Restrainer Removed

Beyond this, Paul indicated that the rebellion could never take place until the "restrainer" or "restraint" ceased to hold back the mystery of lawlessness. Because the Thessalonians were aware of the active and ongoing work of the restrainer, they had no need to fear that they had missed Christ's arrival.

Man of Lawlessness Revealed

Finally, Paul mentioned that Christ would not return until the man of lawlessness was revealed. From Paul's description in 2 Thessalonians 2:4-9, the man of lawlessness would appear to be a sort of parody of the incarnate Jesus Christ. For example, verse 8 says that, like Jesus, he will be "revealed." Verse 6 indicates that he will come "in his own time." According to verse 9, his "coming" will be accompanied by "signs, powers and wonders." And verse 4 says that he will actually proclaim himself to be divine.

Many suggestions have been made regarding the identity of the man of lawlessness. Some have thought him to be a specific political figure, such as Roman emperor Nero Claudius Caesar in the first century. Others have thought him to be a type of political figure that is repeated in every age. For example, although Nero was the first tyrannical persecutor of the church, he was later followed by emperors like Marcus Aurelius, who was also no friend of the church.

Perhaps the best explanation is that the man of lawlessness is a single human figure, yet to be revealed, who will be influential in the last generation before Christ returns, the one whom John called the “antichrist” in 1 John 2:18.

Now, although scholars disagree regarding the precise meaning of each of these elements we have mentioned, we can at least be sure of the larger point Paul was making: Some of the Thessalonians had gone so far in their fervor for the return of Christ that they believed that Jesus had already returned, and that they had not been glorified with him as promised. So, Paul reiterated that a number of things had to happen before the Second Coming of Christ. Since these things had not transpired, it was clear that Jesus had not returned.

Paul pointed out that Christ’s return was further away than the Thessalonians thought in order to open their eyes to the significance of their present lives. And for the same reasons, whenever we are so concerned with the nearness of Christ’s return that we are tempted to neglect this life, we need to remember how important it is that we engage in the responsibilities and struggles of life in the “already but not yet.”

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the church of Thessalonica. We have explored the background of his relationship with the Thessalonians. And we have seen the content of his letters to the Thessalonians. Finally, we have seen how Paul applied the heart of his theology to the problems in Thessalonica, calling on believers to cool down their overheated eschatology and to give proper attention to life in the here and now.

As we reflect on Paul’s responses to the Thessalonians, we see how his eschatology resolved many of their practical problems, and also how it can guide us today. Many Christians today still focus inappropriately on Christ’s return, ignoring the importance of the present. But Christ has not called us to treat our current responsibilities in his kingdom as irrelevant. Rather, he has appointed this as a time for us to remain faithful to him, to grow in sanctification, and to be his witnesses in the world. The heart of Paul’s theology speaks to us today just as it did to the Thessalonians back then. It encourages us to remain faithful and holy while we await our Lord’s return and the fullness of the age to come.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
THREE

Paul and the Thessalonians
Faculty Forum



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Three: Paul and the Thessalonians

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Reggie M. Kidd

Students
Michael Aitcheson
Andrew Litke

Question 1:

Did Paul sin by refusing to take John Mark on his second missionary journey?

Student: Reggie, I'm concerned about the argument over John Mark. First, was he the author of the Gospel of Mark? Secondly, what was the nature of the dispute between him and Paul? Later on in Colossians 4 we learn that the two of them were in prison together. It would seem that they reconciled things. Does that mean Paul committed sin by not going on his missionary journey with Mark?

Dr. Kidd: In the first place, I do think that Mark was the guy who wrote the Gospel According to Mark. It looks like he was recounting Peter's version of the gospel story. And it really is interesting what happens at the beginning of the second missionary journey, because Luke tells us that John Mark had abandoned the mission in the middle of the first missionary journey. Then there is no comment about it, there is no casting blame on John Mark or anything, it's just mentioned. But then at the beginning of the second missionary journey when it's time to go out again, Barnabas wants to bring his nephew, John Mark, along and Paul says, "No, I'm not having it." because he abandoned them. We don't know why John Mark left. We don't know if he was lonely and missed his mother back in Jerusalem. We don't know if he got upset because at the beginning of the first missionary journey, Luke keeps describing it as being Barnabas and Saul, Barnabas and Saul. His relative seems to be in charge. And then somewhere on the island of Cyprus there is a transition and when it's time for Saul to go speak to the Roman governor, who happens to share one of Paul's Roman names; he is Sergius Paulus. Saul is his Jewish name Paul is his Roman name. He starts using the Roman name whereas before he had just used his Jewish name and all of the sudden the narrative starts becoming Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Barnabas. And it looks like there was a transition in leadership in the mission. It could be that John Mark kind of felt like his relative had been muscled aside; we just don't know. But we know that it was a huge disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. And what it means in the short-run is that the mission multiplies because at the beginning of the second missionary journey instead of Paul and Barnabas working together in tandem, Barnabas takes his nephew John Mark and goes back down to Cyprus. But Paul picks up Silas and then they head off into Turkey and go for the second missionary journey.

And then it looks like some 10 years later, like you said in Colossians 4, John Mark is now with Paul and then later on in 2 Timothy 4 at the very end of Paul's ministry just as he faces martyrdom, he asks Timothy to bring John Mark along with him and there's an expression of real warmth towards him. Now what's interesting is, you ask whether Paul sinned or whatever, what is interesting is that Luke never casts judgment in the matter and doesn't blame either party. And apparently Paul and Barnabas split in such a way that neither of them kind of force the other to take a position or to go be repentant or anything like that. They just kind of left it open-ended and over a period of time, the Lord worked things out. And what's important for us is to recognize that they didn't push each other into a kind of disagreement that would be fatal to their relationship and they gave each other time. And apparently over time the Lord worked his grace and changed somebody's heart and I think that is the important take away for us. Sometimes it's just impossible to say who's right and who's wrong. What is important is to keep the relationship in tack as much as you can and then give the Lord time to work in your heart and the other heart and the work of the cross will eventually have its way.

Question 2:

Why did the Holy Spirit prevent Paul from ministering in Asia?

Student: Reggie, I was wondering why would the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter 16 refuse to allow Paul to go on to Asia to bring the gospel? Isn't it generally a good thing for the gospel to go wherever it can? What would bring that upon to play in this situation and what kind of modern applications can we derive from that?

Dr. Kidd: Well, Andrew you are absolutely right. It is a good thing to go preach the gospel wherever you want to and it looks like Paul wanted to preach in Asia and he wanted to go into Northern Asian minor, which is Bithynia. And I'm sure there were a lot of people that the Lord eventually had his eye on up there but the problem is Paul couldn't be two places at once and as the narrative goes on in Acts 16 it's clear that the Lord wanted Paul to go across to Europe because the next thing that happened is that Paul winds up in Troas which is on the Western coast of Asian Minor which is ancient Troy and it's there that he has a vision from the Macedonian who says, "Come across to us." And Paul hears the yes there that is the reason for the no to minister to Asia and Bithynia.

Personally, I would have been so fascinated if the Lord had let Paul go up to Bithynia because one of the guys that is most fascinating to me from that whole period is a guy who would have been a young man when Paul was ministering named Dio Chrysostom who was a philosopher who grew up in Bithynia where Paul couldn't go and like I could so easily imagine Paul and Dio Chrysostom getting together and if Dio Chrysostom had become a Christian there might have been a whole new philosophical wave. But I don't know, for some reason the Lord wanted Paul in Europe to take the gospel there and not to go into Bithynia at that time. And Jacques

Ellul has this incredible book called *Betrayal of the West*. He was a famous French Christian Sociologist. You're a sociologist aren't you Michael? You would know Jacques Ellul.

Student: Yeah.

Dr. Kidd: Well, Ellul says the most significant act in all of Western History was when Paul in this itinerary got on that boat and sailed from Western Asian Minor across to Europe. It was more significant than Xerxes trying to go across to conquer the Europeans. It was more significant than Alexander the Great going over to conquer as much land as much land as he could over in Persia. The most significant thing, according to Ellul, was the gospel of Jesus Christ taking hold in Europe in the middle of the second missionary journey. So why didn't Paul go and why did the Lord say, no don't go to Northern Asian Minor, it's because I've got designs on Europe and for now you need to follow me and go where I tell you to go. And if there is a take away for us, well you know one of the Proverbs says, Proverbs 16:9, "The mind of a man plans his way but the Lord directs his steps." This is a great example. Go for it with all you got but you have to listen to the Lord and when the Lord says, "No don't go there. Go there instead" it is because he has a good reason to go here instead.

Question 3:

What do 1 & 2 Thessalonians teach about the timing of Christ's return?

Student: In my lifetime many people have made predictions about Christ's return but none of them ever seem to come true. But people don't seem to get discouraged by that, they just make new predictions and hold fast to those. Is there anything in Paul's teaching in Thessalonians that can apply to our situation?

Dr. Kidd: Mike, that's a great question and I've lived longer than you so I've seen them come and go too. I remember when I was in grad school, it was "88 Reasons Why the Lord is coming back in '88" and then the next year it was "89 Reason Why the Lord is coming back in '89." But you know the good thing is people know that he has got to come back. And we live in a world of sin and suffering and he is Lord and his Lordship just has to be manifest throughout all creation. I don't know about you but I went to a lot of exams when I was in college just kind of doing a little rapture drill. "Lord, you know, it would be okay with me if you came back right now." And we have this sense that his return is something that we need and we lean into it. So I can understand if some people are so committed to it that they are willing to listen to the promise of all the misery being taken care of like next year and just letting themselves get to next year. And then, kind of getting the, "Ok, maybe we misread it. Maybe next year." But that can — I don't know if you guys have seen it — it can be really abusive too, like some teachers we have seen in our time who use their made up promises of when he is coming back to get people to do all kind of weird things.

Student: What about the people who live as though he hasn't returned yet in a different kind of way?

Dr. Kidd: People who they are not worried about it and are just kind of living for themselves and they have lost the sense of urgency. Yeah, I have known people like that, have you?

Student: Yeah, I live like that sometimes.

Question 4:

How can we hope in Christ's return without forming inappropriate expectations?

Student: Well, how do you get people to see the importance of the hope of Christ's return without jumping right into the predictions that are so rampant that you were just talking about? How do you find a balance between the two, of a practical atheism and not having eschatology on one hand and then this over-emphasized jump towards all of the end times type of things that we see?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think one of the things to do, is to continue to point people back to the resurrection of Christ. And we were talking about the Thessalonians right now but it's really Corinthians where Paul has to argue that the most strongly because here are people they recognize that Jesus' body isn't in a tomb anymore but they've lost the connection between his resurrection and the need for their own resurrection. So my tendency is to point people to Jesus' resurrection but to remind them that Jesus' resurrection only means something because it's the beginning of our resurrection. You know, Paul calls it the first fruits of the resurrection back then.

In fact, in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming there is a great picture of this because there is this incredible, beautiful geyser named Beehive that only goes off every couple of days. And the only way that you know that that big geyser is going to go off is there is an indicator that goes off about 20 minutes before it happens and they have volunteers stationed out there to watch for the little indicator to go and as soon as the indicator goes, they know that the big geyser is going to go and then they get on the loud speaker and tell everybody in the park, no matter what you are doing get over to Beehive because it is going to be spectacular. And for Paul, Jesus' resurrection is like that little indicator and once that indicator goes, Jesus' resurrection, Paul knows it is just a matter of time before the whole geyser goes and that would be our general resurrection. And the privilege that we have is to between his resurrection and our resurrection and to get on the loud speaker and call everybody to come.

So I think the big job for us is to continue painting the picture for people of what the real Christian story is. The move from the creation of us to be God's showcase, to the fall where we lost it, and then his sending his son to be the one in whom it all is going to be remade. And it has to be remade not just on the inside in our spirits but in our bodies and throughout the whole cosmos. And to just keep that in front of people, but not to let people get so sure that they know when it's going to happen that they start getting into silly behavior. And here is where we get back to the Thessalonian letters. Paul's interest is in helping people understand in the first place if people have died they haven't lost out on the resurrection. God is going to raise them up. And one of the reasons he writes 1 Thessalonians is to assure these people that when the Lord comes back, the people who are in the ground they going up first before all of us who happen to be living on the earth.

And then secondly, he wants them to know that they don't have to be worried about all these reports that seem to have been circulating back in his time about you know "Ok, Paul said the day of the Lord has already come and we even have this letter that he was supposed to have written." He says, "Look folks, things are going to have to happen." That there is this man of lawlessness that is going to have to emerge and he is going to have to have this similar kind of complex of miracles around him that were like the one that he is purporting to represent himself, this man of lawlessness instead of the true obedient law keeper, Jesus. And he is going to set himself up in the temple whether that means a physical temple in Palestine or whether it means the church as the true and living temple of the living God. That's the prospect that really scares me, is this man of lawlessness getting in charge of the church and just making things really, really bad for believers. But for Paul, when that stuff happens — and the Lord is not coming back until that stuff happens — but when that stuff happens we are all going to know it. And it's not going to be, so-and-so said or so-and-so said. We are going to know. So, he wants us to know that when the stuff starts going down, that means he is coming back we will all know.

And then the third things he wants us to understand is that our job, all of us between now and then no matter whether its tomorrow, next year, ten thousand years from now is to live in a certain kind of way. And those are the ethics of chapter 4 in terms of our marital relationships and our sexual fidelity. We don't get into misbehavior. When it comes to relationships with one another, we practice brotherly love and when it comes to our jobs and vocations we don't go live on the side of some mountain and say, "Oh, you'll take care of me because the Lord is coming back." He has given us work to do. Some of us have so called secular jobs and our job is to go do that to the Lord. Some of us will have more formally vocational ministry jobs and our job is to go tell them about the indicator geyser that's gone and the general direction in which it's going to come. And we are all called to tell that story and we are called to live in a certain way.

Question 5:**How does diligent work in worldly occupations benefit our Christian witness?**

Student: What are some of the benefits, in terms of evangelism and living out a witness before unbelievers, what are some of the benefits of living a hardworking life, if you will?

Dr. Kidd: Man, that is a great question because for Paul just living that life is part of the witness. One of the things he talks about to the Thessalonians is he reminds them of his own manner of living among them like in chapter 2. And he talks about the way he had loved God well, the way he had respected them well and the way he had not been motivated by greed and false motives and just trying to get them to like him. And Greek thinkers had this sense of there is this ideal of what it is to be a genuine, full human being, to love God, and to do right by others and to have self-control. But there is also a lot of thinking among Greek philosophers about how do we get the resources to do that? And one of the things that Christians modeled was not only hears what that life looks like but because of our relationship with Jesus living in us and the Holy Spirit making his life really present to us, we can treat each other differently. We can model a kind of self-control and a genuine care and respect for other people. And you know, Paul talks to the Thessalonians about how you were turned from worshipping idols to worship the living God and just by living out the simple Christian life there is evangelistic power in that and the worse things get in the world the more our just living the Christian life is itself is evangelistic. And often like Peter says in 1 Peter, people will ask, “Why do you live like that? Times are hard and everybody else’s lives are being destroyed and you are hurting as bad as anyone else and yet in your tears I see that there’s kind of a joy, there’s some kind of hope. What’s up with that and where does it come from?” And we have the opportunity to tell them.

Question 6:**Who is or was the “man of lawlessness”?**

Student: Just to jump back slightly, you mentioned the “man of lawlessness”. I mean there have always been jumps to who is this person? You know, people tie him to the anti-Christ in 1 John and looking at some of the old Roman leaders and such. But it’s always gone down and we’ve had a lot of world leaders that have had fatal wounds to the head and things like that. They always attach that. What do we make of this “man of lawlessness”?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I do think that Paul has in mind somewhere down the road, and he might have anticipated a picture of that in this rotten scoundrel Nero. But Nero, and some people try to say that he was just talking about Nero Claudius being the restraint in all that, but the actual events of Nero’s death, it wasn’t like he was struck down by

the word of God coming out of Jesus' mouth. And you know we are still walking around in non-resurrection bodies, so he clearly wasn't talking about Nero. But it looks like he is looking down the corridors of history, way off into some remote point in time that's not even revealed to him, where the great satanic rebellion against Christ's victory will be personified in one single human being who will be the focal point for this concentration of evil energy that Paul calls the mystery of lawlessness, which he says is already in play in his own time. And just like Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of the resurrection that is to come and the whole era of the spirit is the ministry of that resurrection Spirit who's giving us new life in our inner man in anticipation of the outer resurrection of our whole being and the lighting up of the whole cosmos with his glory.

In the same sort of way, in a sort of reverse mirror image, evil has — a kind of a different evil — has been in place since Jesus' resurrection. Satan's knee-jerk reaction against the mortal wound that was inflicted on him in Jesus' resurrection. And I think, what we see over time in history is different individuals who were like little — this may not be the best term but it's all I can think of right now — little mini incarnations of that great final figure. So it might have been Mussolini one day; it might have been Saddam Hussein in another day, or, you know, Osama Bin Laden or, you know, other figures that kind of approximate that kind of sinister leader of darkness. But one day that will all culminate in *the guy*. And again, I think Paul has the sense that when that guy is on the field, we will all know.

Student: That's that little geyser.

Dr. Kidd: That is a good analogy. There are these little geysers along the way and one day there will be just this intense, like Armageddon kind of evil. Every generation... we know in fact that temporally we are closer but every generation is going to have this understandable sense of "Well, I wonder if it's really us." I wonder if it's really us. And you are going to have those voices in the church that say, "It's us." And who knows how long it's going to be; the benefit to the church is that even when they are wrong, we are continually reminded, "Don't get too comfortable here." We are sojourners and pilgrims and our number one task is to tell people, "The big geyser is going to blow. You'd better be ready."

Question 7:

How can we discern false prophets and false teachers today?

Student: Reggie, today we seem to struggle with the same things Paul struggled with in Thessalonica with all of the false prophets that were causing troubles. How do we discern those prophets and test those prophets as he recommends. What kind of guidelines do we have as they still jump at us today?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, just turn on the TV and just flip for a little while and you'll find somebody making you mad. And one of the things, I think, that believers struggle with in this is when they hear somebody say something that they know is wrong. Does that mean that everything they say is wrong? And can I trust somebody that tells me anything that's wrong? And Paul himself encouraged people to check him out according to the Word of God. He understood that what he was teaching was the summation of what Scripture had taught and his traveling partner, Luke, commended the noble Bereans for taking the message of the apostles and going to Scripture and checking it out. So Paul tells the believers in Thessalonica to discern the prophecies. By that I think he means, take what's taught to you and go to Scripture and check it out for yourself. Now, in the Old Testament if the prophet was found to be wrong, that was it. They were just stoned and left for dead. It doesn't seem like that's the way things are supposed to work in the New Testament. It looks like the Spirit is given as a general gift to the church and it's our job to listen carefully to what is being taught us and to assess and evaluate. I don't know have you guys ever heard of a teacher who has everything right?

Student: Well, no not at all but it seems like every heretic has his Bible verse. And you know so many of these verses we see in relationship to debates about women in the church, everybody is always jumping to verses in Paul, or spiritual gifts, everybody is always looking to verses to Paul. And everybody has what seems to be very credible arguments from Scripture. I mean, what do you do with that?

Dr. Kidd: Well, like you said, everybody's got their scripture and our job is know the Scripture well enough so we can recognize when somebody's taking something that is only part of the truth and abstracts it from the whole truth. And so, like when it comes to women, you have to go and see what Paul was saying at a particular time and place and then when he is saying "no", you also need to look at the ways he worked with women and like commended Phoebe and I think, sent the letter to the Romans along with Phoebe and expected her to help people sort it out. Well, you have to reconcile is, no, one shouldn't do "X" with the fact that he does have women do "Y", and then you have to assume that he also is ministering out of the same kind of heart that Jesus himself displayed when he was on the earth and he took women aside him and treated them as disciples along with everybody else.

Luke 8, I'm thinking of the women who were called who used their resources to serve the church. I'm thinking of the woman who washed Jesus' feet in chapter 7 of Luke. The Syrophoenician woman in Matthew 15 who is in the heartland of paganism where Jesus had brought the disciples to teach them after he has just taught them in Matthew 15 about it's not something that goes into a person that pollutes them, it's what comes out. And that how he was in this process of coming to make people clean which is going to include Gentiles as well as Jews. And he takes the disciples into Gentile territory and he ministers among Gentiles and this woman comes and he says — well, I forget exactly what her words are — "Oh, son of David." And he just is quiet and he is waiting to see if that get it and they go, "What? Jesus? This is a pagan Gentile woman." And he does exactly what he expects them to do and says, "Well, I

was only sent to the house of Israel, wasn't I?" I mean just the irony of the whole setting. He has gone to pagan territory obviously to reach pagan people, and they don't get it and she does. She goes — and again I can't remember exactly what she says — but she says, "Son of David, have mercy on me." And she gets it. And then she goes like, "Well," — and there is just deep irony in her voice — "I know. Even the dogs get crumbs from the table." And he goes, "You get it don't you?" So he blesses her.

And the way that the disciples, none of them, the male disciples have no idea what is going on at the resurrection but the women show up. And he shows himself to the women and they go tell the men. So, there is this sense of, there's this heart in Jesus that surely Paul brought over and the whole conversation about how women minister in the church alongside men needs to take that into view. Not ignoring the "no's" but recognizing that there is this larger "yes" that is a part of it as well.

So, it is my understanding that any verse has a larger context. The largest context is the great story that the Scripture is telling of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. And whenever believers listen to any teacher they should be asking whether that person really understands where we are on that storyline. For instance, in the United States today there are teachers who are promising, "you name it, you claim it." Jesus took all your sicknesses and diseases on himself on the cross, so you have the right to claim freedom from sickness and disease. The Lord blesses those whom he loves, so you have the right to go to God and say, "God, make me rich." Well, there is just a little problem in the timeline here in the story of moving from creation, through the fall through redemption, to the final consummation. We live in this period of time where sin continues to exist at the same time the kingdom of righteousness has been established. And it means that what is happening in our bodies is that our bodies are going to decay and be corrupted because of the fall.

One day we will be resurrected completely whole. And Paul talks about how our outer man is fading away but our inner man is being renewed from day to day. And that means sometimes he will give us this sort of kiss from the future but none of us is going to get out alive apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And when decay sets into our bodies, it's not because we don't have enough faith. It's because the avenue for us to know Jesus is in the fellowship of his sufferings and the very decay of our bodies has now become a part of the whole redemptive process where he makes himself more sweetly known to us as we know him, as we move into our deaths. And sometimes that's you know, painful cancer. Sometimes it's bang, you are just gone and the family has to put up with the loss of a breadwinner or a mom or a son or a daughter. And it's precisely that stuff that the resurrection has redeemed and it is so freeing for God's people just to recognize that the verses that talk about happiness, joy, and you know, complete fulfillment, they are all absolutely true and ours. But we live in this period of the "now and the not yet" where some of those things we get and some of those things we don't but we always get him in the midst it. I don't know. Have you guys had to work that sort of struggle out yourselves?

Student: Yeah. Every now and then I think about people who are on the low socio-economic bracket and I think about the prosperity preachers that promise them this life that is going to come if you just sow this kind of seed. And then passages like James come to mind where he says to take pride in your humble circumstances.

Dr. Kidd: Yes, exactly.

Student: I wonder, how much should we realize that, for some of us, our lot in life may be our humble circumstances, and maybe some are given more? But what do we tell people in light of all of this false prosperity message that's inundated in church? What do we tell Christians who want to pursue the highest things in life and maybe want to obtain some kind of wealth? I mean, how do we reconcile that and tell them they can do that?

Dr. Kidd: It seems to me that our job is to work hard. And to offer what we can to other people and it's the Lord's job to reward that the way he wants to. The guy I worked for my second job out of seminary, that was his attitude and man, I loved him. I remember we were talking about how much we were going to get paid by the church and whether we should go ask for more. And he said, "You know, I've always figured that my job is to serve and the elders of this church's job is their job to decide how much it's worth. And my call is to do my ministry as unto the Lord." I think that well that really sort of rebuked the envy and the avarice and the greed in me. And it just reminded me that my job is to serve. My job isn't to worry about what the reward is going to be.

Question 8:

How can we affirm hard work without overemphasizing prosperity?

Student: I was just concerned about Christians who, I even think in my life, where I may want to start a business as a young minister outside of the church. And I know that Paul was a tent maker but then I get concerned sometimes that that may be seen as you know, I am consumed by prosperity and I don't want to mix that message of my ministry and that false message together. So, I just kind of wonder, what can we tell Christians that will encourage them that, yes, they can try to obtain wealth and they can pursue the highest things in life if you will. But without falling victim to being categorized as one of those who have fallen victim to the prosperity message or you know?

Dr. Kidd: Michael, that's a great point. See if this helps. I think on the one hand, we can offer the general teaching that comes out of the wisdom theology of the Old Testament like the book of Proverbs. That in general, you work hard, you don't be lazy and you will get blessed. But two, there is the problem of the fall. There is the problem of sin. There is this irrationality that is built in. And the book of Ecclesiastes talks about that you know, "What prophet does the wise man have?" And you know

you look around and it doesn't look like the people who ought to be in charge are always in charge. And the people who ought to get blessed don't seem to be getting blessed and the people who ought to be getting cursed, they seem to be getting blessed. And we just have to recognize that sin and a certain upside-down-ness and warped-ness of the whole cosmos is in play. But then third, what God is all about is working in the midst of situations that are often upside-down. And it's important for us not necessarily to assume that physical prosperity is a direct blessing of the Lord, nor is physical, even emotional, and financial hardship a curse from the Lord. Those are there because sin abounds. But in the hands of God, those are means by which he molds and shapes his people after his own heart of tenderness and compassion and he builds character into us. And puts us often in positions where we can go and we can offer care, not from a position of superiority and arrogance but from real fellow understanding.

I know what it is to be poor. I tell you in the last few months, it's been kind of a time when some things in my life that I thought should be going in a certain direction and have gone in another direction and it hasn't been much fun. And what I found myself doing is going to the Beatitudes where Jesus lays out what it is to be a part of his kingdom. And he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Theirs is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn. They are the ones who will know joy. And blessed are the meek. They're the ones that will inherit the earth." And we just have to recognize that the God who made it all and who has determined that one day it will be perfectly beautiful, pristine, radiant with his glory again has gone through this agonizingly painful, often very dark and dreary looking process to redeem it. But he has so committed himself to it that he has come in the flesh and taken the worst into himself and cares so much about us that he is going to make us over from the inside out. Sometimes that is going to feel good and sometimes it's going to feel bad but he is conforming us to the image of his Son because he loves us.

Question 9: **Is laxity always sin?**

Student: Reggie, is laxity always sin? Especially in our culture where we have this idea of working your whole life to somehow, at the end of your life, to retire and do nothing for the rest of your life. Are we called as Christians to be industrious in every circumstance? Is there some point where it's okay for us to get supported by the church?

Dr. Kidd: That's a great question, Michael. And what occasions it is here in the Thessalonians letters, Paul is upset because some people, apparently in view of their expectation that the Lord is coming right back, are not working anymore. And he says, "No, your job is to work with your hands." His sense is that we are all given some sort of gift and ability so that we have something to contribute to other people's wellbeing. And that's part of what it is to bear God's image. And it's important for us

to do that. But I also think for Paul, he has got this sense as a person of Jewish heritage that there is supposed to be a rhythm, a Sabbath rhythm so that we don't just burn our batteries over the course of a life so that we just kind of get to the end totally exhausted. I think, I don't see him envisioning us just getting to a place where I've worked and worked and worked and now I just quit. I think his sense is that we work and rest, work and rest all the way through our lives and see our lives being not about amassing material wealth and paying enough dues so that finally we just check out. I think, for him it's about being productive members of societies and communities as long as we possibly can.

Now, it so happens that in the kind of world we live in, lots of people have the opportunity to stop the jobs they have been carrying out for a long period of time and then have resources made available to them so that they don't have to do that anymore. Those people are in a unique position to kind of go into another phase of ministry. I don't know about you guys but I have been in churches where you know we have almost been staffed by people who were accountants, or lawyers, or teachers who now are able to come and do really critical functions in our churches. Have you known people like that?

Student: My parents, essentially, about 10 years outside of retirement, they pretty much called it quits and signed on with a full-time mission, and they're loving it. And even though now all of their friends are retiring, and they can't do all of the stuff they would have liked to even 10 years ago, I mean, they are still just loving every second of it and feeling like they are contributing as much as they can towards the kingdom. It's an encouraging thing for people as well when they go from church to church to talk about their mission, just to tell them their story and say, "I didn't give up. This wasn't the end for me. It was actually just the beginning of the next week. You know, I had my Sabbath rest and then the next week began." And you know, that more than what they are actually doing, just their story encourages people more than anything else.

Dr. Kidd: Well, one of the most inspirational couples I ever knew was a couple I knew who had retired from the New England area and settled in south Florida where I was ministering in a church and God had put prison ministries on their hearts. And this man virtually single-handedly organized prison fellowship ministries in the state penitentiaries in the state of Florida just by the industry with which he went about it. He would set up interviews with wardens and explain what this ministry was all about and he would go and he would recruit people from churches. And all those years of being a very successful businessman had put him in a position where he could do this and not that many people would have been able to do that. You know, if Anna in Luke 2 could spend decades serving God's people by praying in the temple, it means that none of us are ever called off the field until the Lord calls us to himself.

Student: Yeah, I even think about my grandparents. They are all well beyond the age of retirement but they are still so involved in the church. My grandmother is constantly cooking for the church. My grandfather gets us at 5:30 in the morning

before his morning service and meets with a group to pray. And my other grandmother, she is well in her 70's and she still works. She does domestic work and she is just as energetic as 20 year old or something. So I just really think that's a great model when we see senior saints that don't have this idea that I finally arrived at this age where I can just slow down if you will. But they keep going and they are just so thankful and they are just so on fire for the Lord. They exhaust themselves for the Kingdom and I think that's just so awesome to see.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, there is nothing sadder than seeing a person get to a place where they feel like, "Well, I'm done." And they just cocoon and they die long before their bodies give out. And there is nothing more exciting than seeing people in their 70's, 80's and 90's that are just becoming more alive because they understand that God still has a purpose for them.

Question 10:

What can younger, poorer Christians learn from the example of older, well-to-do Christians?

Student: So what kind of lessons does that teach us that aren't at the point of retirement, where we haven't saved up enough money like they have to where they can do this? We still feel like we are just scraping by for the next paycheck, whereas they have saved up all that they need for the next 20 years that they may be alive. How does that impact how we live our lives?

Dr. Kidd: Well, in the first place, to go back to this work/rest pattern, I think it means finding a way along the way to not just let your life just exhaust you. But to find a way to lean into the times that the Lord gives you for refreshment and rest and use those times, really set them aside to look back on the labors of your hands and say, "Thank you, Lord," and get ready for the next round. Second is to save, to go into a disciplined, planned program of setting aside a certain amount of your income and you set aside money for the Lord and you set aside money for the government, and then, like you are paying yourself, set aside money so in the long haul if the Lord gives you enough that you can back off of other labors and be freed up to kind of go into another way of serving him. And that's one of the ways that people can keep themselves from just feeling depressed and behind all the time. Spend less now, save.

Student: You know Reggie, one of the things that encourages me when I get into one of those lazy spells, is we have a deacon at our church and he is 62. And he still plays basketball with us at the Memorial Day picnic and he is real good too. He is running up and down the court and it's unbelievable. And that just kind of encourages me that working hard is something that is all the way throughout your life.

Dr. Kidd: Amen. Well, I hope to be still kicking when I am in my 90's, which is still really far down the line.

Question 11:**How do we deal with churches and church leaders that advocate false teachings?**

Student: Reggie, Paul taught the Thessalonians to follow the teachings of the established church rather than the church leaders. What happens when the church leaders are the established church and vice versa? And what do you do when they might be the only church in town? What do you do if they are causing everybody to go astray?

Dr. Kidd: There are times when it becomes clear that church leaders no longer believe the Scriptures, no longer believe the Apostles Creed, no longer believe the Nicene Creed, and the councils that had really established what Christian orthodoxy was by the middle of the 4th century. And sometimes believers in good faith have found themselves having sadly to leave those churches and find other churches. I'd say, number one, that my first job is to go to the church where I am and give them the opportunity to indicate that they believe or don't believe what orthodox Christianity is and call them to the Scriptures and to the faith of historic Christianity. And then if I feel that I am really on the outs, I really want to make sure that I'm just not making a very selfish, pride driven, anger driven decision on my own. I really want to be in fellowship with others who know me, who know my own prideful, sinful heart and are praying through this with me. And I don't want to just go and decide to be a Christian all on my own but I want to be in submission to his body someplace.

Question 12:**When is it legitimate to leave a church?**

Student: Do you think the decision to leave a church, should that only be a theological decision? Like if you are going to say in the same town and go to a different church, same denomination, you know, similar types of situations. Since there is so much emotional attachment and spiritual attachment to your brothers at this church, should there be something more or less than a theological decision that should make you change?

Dr. Kidd: Well, Andrew there can be lots of reasons for leaving one church to go to another church. You know, sometimes the Lord can simply, out of your giftedness, call you to serve in another church and that can be done in concert with the leaders of the church that you are in fellowship with. I'm not sure whether you are asking about taste in music or, you know, church "A" does a more liturgical kind of worship and I would rather have something that's a little bit freer and I want to go over here. As much as I can, I really want to be in submission to the brothers, and I want to honor the commitment that I have made to the body of Christ and particularly to the part of the body of Christ that I am a part of. But it's hard to articulate a one-size fits all philosophy.

Question 13:**What unique contributions do Paul's letters to the Thessalonians make to our theology?**

Student: Reggie, do any of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians contribute in a special way to our Christian theology? And what would we be missing in their absence?

Dr. Kidd: That is a great question, Michael. There is some really fun stuff in the letters to the Thessalonians and we would really be missing some good stuff if they weren't here. In the first place, there is nowhere else in Scripture that addresses directly the fact that those who have already died are going to precede those who are on the earth when the Lord comes back again. So, there is great comfort for those of us who have lost loved ones that we need to recognize that they are at no loss for having died. And then from Thessalonians Paul does some teaching in Philippians 1 and in 2 Corinthians 5 about the fact that those who have died are present with the Lord but even they are waiting until the Lord comes back again. But the real contribution of the Thessalonians letters is just to let us know that we can be encouraged because those who have already died in the Lord are not gone and that they will be with us. They will be with the Lord. In fact they will go before those who are still on the earth.

Secondly, he lets us know that we don't have to figure it all out about when he is coming back. He says, "He will come back. There will be this great epiphany, there will be this *parousia*, and between now and then there is just some stuff that is going to have to get worked out, and we can relax and we can let the Lord take care of that. Meanwhile we can go about doing our jobs and living for the Lord."

And the third thing that Paul does in this letter that is really helpful — and I wish it had been paid more attention to over the history of the church — is in warning about people who are obsessed with the Lord's concern. He addresses two problems that often come up when people get all hot and bothered about the Lord's return. In the first place, in chapter 4 as soon as he raises the question about times and seasons he talks about the need not to engage in sexual misbehavior. He talks about living with integrity and holiness in that aspect of your life. And unfortunately often when leaders get into this real speculative stuff about when the Lord's coming back again, in the back door they are starting to abuse their relationship to make improper sexual advances and breakdown all kinds of normal rules for how men and women are to treat one another. And the second thing that he talks is people are stopping working and he says, "No, you need to keep working with your hands."

So, the one problem is just something that is just kind of anticipating that could happen, sexual misbehavior and kind of warning people off of. But the other is something that has actually come up in these communities where people are not working anymore, they are just sitting back letting everyone else take care of them while they just wait for the Lord to return. And it's really nice to have Paul already

speaking to these kinds of problems that come up often when people get into speculation about the end times.

Question 14:

Why did Paul say that believers that had died were “asleep”?

Student: In 1 Thessalonians, Reggie, Paul described the people who had already died as being “asleep.” Was he referring to soul sleep or what exactly is this period after death that Paul is describing?

Dr. Kidd: The language of sleep means, as far it looks, their bodies are still. But from what he says in Philippians 1 and 2 Corinthians 5, we know that he also believes that those people are present with the Lord. And so what has happened is that their bodies are at rest but their souls are with the Lord in heaven and they are enjoying some sort of fellowship with the Lord. He says, “It would be better when I die because I will present with the Lord. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” What is interesting is that he doesn’t speculate a lot about what that existence is but we get a window of insight into it in the book of Revelation when in chapter 6 and chapter 8 we have this picture of those who have died who their souls are under the altar. And their prayers continue to go up to the Lord asking, “Oh Lord, how long?” So in some sense those who have died have gone on beyond us but they have not received their resurrection bodies as yet. So it’s not really proper to talk about those people as having graduated, you know, gone to glory. They are with the Lord but we all get to glory at the same time because we all get resurrected at the same time. And it’s very interesting to find what comfort Paul takes in the fact that even death cannot separate us from the Lord and yet there is only one resurrection and we get that all at the same time.

Question 15:

How should Christ’s imminent return impact our view of building the kingdom?

Student: Reggie, how can the modern church balance a healthy view of building for the kingdom with Christ’s imminent return in mind?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think it helps a lot, Mike, to keep Paul’s timeline in view. In his sense that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God’s kingdom has come and it’s been inaugurated. And the end of that process is the fact that the Lord is going to come back and going to consummate the work that he began. And we have the privilege of living in between the times where his work is being continued and the kingdom is being established without our having a sense that we are going to bring it in, in its fullness. He and only he is going to bring it in its fullness. So, we can have in

this period of time this tremendous sense of privilege of being part of the answer to the prayer, “Father may your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Let your kingdom come.” And we advance that kingdom because the King is already on the throne and yet that kingdom is not going to be fully realized until he comes back himself. So, it gives us this potential of living with the great sense of possibility and hope, and at the same time with a sense of realism and not taking ourselves so seriously. So, I think it’s a great perspective that Paul gives us that we contribute to the kingdom but only the King is going to make the King fully here.

Question 16:

How does the Holy Spirit separate us from the world without taking us out of the world?

Student: Reggie, how does the Holy Spirit purify us but also separate us from the world? What does that look like from the corruption of the world specifically and how do you become a part of that separation without becoming your own entity?

Dr. Kidd: Well, Andrew, I think you asked the question really well. It’s about being separate from the world without becoming this holy little huddle. And it’s interesting to watch Paul talk about how there is this pattern of life that we are called to live, that is a pattern of life as he says, “I exhort in the Lord Jesus that you learn from us how you ought to live and to please God just as you are doing and do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through Lord Jesus and this is the will of God, your sanctification.” He believes that the whole thing that’s going on in us in our relationship with Jesus is that we are being sanctified, which means being set apart. But that doesn’t happen on our own. It’s the work, as he says later on — I’m in chapter 4 by the way, in verse 8 — “He gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

What happens is that upon his resurrection from the dead, Jesus receives the Holy Spirit and then he gives the Spirit to us. And the Spirit’s work is to work in us individually and to work in us together to make us God’s separate holy people and yet he does not call us to physically, literally move out of the world but to live as a colony of his people in the midst of the world and to let the spirit’s work in us individually and in us as his people, as we learn to proclaim his word, as we learn to love one another, as we learn to serve people in our community, working with our hands, offering our gifts and receiving some sort of support for that work. Those are ways in which we show his character at work in us so that we, the saying is often offered, “We are in the world but not of the world.” And the being not of the world is the work of the Lord, not physically removing us from the world but making us a people who are accountable to the Lord, accountable to one another, and then serving other people. And that’s how the Holy Spirit purifies us without just taking us out into the desert some place.

Question 17:**How common were forgeries when the Bible was being written?**

Student: Reggie, were there a lot of forged letters in the early church? And how can we be sure that we don't have forged letters in the Holy Bible?

Dr. Kidd: That's a great question and Christians have thought about that from the very beginning. And it's relevant to us because 2 Thessalonians is one of the letters that there has been some conversation about in recent times. One of the things that we know from the 1st century is pagans as well as Christians had a pretty keen sense of intellectual property and whenever writers could find out that they had been misrepresented or somebody had passed off a letter as their own, they went after them. And we have no reason to think that Christians thought any differently about that. In fact, every time in church history in the early part of the church when documents were found to be not what they were thought to be in the first place, they were thrown out. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, for instance, was found out to have been written by an elder out of "piety" for Paul according to Tertullian around the 180's or so. And he was defrocked. And again, you can find non-Christians worrying about making collections of their letters and their writings to make sure they were really what they were supposed to be.

Interestingly, 2 Thessalonians is one of the places where we have some concern about it being expressed about the integrity or authenticity of the letter. Paul worries in 2 Thessalonians 2 about whether there might be some letters out there purporting to be from him saying that the day of the Lord is coming. He says, you know, "Those didn't come from me." And he closes the letter by saying, "I, Paul write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine. It's the way I write." You should be able to recognize that this is my hand. And as time has gone on, I think we have every reason in the world to think that the letters that bear the name of the person who wrote them that are in the New Testament were actually written by the person who wrote them, including 2 Thessalonians.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
FOUR

PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Four

Paul and the Corinthians

INTRODUCTION

Many of us are familiar with the fables attributed to an ancient Greek named Aesop. In one of those fables, “The Tortoise and the Hare,” a hare constantly boasted that he was the fastest of all the animals. So, tiring of the hare’s arrogance, a tortoise challenged him to a foot race. Now, the hare clearly could have won, but because he was so certain of his victory, so full of pride in his great abilities, he took a nap in the middle of the race. And while the hare was sleeping, the tortoise crossed the finish line ahead of him.

In certain ways, many Christians living in the city of Corinth during the first century were like the hare of Aesop’s fable. Just as the hare counted himself the winner before the race was over, many Corinthian believers thought of themselves as winners before the race of their Christian lives was over. They looked at their earthly prosperity and at their special spiritual gifts, and then deluded themselves into believing that the Lord had made them superior to everyone else. They thought that God had blessed them far more than he had blessed other Christians who had fewer earthly treasures and less spectacular spiritual gifts.

This is our fourth lesson in our series, *The Heart of Paul’s Theology*, and we have entitled this lesson “Paul and the Corinthians.” In this lesson we will see how Paul addressed these proud Christians in his letters now known as 1 and 2 Corinthians. Although Paul had many specific problems to address, he centered most of his attention in these letters on the main source of their many problems: the false belief that some of them had already crossed the finish line of the Christian life, while in reality the race was still on.

Our study of Paul and the Corinthians will divide into three parts. First, we’ll look into the background to Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. Second, we’ll examine the structure and content of 1 and 2 Corinthians. And third, we will see how Paul’s letters revealed one of his central theological outlooks, his doctrine of the last days, or his eschatology. Let’s look first at the background to Paul’s letters to the Corinthians.

BACKGROUND

As we have emphasized throughout this series, the Apostle Paul wrote his letters in order to address particular issues that arose in different churches. So, as we look at 1 and 2 Corinthians, we need to ask some basic questions: What was going on in the Corinthian church? Why did Paul write to them? We’ll answer these questions in two ways: first, we’ll explore Paul’s third missionary journey, and second, we’ll delve into some

particular problems that developed in the church of Corinth. Let's look first at Paul's third missionary journey.

THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul's third missionary journey is recorded in Acts 18:23 through Acts 21:17. In these chapters we learn that Paul largely repeated the itinerary he followed on his second missionary journey. Paul began this trip around the year A.D. 52 or 53. As with his first two missionary journeys, he started in Antioch in Syria. In Acts we learn that he strengthened the believers throughout Galatia and Phrygia. We are not told of specific cities he visited in these areas. Probably, he visited at least some of the cities in which he had previously ministered, such as Derbe, Lystra and Iconium in Galatia, and perhaps Antioch in the Phrygian region. Having passed through Galatia and Phrygia, Paul arrived in the coastal city of Ephesus in the province of Asia, or Asia Minor.

Upon his arrival in Ephesus, Paul encountered twelve disciples of John the Baptist, who quickly received the gospel of Christ. At first, Paul evangelized in the synagogue, but within about three months, the Jews became hardened to his message. So for the next two years he preached the gospel and performed miracles elsewhere in the city.

Eventually, however, Paul and his compatriots came into conflict with the artisans who crafted shrines of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus. Evidently, Paul had won so many converts to Christ that the market for pagan shrines had shrunk considerably. As a result, the artisans nearly rioted, threatening the safety of some of Paul's associates.

After this event, Paul and his traveling companions spent several months in Macedonia and Achaia, regions that lie within modern-day Greece. Luke's record on this part of Paul's journey is scant, yet he does mention that the company started their return to Asia from the city of Philippi. Paul and his companions disembarked at Troas. Because he planned to remain there for only one day, he gathered the believers and spoke to them late into the night. As Paul spoke a young man named Eutychus fell asleep and fell to his death from a window. However, Paul miraculously revived him.

Leaving Troas, Paul and his company traveled to the neighboring city of Assos, where they again took to sea. They stopped in Mitylene, Chios and Samos, and eventually reached Miletus, where they remained for a brief period. While in Miletus, Paul sent for the elders of the church in the nearby city of Ephesus. He gathered them in Miletus to give them some parting instructions and to bless them.

After this, the company set sail again. Passing through Cos, Rhodes, Patara and Cyprus, they landed in Tyre, where they ministered for a week. From there they sailed to Ptolemais, then to Caesarea, where the Judean prophet Agabus warned Paul that he would be arrested in Jerusalem, confirming what Paul already knew to be true. Yet, not dissuaded by Agabus' prophecy or by the pleading of his friends, Paul continued on to Jerusalem, where he ended his journey around the year A.D. 57.

Paul wrote his two canonical letters to the Corinthians during this third missionary journey, as well as two additional letters that have not been preserved. 1 Corinthians was probably written from Ephesus, perhaps in A.D. 55. Shortly after sending this letter, Paul briefly visited Corinth, during which time he was grievously offended by a member of

the church there. Subsequent to this visit, he wrote a letter that is now lost to us, sometimes called his “Sorrowful Letter.” Later, after receiving a report from Titus about the positive way his sorrowful letter had been received, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, probably from Macedonia, and most likely within a year or so of writing 1 Corinthians.

Now that we have seen how Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians fit within the context of his third missionary journey, we should look at some specific problems within the church in Corinth. What issues were causing them turmoil? Why did Paul have to write to them so many times?

PROBLEMS IN CORINTH

As we read in Acts 18, Paul had planted the Corinthian church during a prior missionary journey, and had lived in Corinth for at least a year and a half at that time. But after his departure the Corinthian Christians forgot some of Paul’s teachings and misapplied others. As a result, a number of significant conflicts and problems arose in the church.

As we will see, many of the problems that arose in Corinth stemmed from a misunderstanding of eschatology, how Christ had brought the age to come, the age of salvation and life. Many of the Corinthians had come to believe that they had actually received more of the blessings of the future than anyone else; they thought they had already received the ultimate blessings of God.

For our purposes, we will see how this misunderstanding led to four conspicuous problems: first, damaged relationships within the church; second, sexual misconduct; third, abuses in worship; and fourth, a rejection of Paul’s apostolic authority. Let’s turn first to the problem of damaged relationships.

Damaged Relationships

Paul addressed several different types of damaged relationships in his letters to the Corinthians, including such things as rival factions within the church, lawsuits between believers, disregard toward the poor among them, and a failure to minister to the poor in Jerusalem. Let’s look first at the problem of rival factions.

Prior to writing 1 Corinthians, Paul received a report that the believers in Corinth were turned against each other by identifying themselves with whichever teacher they held in highest esteem. Listen to the way Paul described their attitude in 1 Corinthians 1:12:

One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul was astounded at the pettiness that divided these believers. After all, Paul, Apollos, Peter and Jesus all taught the same thing, namely that Jesus was supreme and that

apostles and teachers like Peter, Paul and Apollos were his servants. They did not seek to build rival schools of thought, but to build up the church of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:5 and 11:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task ... No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:5, 11).

Peter, Paul, Apollos and other human leaders obeyed Jesus in all things. They did only what Jesus had appointed them to do, which was to preach his gospel and to build his church.

Sadly, the divisions in the church were not simply ideological; they also appeared in the ways that Christians in Corinth were taking each other to court. Listen to how Paul described the situation in 1 Corinthians 6:7-8:

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means that you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers (1 Corinthians 6:7-8).

This lack of concern for one another was also evident in the way the poor were mistreated in the Lord's Supper. Paul rebuked this behavior in 1 Corinthians 11:21-22:

As you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk...Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Corinthians 11:21-22).

Such selfish egoism also led to a fourth form of damaged relationship among Christians: their failure to collect relief funds they had promised to the needy Christians in Jerusalem. Paul had instructed them to take up this collection even before he wrote 1 Corinthians. But by the time he sent 2 Corinthians to them, they still had not completed it. Listen to Paul's exhortation to them regarding this matter in 2 Corinthians 8:10-11:

Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

Paul commended them for expressing a desire to meet the need of the saints in Jerusalem, but he had to press the issue throughout 2 Corinthians 8-9 to get them to follow through with their promise.

Sexual Misconduct

In addition to damaged relationships, several different sexual problems were also evident in the church in Corinth. In general, it seems that many Corinthians believed that because Jesus had come, sexual matters were no longer significant. From this attitude, two divergent approaches to sexuality seem to have arisen. On the one hand, some in the church apparently adopted the perspective of sexual license. This probably resulted in a variety of problems, perhaps including homosexuality and prostitution. But Paul mentioned one problem explicitly: a man was cohabiting with his stepmother. Listen to Paul's rebuke of this situation in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

In this context, the Greek term *echo*, here translated “has,” means “lives sexually with.” The Corinthians were so confused in their theology that they actually took pride in tolerating this man's sexual relationship with his stepmother.

On the other hand, some believers in Corinth went to the opposite extreme, preferring asceticism and sexual abstinence, even within marriage. Paul rebuked this view, as well, because it violated the marriage covenant and left both spouses open to great sexual temptation. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5:

Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband... Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time... Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:2-5).

The Greek word *echo* appears in this text also where it is translated “have” in the phrase “have his own wife.” As we have already noted, in this type of context *echo* means “live sexually with.” Paul exhorted married couples to maintain appropriate, ongoing sexual relations in order that they might fulfill their marriage covenant and protect themselves from sexual temptation.

Abuses in Worship

A third major problem in the Corinthian church was misconduct in worship. We have already seen that one of these was the mistreatment of the poor during the Lord's Supper. Beyond this, issues also arose with regard to three other issues: gender roles, the use of spiritual gifts, and meat sacrificed to idols.

In the first place, Paul was concerned about the way men and women conducted themselves in public worship. One corrective he gave pertained to the use of head coverings during prayers. In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 he wrote:

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head (1 Corinthians 11:4-5).

Scholars disagree as to whether Paul was speaking of the use of prayer shawls or veils, or whether he was referring to hairstyles. There is also a lack of consensus as to the identity of the “head” that is dishonored. Some think “head” refers to that part of one’s body, while others believe that the man’s head is Christ and the woman’s head is man. But regardless of what these terms denote, the underlying issue is clear: men and women were acting dishonorably in worship, in part by blurring the appropriate distinctions between the genders.

In the second place, Paul also dealt with the use of spiritual gifts in worship. Evidently, many Corinthian believers possessed spectacular gifts such as tongues and prophecy, and they used them so frequently in worship services that disorder ensued. In 1 Corinthians 14:26-33, Paul addressed the situation this way:

Everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation... If anyone speaks in a tongue, two — or at the most three — should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret... Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop... For God is not a God of disorder but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:26-33).

From Paul’s words here, it would appear that worship services in Corinth were confusing and disorderly, with many people speaking simultaneously. Paul insisted that unless believers listen to one another and defer to each other, they do not benefit from the words the Spirit has given.

In the third place, we should mention the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. In the ancient world, much of the meat sold in the marketplace had previously been sacrificed or devoted to an idol, and meals could even be obtained directly from pagan temples. Now, Paul insisted that pagan worship practices did not taint the meat, and that Christians could eat this food as long as they did not do it as an act of pagan worship. But he also warned that believers committed idolatry when they ate with the wrong mindset. He addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians 8:7:

Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled (1 Corinthians 8:7).

Put simply, by eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, Corinthian Christians with a poor understanding of theology were mixing the worship of Christ with the worship of

pagan gods. Paul also pointed out that even mature believers sinned when their eating added to their weaker brothers' confusion. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:10 and 12:

If anyone with a weak conscience sees you ... eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ... When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:10, 12).

By failing to consider their fellow believers in this way, they were partly responsible for the sin of their weaker brothers.

We can see that Paul was deeply concerned with a variety of abuses in the Corinthians' worship. But at the root of all of these problems was the fact that they were selfish and arrogant. They refused to stop indulging themselves, even when their indulgence caused others to fall into terrible sins like idolatry. As we will see later in this lesson, this refusal to honor and respect others was so reprehensible that at times it rendered their worship worthless.

Rejection of Paul's Apostolic Authority

The fourth problem that we should mention was the rejection of Paul's authority as an apostle. This was perhaps their greatest problem. As we have already read in 1 Corinthians 1:12, many in Corinth downplayed Paul's authority by choosing rival figureheads for their factions. What we have yet to look at is the fact that in both letters Paul also had to defend his apostleship against those who sought to discredit him entirely. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:1-3, he wrote:

Am I not an apostle? ... Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me (1 Corinthians 9:1-3).

And in 2 Corinthians 12:11-12, he insisted:

I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles" ... The things that mark an apostle — signs, wonders and miracles — were done among you with great perseverance (2 Corinthians 12:11-12).

Some of the Corinthians had become so full of themselves that they actually denied the authority of the very apostle who had converted them. And in his place, they looked to so-called "super-apostles" who were really not apostles at all.

These counterfeit apostles claimed to have the same authority that Paul and the other legitimate apostles carried. And they taught a false gospel that was seducing many Corinthians into sinful ways of thinking and living. In 2 Corinthians 11:12-15, Paul criticized these wicked men in the harshest terms:

I will ... cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us... For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

Paul refuted these con-men in extremely strong language because he knew their lies could have deadly consequences. If the Corinthians believed the false apostles and rejected Paul's teaching, then they would deny both Christ and the gospel.

So, we can see that Paul faced a number of problems as he wrote to the Corinthians. As we will see, these problems occupied Paul's thoughts throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Now that we have seen some of the important issues that form the background to Paul's epistles to the church in Corinth, we are ready to look at the content of these letters. We will briefly explore each canonical letter to the Corinthians by summarizing the contents of their major sections. Let's begin with 1 Corinthians.

1 CORINTHIANS

First Corinthians is actually the second letter we know of that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul indicated that a prior letter existed by including the words, "I have written you in my letter." The Corinthians also sent Paul a letter, which is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 7:1, and 1 Corinthians appears at many points to respond to issues raised in the church's letter.

First Corinthians is arranged in four major sections: a salutation in 1:1-3; thanksgiving in 1:4-9; the main body consisting of responses to letters and reports in 1:10–16:12; and a closing in 16:13-24.

Salutation

The salutation is fairly brief, stating that the letter is from Paul and Sosthenes, and that the church in Corinth is the intended audience. It also includes a short blessing that serves as a greeting.

Thanksgiving

The thanksgiving is also rather short, expressing Paul's gratitude for the faith and spiritual giftedness of the Corinthians, and confidence in their salvation.

Closing

The closing contains several general exhortations, an endorsement of Stephanas and his household, a final greeting, a blessing, and a note in Paul's own hand verifying the letter's authenticity.

Main Body

The main body consists of two large subsections: 1:10–6:20 includes Paul's responses to reports he had received from Chloe's household, and 7:1–16:12 contains Paul's responses to the letter he had received from the Corinthian church. In the first of these two subsections, Paul addressed three main issues that had come to his attention through the messages from Chloe's household: divisions within the church, immorality, and Christian associations.

Responses to Reports. As we have already seen, the Corinthian church had a number of problems that resulted in divisions. They were fragmented by loyalties to particular church leaders such as Paul, Peter, Apollos, and Jesus. They were divided against one another in lawsuits. And they had become arrogant toward the poor among them and to the poor in Jerusalem. Paul tackled this problem in a few different ways.

For example, he argued that if they had only looked to Jesus as their primary leader, and regarded the apostles and teachers as Christ's servants, the Corinthians would not have clashed over their preferences for certain apostles and teachers. By honoring the apostles and teachers of the church too highly, the Corinthians had lost sight of Jesus who far outshined all others.

Paul also wrote extensively on the total ineptitude of worldly wisdom at handling spiritual matters. Evidently, the influential minority in the Corinthian church was largely composed of those whom the secular society would have respected such as the wealthy and the educated. Under their leadership the rest of the church followed suit in adhering to worldly values. For example, in 1:19-20, he wrote:

It is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:19-20).

Besides telling the Corinthians they were foolish for thinking like the world, he also let them know that they were spiritually immature. In 3:1-2 he wrote:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready (1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

In other words, while the divisive Corinthians thought themselves superior for their wisdom and maturity, in reality, they knew little to nothing and were not even close to being qualified to lead the people of God. Their worldly values had blinded them to spiritual truth.

Paul also took the Corinthians to task for the immorality that had been reported to him. We have already mentioned the case of the man who was cohabiting with his stepmother. Paul addressed that issue in 5:1-13, but he wrote more generally about the subject in 6:12-20 where we learn that the Corinthians had apparently misappropriated the slogan “Everything is permissible for me.” Paul responded directly to this error by qualifying the slogan in verses 12 and 13:

**“Everything is permissible for me” — but not everything is beneficial.
“Everything is permissible for me” — but I will not be mastered by anything... The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Corinthians 6:12-13).**

As we have seen, some Corinthians thought that any sexual conduct was permitted now that Jesus had come.

Now, elsewhere in chapter 6 Paul mentioned a number of sexual sins that had characterized the Corinthians prior to their coming to Christ including fornication, adultery, male and female prostitution, and homosexuality. It is possible, though not certain, that his statements about immorality were directed toward members of the Corinthian church who still engaged in these activities. In any event, the church’s toleration of the man who cohabited with his stepmother clearly demonstrated their laxity in this area.

Finally, Paul clarified some instructions he had previously given to the church concerning Christian associations. He wanted them to maintain their relationships with unbelievers in the world, but to distance themselves from gross sinners who claimed to be believers, but who brought disrepute to the people of God, such as the man who lived in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. In such cases, the Corinthian church was to practice proper church discipline, even excommunicating the offenders if necessary. He summarized these instructions in 5:9-11:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the people of this world... In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

Responses to Letters. The second major section of the main body of 1 Corinthians runs from 7:1–16:12. This is where we find Paul's responses to the Corinthian church's questions: On the subjects of marriage in 7:1–40; in chapters 8–10 meat sacrificed to idols; 11:2–34 deals with questions about worship and is not identified as being responsive to questions from the Corinthians; in chapters 12–14 spiritual gifts; chapter 15 introduces the subject of the resurrection of all believers; in 16:1–12 the collection for the church in Jerusalem, and Apollos.

The first questions to which Paul responded dealt with marriage, remarriage and singleness. Paul took up these subjects in 7:1–40. Some believers in Corinth adopted asceticism and sexual abstinence even within marriage. The tendency of some Corinthian believers toward asceticism seems to have given rise to questions about sexual behavior within marriage and about the honorableness of marriage itself. In response to this, Paul affirmed both marriage and singleness and insisted that marriage must include a sexual element. But he also taught that singleness is more advantageous than marriage because singleness allows believers to focus more on "the things of the Lord," that is, on the interests of Christ's kingdom. Some believe that Paul advocated singleness over marriage only during situations of crisis, while others equally apply his instructions to all believers at all times since the first coming of Christ.

In chapters 8–10 Paul addressed the subject of meat that had been sacrificed to idols. We have already spoken of meals served in idols' temples, which is the main topic of chapter 8. But in common practice, pagan temples did not eat or serve all of the meat from the animals they butchered, and they often sold the remainder. So, in chapter 10, Paul wrote about meat purchased in the marketplace. He defended believers who ate this meat, so long as they did not do so as an act of pagan worship or in violation of their conscience. But he also taught them not to eat when their actions were likely to be mistaken for idolatry. In the intervening material of chapter 9, he explained his own willingness to restrict Christian freedom, implicitly asking others to do the same.

In chapter 11, Paul turned to two matters relating to worship: gender roles, which he addressed in verses 2–16, and the mistreatment of the poor during the Lord's Supper, which he dealt with in verses 17–34. The same arrogance and egocentrism that had led to factions in the church, to lawsuits, and to stumbling weak Christians with food, had also produced believers that disrespected one another in worship. Not surprisingly, Paul's solution was not just to stop the offending behaviors, but also to change the attitudes of the heart.

In chapters 12–14 Paul addressed problems related to the use of spiritual gifts. In chapter 12 he explained that the Holy Spirit did not give gifts in order to enhance the status of those gifted or as a reward to the righteous; rather, he gifted people according to the needs of the church.

In chapter 13, which is commonly known as the "love chapter," Paul explained that all spiritual gifts were to be used in love and that, if they were not used in this way, they were worthless.

Finally, in chapter 14, he rebuked the Corinthians for their disorderly worship services and gave instructions on how they were to restrain their use of gifts in public worship.

Chapter 15 introduces the subject of the resurrection of all believers. Evidently, some in the Corinthian church denied that believers would be raised bodily from the

dead. In response to this error, Paul explained that Christ's resurrection was key to the gospel, and that in order for believers to receive final salvation, they would have to be raised just as Jesus was.

Paul completed his answers to the Corinthian's questions in 16:1-12 by giving them instructions on how to take up the collection for the needy church in Jerusalem, and by making a few comments about Apollos.

Now that we have looked at the content of 1 Corinthians, we should turn our attention to the content of Paul's second canonical letter to the Corinthians.

2 CORINTHIANS

Second Corinthians can be outlined in a variety of ways. We have chosen here to present its material under four major headings: a salutation in 1:1-2; an introduction in 1:3-11; the main body in 1:12-13:10; and a closing in 13:11-14.

Salutation

The salutation states that the letter is from Paul and Timothy, and identifies the church in Corinth and the saints in the surrounding region of Achaia as the intended audience. It includes a short blessing that serves as a greeting.

Introduction

The inclusion of an introduction is somewhat atypical of Paul. This particular introduction describes the intense suffering that Paul underwent for the sake of his ministry, as well as the comfort he received from God. While it primarily functions to make the Corinthians sympathetic toward Paul's arguments, it also offers great consolation to all believers who suffer for the sake of the gospel, even referring to the Lord himself as "the God of all comfort." Moreover, it encourages those who suffer to learn from their experience how to comfort others who suffer.

Closing

The closing is quite brief, consisting of a few general exhortations and a final greeting.

Main Body

The main body takes up the bulk of the letter, and includes five major subsections: a defense of Paul's conduct in 1:12-2:11; a defense of Paul's ministry in

2:12–7:1; instructions regarding the collection for Jerusalem in 7:2–9:15; a continuing defense of Paul's ministry in 10:1–12:13; and a discussion of Paul's upcoming visit in 12:14–13:10.

Paul's Conduct. In 1:12–2:11 Paul defended his conduct in two matters. First, he explained why he had not visited Corinth as he had previously planned. And second, he addressed a wrong that had been done to him by one of the Corinthians. Evidently, after Paul had made known his plans to visit Corinth, a conflict had arisen between him and some within the Corinthian church. As a result, Paul knew that if he were to visit them, he would have to be confrontational, perhaps even disciplinary. So, as an act of forbearance on Paul's part, he changed his travel plans. A number of Christians in Corinth failed to realize that this was an act of mercy and were quite offended by his withdrawal. Some even questioned his credibility.

In what may have been a related matter, Paul also addressed the situation of a particular believer who had wronged him and who had subsequently been disciplined by the church. Paul assured the church that he had forgiven the man and that the discipline had been sufficient. And he instructed the church to reaffirm their love for the man and to restore him to their fellowship.

Paul's Ministry. In 2:12–7:1 Paul addressed a far more serious issue — certain individuals within the Corinthian church continued to doubt Paul's apostleship. As we have already seen, Paul had addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians. But from his words in 2 Corinthians, it is obvious that a number of Christians in Corinth had not repented of their error. So, Paul provided an extensive defense of the nature of his ministry, proclaiming that his call and his power both came from God, and making it clear that to reject his apostleship had grave consequences.

In fact, in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 he went so far as to suggest that those who doubted his apostleship were not even saved:

God ... gave us the ministry of reconciliation... God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them... We are ... Christ's ambassadors ... Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Those who have not been reconciled to God still bear the weight of their own sin — they have not been forgiven. And of course, Jesus himself taught that to reject his ambassador is to reject him as well. As the Lord told his ministers in Luke 10:16:

The one who listens to you listens to me, and the one who rejects you rejects me (Luke 10:16).

This subject was so important that Paul spent much of this letter addressing it in various ways. The last thing he wanted was for the Corinthians he loved so dearly to perish because they refused his gospel.

Collection. The third subsection consists of instructions regarding the collection for Jerusalem and spans 7:2–9:15. The Christians in Jerusalem were in great need at this point in time because of a famine in Judea. In response to this crisis, the Corinthian church, along with many other churches, had committed to sending funds to aid them. But the Corinthians had failed to finish collecting their contribution. So, Paul engaged in a lengthy discussion of the value of sacrifice for the sake of others. He appealed first to the exemplary giving of the Macedonian churches who gave even more than they could afford to give and were happy for the honor of serving in this manner. He also appealed to the example of Christ who gave up his very life that the Corinthians might enjoy abundance. Beyond this, he encouraged the Corinthians that God would bestow great blessings on them if they followed through with their prior intentions.

Paul's Ministry. In 10:1–12:13 Paul returned to defending his apostleship. It would seem that the Corinthian Christians highly valued in their leaders those traits that were well respected in the world, and because Paul did not exhibit these traits, many in Corinth discounted his teaching and authority. For example, the Corinthians apparently valued trained speakers and expected their leaders to draw a salary of sorts. Because Paul did not practice professional rhetoric, and because he chose to support himself financially while in Corinth so as not to burden the church, he was considered inferior.

In response to this attitude, Paul laid out his qualifications, both to assert the legitimacy of his ministry and to rebuke the Corinthians for holding to improper values. Among other things, he mentioned his tremendous sacrifices for the sake of the gospel and his experience of viewing heaven itself. Moreover, he went on the offensive, attacking and discrediting the false apostles who spread their lies in Corinth, but who nevertheless carried earthly credentials that the Corinthians respected. Of these men, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:13:

Men like this are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as Christ's apostles (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Paul made it clear that they were unbelievers and liars, and that those who listened to them did so at their own peril.

Upcoming Visit. Finally, in 12:14–13:10 Paul turned to the matter of his upcoming visit. He was now planning to come to Corinth regardless of whether or not it would mean judgment upon the church. Sadly, he feared that he would find many professed believers who had been warned about their grievous sins but who had refused to repent. Paul instructed his readers to examine themselves to make sure that they were in the faith. Listen to his words in 13:5:

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves. Or do you not perceive that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless, of course, you fail the test (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Paul knew that many who professed faith did not actually trust in Christ for the salvation. So, he earnestly preached the gospel of repentance, faith, and salvation to the Corinthian church in the hopes that his opponents would become genuine followers of Jesus Christ.

Having looked briefly at the background and content of Paul's canonical letters to the Corinthians, we should turn our attention to our third concern: Paul's theological outlooks as reflected in 1 and 2 Corinthians.

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

So far in this lesson we have reviewed several specific problems that Paul tackled in 1 and 2 Corinthians. And we have suggested that the Corinthians' poor understanding of eschatology significantly influenced all these problems. So, as we have done in our previous lessons on the heart of Paul's theology, we will now turn our attention to the ways in which Paul used his doctrine of the last days, or his eschatology, to correct his audience.

As we have noted throughout these lessons, Paul's eschatology was rooted in common Jewish outlooks on God's design for history. During the first century, the dominant Jewish understanding was that the Old Testament divided history into two ages: "this age" and "the age to come." "This age" was the present age of sin, judgment and death, while "the age to come" was the future age of ultimate blessings for God's people and final judgment against his enemies. The event that marked the transition between the ages was the coming of the "Messiah" or "Christ." When the Messiah came, it was thought that he would end this age and begin the age to come.

Of course, followers of Christ, such as Paul and the other apostles, recognized that history had not unfolded in precisely the manner Jewish theology had expected. Beyond all doubt, Jesus was the Messiah and he inaugurated the age to come. But he did not completely fulfill all the promised blessings. In short, we live in a time when the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in others. Ours is a time when the present age and the age to come exist simultaneously. During this overlap of the ages, although we enjoy many blessings of the age to come, we also must recognize the strife and hardship that continue to exist in the age of sin and death.

Paul knew that this pattern of eschatology created difficulties for the early church because it left them guessing at how much of the age to come was already present. In previous lessons, we have seen that some believers took rather extreme positions on this matter. For example, the Thessalonians developed what we called "overheated eschatology," believing that in the immediate future Jesus would do away with the present age and consummate the age to come in all its fullness. As a result, they considered life in this age to be largely unimportant. The Galatians, in turn, acted as if the age to come had not arrived in any significant way. We labeled their error "under-realized eschatology."

As we look closely at the problems in Corinth and at Paul's responses to them, we will see that the Corinthians also had greatly misevaluated the plan of the ages. In their minds, the present age of sin and death had largely ceased to exist, leaving them free to

enjoy the full bounty of the age to come. Their error was one of “over-realized eschatology.” So, as Paul spoke to the specific issues in their church, he taught them how to evaluate and live their lives properly during the overlap of the “already” and the “not yet.”

Although Paul addressed the Corinthians’ problems in numerous ways, we will focus on three elements of his eschatology that regularly surfaced in these letters: faith, especially with regard to the preeminence of Christ; hope in the future rather than in the present world; and love as a critical element of Christian living. Let’s look first at the ways Paul emphasized the preeminence of Christ to cure the imbalances in the Corinthians’ faith.

FAITH

In this lesson we have seen that the Corinthians’ pride and arrogance caused many problems in the church. In large part, this arrogance developed because the Corinthians had lost sight of the exaltation of Christ as Lord over all and Savior of all. With regard to Christ’s Lordship they de-emphasized his role in consummating and ruling his kingdom.

Christ as Lord

As odd as it may sound, some Corinthian Christians acted as if Christ had brought in the kingdom of God in nearly all its fullness so that they were already enjoying many if not most of the eternal blessings that God has in mind for believers. They also acted as if Jesus had appointed them as rulers over his newly established earthly kingdom. This appears to have been the opinion especially of those Corinthians who wielded authority in the church. They imagined that Christ had given them this power because they were wiser and more spiritual than the others. And they looked down on others who, in their eyes, had not merited such great rewards. Listen to the way Paul rebuked them for this kind of thinking in 1 Corinthians 4:7-10:

Who considers you superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not? You are already filled, already rich — you have begun to reign without us... We are fools because of Christ, but you are so wise in him! We are weak, but you are strong! You are glorious, but we are dishonorable (1 Corinthians 4:7-10).

In this passage Paul mocked the arrogant thinking of these Corinthians. They thought they had *merited* status and honor, but in fact it was Christ who had given them these things. They knew that Christ’s loyal followers would reign on the restored earth with him one day, but they foolishly thought that their reign had begun even though Christ had not yet returned as king. And they claimed for themselves wisdom and strength and glory that rightly belonged to Christ alone.

In certain respects, these errors are understandable. The Corinthians rightly assessed that believers will reign on the new earth after Christ has restored it. And they properly understood that believers receive eternal rewards based on their actions in this life. Since they believed that the final state of the kingdom was basically at hand, it was natural for them to think that they had already been glorified and had received their rewards. Moreover, since Christ was nowhere to be seen in this supposedly restored kingdom, it would have been easy for them to downplay his ongoing role as ruler.

But whether or not their errors are understandable, they were not acceptable. In fact, they were wreaking havoc in the church, largely by dishonoring and damaging those believers who were not in positions of influence. So, to correct this problem, Paul emphasized the fact that the age to come had not yet been realized in all its fullness. No one had “begun to reign.” Everyone still awaited Christ’s return.

Christ as Savior

The Corinthians also failed to exalt Christ by devaluing his role as Savior. Specifically, they overlooked the fact that only through union with Christ do believers receive the blessings of the age to come, including spiritual gifts and honor. Through union with Christ, believers share in Christ’s identity and merit. And because of this, God looks upon them as if they were Christ himself so that he grants them the status, honor and gifts they enjoy in the church.

But in the minds of many Corinthians, gifts and honor were earned by individual believers. They thought that if a Christian had influence and status, it was because that person deserved these things. And if a believer lacked such earthly prominence, it was because he or she was an inferior Christian.

So, Paul responded to their error by emphasizing another aspect of his eschatology that highlighted the importance of Christ, namely the doctrine of the union between Christ and believers. Listen to the way Paul made his case in 2 Corinthians 5:15-17:

[Christ] died on behalf of all, in order that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died on their behalf and was raised again. Therefore, we no longer know anyone according to the flesh... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old things are gone; behold, new things have come (2 Corinthians 5:15-17).

Paul insisted that believers not evaluate themselves or others according to fleshly or worldly standards. Rather, he wanted them to view all believers as people who are united to Christ, and to show one another the honor and love that they would show to the Lord himself. In fact, Paul brought up this line of reasoning again and again in his letters to the Corinthians. Listen to his counsel on this matter in 1 Corinthians 8:11-12:

For the weak one is destroyed by your knowledge, the brother for whom Christ died. When you sin against your brother and strike his conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:11-12).

Paul taught that because believers are united to Christ, to sin against a believer is to sin against Christ. And he raised the same kind of argument when he instructed the privileged not to shame the poor during the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:24-27 he wrote:

[Jesus] said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this ... in memory of me" ... Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:24-27).

Paul reminded the Corinthians that Jesus had given himself for all of them, not just for the wealthy and powerful. And he reminded them that it was only through Christ, whom all believers possess equally, that they received the blessings of the age to come. Finally, he made the point that to participate in the Supper in an unworthy manner, that is, to mistreat the poor or other believers during the Supper, was to sin against Jesus himself.

Throughout his letters to the Corinthians, Paul continually pointed to union with Christ as a basis for honoring, valuing and ministering to other believers. He did this in 1 Corinthians 12:12 when he wrote that believers rely on one another in the same way that parts of the human body do. He did it again in 2 Corinthians 1:5 when he encouraged believers that they would share in Christ's comfort. Time would fail us if we mentioned every way that Paul expounded upon these ideas in his letters to the church in Corinth, so we will have to be content with summarizing his thinking as follows: Believers participate in the blessings of the age to come only through union with Christ; when we recognize this, we can give proper glory to Christ and avoid many sins rooted in arrogance.

HOPE

A second way Paul attempted to correct the Corinthians' eschatology was by reminding them of the provisional nature of their blessings. Even though the Corinthians were enjoying many blessings of the age to come, the present age of sin and death had still not passed away. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:31, Paul wrote that:

The form of this world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31).

He made a similar statement in 1 Corinthians 2:6 when he wrote:

The rulers of this age ... are being cut off (1 Corinthians 2:6).

And in 1 Corinthians 15:50, he added:

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Of course, the Corinthians knew that they were of flesh and blood, so this statement indicated to them that they could not, in their current state of existence, receive their full eternal rewards. Similarly, Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 4:8 that the Corinthians had not yet begun to reign with Christ. That would be another aspect of life in the fullness of the age to come.

Perhaps the longest argument Paul made that applies directly to the doctrine of hope can be found in 1 Corinthians 15. There, Paul refuted those who denied the future bodily resurrection of all believers. As we have seen, at least some Corinthian church members believed that they were already enjoying most if not all of the benefits of the age to come. They were so sure that all the benefits of the kingdom had already arrived, they believed they had nothing left to look for. But in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul made it very clear that some huge events must still occur, and some incredibly significant changes must still take place before the age to come arrives at all its fullness. He summarized these changes in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24:

In Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ is the firstfruits; and then those that are in him at his coming. Then it will be the end, when he gives the kingdom to God the Father, when he has cut off all rule, authority and power (1 Corinthians 15:22-24).

Believers must be raised from the dead just as Christ had been, but their resurrection will not take place until Christ returns. Then, they will spend eternity with Him in their glorified bodies. His return, and their resurrection, will signal the end of the present age with its rule, and authority, and power.

Since Christ had not yet returned, and the resurrection had not yet taken place, the Corinthians, despite what they thought, were not yet living in glory. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:19:

If we have been hoping in Christ for this life only, we are more pitiable than all men (1 Corinthians 15:19).

By speaking plainly of the provisional nature of the present world, Paul hoped to give the Corinthians a realistic perspective on their lives and their church. And he hoped that this new perspective would cause them to repent of their arrogance and sin.

LOVE

The last of Paul's theological outlooks that we will mention is the importance of love. Generally, we think of love as the summary of the whole law of God, or as the greatest commandment, but not as an element of eschatology. Nevertheless, while it is true that love is just as important in the present age as it is in the age to come, it is also

true that for Paul, love was what we might call an eschatological virtue. That is to say, it was a key element in his theology of the last days.

Consider, for example, Paul's argument about the abiding value of love, found in his famous "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13. In verses 8-10 of that chapter he wrote:

Love never dies. But if there are prophecies, they will pass away. If there are tongues, they will cease. If there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know only partially, and we prophesy only partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away... And now remain faith, hope and love, these three, but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).

His point was that many aspects of life in the present age will not continue when the age to come arrives in all its fullness. Neither prophecy nor gifts of knowledge will be of any use when the things of which they speak are right in front of our faces. In the same way, even high Christian virtues like faith and hope will have no real place in the fullness of the age to come. Of all of the spiritual gifts and Christian virtues that Paul mentions in this chapter, only love will continue to be manifested and treasured in the fullness of the age to come. We love now and we will love then. We are loved now and we will be loved then. Love itself is a participation in the blessings of the age to come. Actually, it is the chief expression of those blessings.

But how did Paul apply the eschatological virtue of love to the problems in Corinth? Well we have already seen a number of the ways he did this. For example, he encouraged those believers with greater knowledge to abstain from eating in idols' temples for the sake of the weak Christians who might be encouraged by this behavior to engage in idolatry. He introduced the subject with these words in 1 Corinthians 8:1:

Concerning food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge; knowledge causes arrogance, but love edifies (1 Corinthians 8:1).

In other words, his argument about not eating idol food was really an argument about how to love.

Paul also spoke strongly of love when defending his apostleship. For instance, when explaining why he ministered as he did, he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15:

Christ's love controls us. We are convinced of this, that one died for all, therefore all died. And he died for all in order that the ones who live would no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

The most explicit way in which Paul applied these ideas about love to the problems in Corinth was in his instructions regarding spiritual gifts. Although the Holy Spirit had gifted the Corinthians in tremendous ways, the pride of those with more spectacular gifts, such as tongues and prophecy, led them to devalue many who had less dramatic gifts. And one of the ways Paul hoped to remedy this situation was by pointing

out that all gifts, spectacular and otherwise, are useless and annoying if they are not exercised in love. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophecy, and I know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but I do not have love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-2).

Prophecy, tongues, supernatural knowledge, and miracle-working faith all seem impressive when evaluated from a worldly point of view. But in reality, they are given for the spiritual benefit of believers, not for their worldly value or experiential pleasure. Unless they are used lovingly, spiritual gifts do not confer spiritual blessings. Only when used in love did these gifts mitigate the suffering and death of the present age by allowing the church to participate in the blessings of the age to come.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the church of Corinth. We have reviewed the background to his relationship with this church, as well as the content of his canonical letters to them. Finally, we have seen how Paul applied the heart of his theology to their problems, calling on believers to reevaluate their over-realized eschatology and thereby to repent of their sin, to learn humility, to honor one another, and to hope and strive for the future state of the kingdom of God.

As we consider how Paul handled the Corinthian church, we realize that his eschatology was an essential element of his solutions to their problems, and also that it can instruct us today. Many Christians still think more highly of themselves than they ought to think, still reflect on their gifts with pride, and still orient their lives around their own needs and desires. Churches today continually struggle with divisions and factions, and with sexual sin. And some even treat the revelation of God's prophets and apostles, such as Paul, with disregard or even contempt. But Christ did not call Paul as his ambassador in order that we might ignore him, and Christ did not live and die for us only that we might content ourselves with this present fallen world. As we listen to the heart of Paul's theology, it exhorts us, just as it did the Corinthians, to love one another and to focus on Christ as we wait the consummation of the ages at his return.

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The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
FOUR

Paul and the Corinthians
Faculty Forum



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Four: Paul and the Corinthians

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Reggie M. Kidd

Students
Graham Buck
Rob Griffith

Question 1:

How well did Paul really know his readers?

Student: Reggie, Paul spent a lot of time traveling during his ministry and we base a lot of our interpretation of his letters on the fact that we think he really knew his readers intimately so that he could kind of custom craft his letters to their particular circumstances. Did he really have a chance to get to know the people that well or were his relationships more just superficial?

Dr. Kidd: Well that's a good question to ask, Graham, and it's worth wondering about because if he doesn't, in fact, have the relationships that he seems to have or aspired to, well then it is hard to take this pastoral side of him quite as seriously. But it really does look like he worked hard to develop relationships within the cities that he ministered into. In fact, I think that was one of the lessons that he learned from the first missionary journey, was that these relationships are really important. In the first missionary journey he gets bounced from town to town largely because he is not able to establish the deep, lasting relationships in the cities. And in the second missionary journey, that does look like it's a change in philosophy, and so you have him staying in Lydia's home in Philippi, for instance, and in Corinth he works with his hands. And he winds up working with Priscilla and Aquila, and, you know, the workshop back then was not like, you know, going to a factory, punching your clock, you know, and the union boss making sure you get your work done and not talk. This would have been a family shop, and people would have been coming in and they would have been talking a lot.

Corinth, the book of Acts says he lived there for 18 months and he had plenty of time to develop relationships there. Later on he'll stay in Ephesus for what, three years, and while he is ministering there then people go out from him. So he does stay where he can for as long as he can, to not just get individuals saved but to get a church really grounded and founded. And even in the places where, in the first missionary journey he didn't get a long chance to stay, he saw, he went back to those cities after he got to Derby because he feel like it was important for them to get a church structure in place. And in the second missionary journey, he goes back to one of those cities where Timothy was from, and he felt like he had gotten to know this young man well

enough in the first missionary journey to grab him and incorporate him into his ministry.

All the way through his ministry, he is not traveling by himself. He is traveling with other people. He constantly lives his theology in relationship, and people are going out from him and coming to churches. And people who are leaders of these churches are coming back to him. And one of the ways that you can tell that he really aspires to relationship, and to minister out of relationship, is the two letters that he writes to churches that he'd never been to: [these] are Colossians — well it's three letters because he writes two letters to the church of Colossae, Colossians and Philemon, and the third letter to the church at Rome. The two letters that he writes to the churches — Philemon he writes to Philemon himself — but when he writes to the church at Colossae precisely because he's never been there, he mentions every person that he knows that's in that church. Same thing with the letter to the Romans, he is looking to help them come together as a church, and he has this whole chapter of greetings to people at in the church at Rome. So he is keenly interested in relationships. He lives them as much as he can and he will, even in letter writing itself, he will try to establish relationships that he doesn't yet have.

Student: So, Paul is not like just some sort of itinerant preacher who goes there for like a couple days. He really puts down roots?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, again because he is looking to build a church. He is not looking for people to just sign a pledge card and then him just go on. The whole process of traveling would have been slow — walking, going on ship — and his world was just a very much more social world than what we might think about today of missionaries just kind of flying in, you know, getting a big crowd together and then going onto the next one, very different pace and a very different relational network that he is working out of.

Question 2:

Why did the Corinthians have so many problems?

Student: So Reggie, considering how much time that he spent in Corinth, you know, you look through his letters and they are pretty messed up. I mean, what is it about Corinth specifically that caused them to have so much difficulty or are basically all churches just like that?

Dr. Kidd: That's a good question. Probably if we could know all the churches we would find a pretty deep pile of stuff as well. But Corinth does seem to be particularly exotic when it comes to the sin scale and I don't know exactly all that goes into that. Corinth had a reputation. I mean to "Corinthiate" was to act out sexually as far as other Greeks were concerned. It was a port city. It was a very wealthy city. You had to go through Corinth. You didn't have to but it was a path of choice to go through

Corinth whether going from East to West as opposed to sailing around the Southern Isthmus. And so there was plenty of opportunity for misbehaving in Corinth and because it was a wealthy city and it looks like there were a significant number of wealthy Christians. There were ways for that wealth to work its way into the church's sense of self-importance.

Student: It's almost like you've got to watch out when you have too much money or too much time because you will find yourself getting into trouble.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, it could be. Well and it was the center of power too because it was a Roman colony and had a Roman governor in place and it wasn't just wealthy but it was new wealth. You know, the city had been destroyed by the Romans and then rebuilt and it was within a hundred years of Paul's having been there and there were still lots of...it was a city on the way up. So yeah, whenever you have a prosperous bustling metropolis...

Student: So really we are just talking about a lot of cultural influences that they weren't able just to shelter themselves from or have. Would you say that their theology of their understanding just wasn't strong enough for them to keep their heads on straight?

Dr. Kidd: Well, and part of the theology problem was a basic misunderstanding about how much God's promises had been fulfilled and a confusion about the spiritual nature of the promises and the physical prosperity and power that the Corinthians enjoyed. So there was some crossing of signals between sort of cultural success and equating that with spiritual success. And then, you know, what happens often is you baptize your sins and it goes downhill from there.

Student: So, Corinth is really kind of a warning to a lot of us who find ourselves in prosperous and wealthy nations?

Dr. Kidd: Yes, it really is and I mean there are those of us who live in prosperous Western cities, we read the letter to the Corinthians and we go, "Oh my goodness, he is writing to us."

Question 3:

Are there similarities between the divisions in Corinth and modern denominations?

Student: You know Reggie, in Corinth there seemed to be a lot of partisan divisions going on. You've got people saying, "I'm of Cephus", "I'm of Paul", "I'm of Apollo," and some other people are like, "Oh, I'm of Jesus." Well, how would you compare what is going on in Corinth with say like modern denominationalism or is there even a connection?

Dr. Kidd: Well, there probably is a connection. You know when we were talking about Galatians we were talking about a group of people who had what we called an under-realized eschatology and part of that meant for those folks, you know, they didn't have a sense of the security of their salvation. They weren't sure that the work of Christ on the cross had done enough. But one of the things that was really apparent to Paul was that their sense of belonging was threatened as well. There is the question of which Jerusalem should you have loyalty to, and are you really in the family of God? And part of what Paul did with them to bring them into a more realized sense of eschatology is, "You know what guys, you are part of the family don't worry about it. The Israel of God, you are already there. There's a place for you at the table."

Now, the situation is really different in Corinth because these people think that they are king's kids. They think that they have arrived, they think that the portals of Heaven have been opened up and all of the spiritual blessings have been poured out on them and so they, you know, they've got the tongues, they've got the word of knowledge, they've got the prophecy, they've got the power of stuff going on. And what has happened is that they in the Aggregate in Corinth think that like, "We are it. We have got this special revelation from God. We've got it going." And because they are still sinful and in their flesh, they are going like, "But you know you and I got a little bit more than like Rob over here." So their sense of having arrived, of being king's kids, of being like rich spiritually at everybody else's expense winds up being not just about what we Corinthians are so special but we have these little sub groups in Corinth that are very special. And part of what Paul is doing in this whole letter is reminding them that you Corinthians are no more special than everybody else in the church. So, he writes makes a point of uniting them with all the saints outside of Corinth. And that's a great lesson for us because what has happened over time in the history of the church is denominations have formed. Often it's political. Often it's people just not being able to get along. Often it's over substantive matters of interpretation about what's really important in Christian doctrine. And often those denominational divides are very important to preserve particular doctrines that need to be argued for and articulated well. But what can happen is the same over-realized sense of we are the special people who see things that other people don't.

And I think what Paul would invite us to, as he invites the Corinthians, is to not say, "Well, I'm of..." — whatever our denomination equivalent would be — "...I'm of Paul" and you know, some denominations do ironically get more of their bearings out of Paul's writings. Or "I'm of Peter." Well, it so happens there are some denominations that pay kind of more attention to Peter and the gospel tradition and the gospels that we think were written by Peter or at his behest. Then you know, other groups are kind of like, "Well, I'm of John" and you know, and have kind of a more mystical sense of Christianity. And what is really interesting is that each of those corporate expressions does have a certain embodiment of Christian truth that's really kind of very special. But when they become these little cliques that aren't aware of the rest of the body of Christ much less appreciative of how dependent we all are on each other it gets to be really quite ugly. So yeah, I think there is a lot that we can

learn about how to be faithful to the denominational heritage that has shaped us and how to preserve the good that's in it but also how to be charitable towards other Christian expressions where other doctrines or other practices are more elevated over our own. And to realize that we are all part of a large house, the body of Christ, the church worldwide.

Question 4:

Should modern denominations work toward reunification with each other?

Student: And it seems though as we look at what he is writing about the body of Christ and how he talks about equipping saints in specific ways with a specific purpose but that purpose is not for individual gratification. It's for mutual edification and it's for building up others who aren't equipped in that way. And it seems to me that if we apply that to what we've done with denominations that maybe I mean there is a role for a greater ecumenism, there's a role where denominations need to be working together more. Would you agree with that or should we stay on our street corners and not have potlucks together or whatever?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I do think that for Paul the idea of there being really one church in God's eyes is an important one. That comes to fullest expression in Ephesians 4, "One Lord, one faith, and one baptism." And I think what we will see in the letter to the Ephesians is for Paul it's very important that there is a living house that God is indwelling made up of Jews and Gentile, made into one new man in Christ and together presented to the Father. And Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free all living together, striving together for the unity and bond of peace that the spirit gives us is for Paul a sign to the principalities and powers, as he says in Ephesians 3:10 that their day is done, that together people who belong to Jesus are a sign of the great reconciliation between heaven and earth that God has effected.

So I think it does make it incumbent upon us as believers to find ways to cross the "t's" and dot the "i's" and be as careful as we can theologically and yet also respect the fact that in the providence of God, in the course of history, churches have not crossed their "t's" and dotted their "i's" all the same. And sometimes we have to look across those confessional boundaries with some charity and we can't do everything together. But we can pray together, we can work together. We can work together to find places where we can make a common cause. For instance, with some churches, because I know that they have enough of common loyalty to Scripture and to the narrative of biblical history, we could work together in evangelistic enterprises. Other churches that I think are a lot softer on doctrinal distinctives, even biblical authority, the necessity of regeneration, and matters like that. Well, in terms of spiritual ventures, well we really don't have much in common at all. But we can work together for matters of mercy and social justice and contribution to the broader general good in our community.

Question 5:

Is denominationalism a sin?

Student: So, what would you say to the individual that would say denominationalism is a sin? I mean, on these grounds? 'Cause it seems what we have done is we have created these like homogenous subgroups. And you and I don't get along so instead of us hammering out together or learning to live in love despite the fact that you and I have a disagreement, whatever topic, what we do is agree to disagree and we go our own ways. Then we go find other people who agree with us and so our churches then end up being homogenous subgroups of Christianity and so somebody might pipe up and say, "Because of this, you know, I think denominationalism is a sin." How would you respond to that?

Dr. Kidd: Well, I think that C.S. Lewis gives us some very good perspective at the beginning of his book *Mere Christianity*. He talks about God's house being this great hall and there being a common life that we can all share living in the great hall. But then he goes, you know, real intimacy, the real ability to be comfortable lies in what goes on in the off rooms where there are, you know, there are places that you can sit and you can have these long and extended conversations. I think it's helpful to have that sort of paradigm in mind where the church at large is a great house with a great hall. And at the same time there are necessary rooms off to the side where subgroups of the larger church live together and work together more closely because we speak the same language and because again over the history of the church really important doctrinal disagreements have emerged. And we have just not found a way to have perfect ecclesiastical harmony over those doctrines and it has seemed better in the providence of God for these denominations to exist as separate entities but when it can work well when they recognize that there are other expressions that they may really, really disagree with and there may be real problems with. And yet when the confession is, "Jesus is Lord and his word is truth. And I'm a sinner; you are a sinner," there is a possibility for relationships to exist and for us to find a common cause. Again, some of it very deeply spiritual and some of it, just you know, I don't know why you see things that way.

Student: So for Paul it really does all boil down to charity?

Dr. Kidd: Well, what he says is — I like what he says — in Ephesians, "Speaking the truth in love." And sometimes there is some burn on one side of that or the other. It's not a love at the expense of truth. But it's also not a commitment to truth, just an "I'm going to blow you off because we don't agree on everything."

Question 6:

Should congregations seek outside counsel to solve problems?

Student: So Reggie, we learn from Paul that he actually found out about the problems in Corinth not directly from the people in Corinth but actually from the

House of Chloe. She sent a letter or somebody from the house sent a letter. And my question is, when is it appropriate for a congregation to seek outside help for their own internal struggles and how valuable is it for us to be connected with outside churches?

Dr. Kidd: You know Rob, that's great stuff. That's really important. It looks like the church sent a letter and in chapter 7 is where you start to get the things. It's where Paul starts to deal with the questions that the church has asked. Chloe and Chloe's people seem to be the ones that have brought the letter and all the stuff that Paul deals with up to chapter 7 are Paul dealing with, "Okay now here's what I understand and from Chloe's explanation of what has been going on; so let me take those up first." So there are kind of two questions here. When does the church need to say we need help? And then when can individuals in the church speak on their own behalf about what is going on to people who can help? I think what is really helpful to note here is like, Chloe's people didn't just go off and go whining to Paul and tattling on everybody else. There was enough mutual submission in the church in Corinth where they came together and said, "We can't figure this out, and we need help."

Student: So, it was a sign of humility?

Dr. Kidd: There was a step towards humility. So, you know, I don't know if there is a hard and fast answer when a church comes to that point. But what really is helpful to note here is that as messed up as this church was, as arrogant and selfish as its corporate ethos does seem to be, they did understand that there was somebody up the line that they could talk with. And I think it's incumbent upon every church to be somehow somehow connected to the rest of the body of Christ so that we don't become our own little personality cult and not have any way out of, you know, serious controversy other than just splitting.

Student: For some churches, I mean, that's easy 'cause they're already existing within a more hierarchical structure. But what about churches who are more independent like, you know, some denominations are more like associations of autonomous churches? What are they supposed to do?

Dr. Kidd: Well, it's funny. My own persuasion is that there are different ways that churches have organized themselves, each one of those ways more hierarchical like Episcopalian, Lutheran, Catholic churches, more Presbyterian which are more... Well, I'll go to the other end where they are more congregational and they have really loose associations with other churches. And then in the middle is a more Presbyterian system where you have local elders but then those churches are officially in submission to other churches of that same denomination and you've got a checks and balances. Now, each one of those is trying to honor certain genuine scriptural values, the oneness of the whole body of Christ in the more hierarchical the importance of the local church and the congregational. And in the middle the Presbyterian system, this recognition that given sin, there needs to be checks and balances. But also part of my own persuasion is the Holy Spirit can be locked out of any of those and the Holy

Spirit can force his way in all of them. So you can go to churches of the different kinds of ecclesiologies, and you can see, you know, it's working here because Jesus is in the house and the Holy Spirit is working or no matter how good it looks on paper, it's not happening.

Student: Well, thinking of churches that are more congregational or independent and there are some that I have been to that are fiercely individual that would say that to go outside of the local congregation is to go against the Word of God.

Dr. Kidd: One of the ways that churches that are more on that congregational end find of compensating for the fact that they don't have formal ties elsewhere, happens lie in the hearts and the minds and persuasions of the pastors and the leaders who recognize that we need outside counsel. And what often happens in those churches is that there are informal lines of connection, whether it's with old seminary buddies, or whether it's with people that pastors have gotten to know over times from other denominations that can be a council of counselors. And there are kind of an infinity of associational connections and web kind of relationships that can bring some sort of moderation to all that.

Student: So, what you are saying is that there definitely is a necessity that before that interconnectedness outside of the congregation could get. You are not saying that all you need is the Holy Spirit and you can get it right?

Dr. Kidd: No, the Holy Spirit uses these relationships to bring about, to keep the worst possible scenario from happening of just this disillusion and this disengagement, and just falling off the face of the earth.

Student: So, then in Paul's response to both Chloe's household and to the letter that the Corinthians sent, we sort of have kind of on the other side a model for us for how we should respond to people of other churches or other denominations when they come to us for help.

Dr. Kidd: Like, what's that model look like?

Student: Like you know, on the one end if we are the ones having the problems we need to be humble enough to look outside of ourselves. And if somebody else comes to us asking for our help, there is humility as well that says, "Yes, I will help you. Whether or not we have full agreement on doctrinal issues or what have you that I love you enough in the Lord to desire your good and I will help you no matter what."

Dr. Kidd: Yeah and one of the things I'd be looking for, and it happens, is people come to you with a complaint or a story about what's going on in their church. And one of the things that I find myself wondering is, okay, is the person, are they just a lone ranger with a line that really needs to be talked about with folks in the body first? I mean, that's the pattern here is there was enough of the consensus that we

have a problem. And then Chloe and Chloe's people are delegated. And what I want to see is what I would...sometimes people are just wounded and hurt and they need somebody outside and they are not looking to gossip or slam. They are just looking for perspective on how to deal with a very difficult situation in the church. But what I am looking for is not just pulling people out and disabling them from being able to make a contribution positively to the church that they are coming from.

Question 7:

How should Christians respond to those who are weaker in faith?

Student: Reggie, one of the things that Paul kind of talks about in the letter is dealing with the issue of the “weaker brother”, somebody who kind of stumbles over the liberty that other believers have. How should we respond to the weaker brother? In what ways should we love on them and in what ways might we need to push them?

Dr. Kidd: Graham, when it comes to the weaker brother in the matter of liberty and the weaker brother's problem with your exercising certain kind of liberty, we need to distinguish some things. It's not a question of whether the weaker brother is offended. Paul's concern is when the stronger brother could lead the weaker brother by the stronger brother's example to do something before the weaker brother's conscience is itself free to do that thing. So the stronger brother, the person who feels freedom, has an even greater responsibility. It's not will my behavior offend. My question is...beyond the question of whether what I do might bother somebody, that's just really not the question. Now, there are questions of whether my behavior offends people and that's just a matter of consideration and love. But that's kind of a different. That's really kind of a different question. But when my behavior takes somebody into a place where they could wind up doing what I'm doing only their conscience the whole time is saying, I shouldn't be doing this. I should be doing this. Then I have a responsibility to gauge or to pull back. Now, one of the things that can happen is the weaker brother can come up and say basically, “You are going to offend me, so you just can't do it,” or “I just couldn't handle your doing that because then I just might do it and therefore you can't do it.” It's kind of playing this victim role and there I really need to listen.

I have a good friend who says, “Whenever you come under attack, you need to listen for the Lord.” And sometimes there is a direct correlation with what the attacker is saying and sometimes it has nothing to do with what the attacker is saying. But when that person comes to me, sometimes I really do need to heed. I need to hear this immature cry that would call upon me to say, “Okay.” Sometimes, I need to say, “You know what your problem is that you don't understand what this issue is. Now let's talk about what the Scripture says we really are free to do.” Here's one of the areas where I think it gets really important to be in fellowship and especially in leadership of a church and I've seen situations where church leader boards have

found themselves having to respond to people who say, “Well, we shouldn’t be doing ‘X’ because I am offended or I have a weaker conscience. And even though it might be okay for everybody to do it, the church shouldn’t be doing it because I can’t do it.” The church leadership, I think, is called upon to pray, really look at Scripture and see if there is some other deeper principle involved that’s not readily on the surface. And if the church leadership together, in prayer, in consultation with each other, in submission to the Word feel like, you know, we can’t be held back by this person saying, “The church can’t do ‘X’ because I can’t do ‘X’.” Sometimes they just have to go to him, try to reeducate their conscience but at some point just say, “I’m sorry but the church just can’t be held hostage to that.” So, community is really important here.

Question 8:

Why is the collection for the church in Jerusalem so important to Paul?

Student: Reggie, throughout Paul’s letters it seems that one of the things he is very concerned about is taking a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. And why is this so important to him? What’s significant about this collection and is there a modern parallel?

Dr. Kidd: Rob, I think it goes back to what we were taking about before. Paul has this understanding that what Christ has done is to reconcile Heaven and earth. And Paul is so excited about this picture of what was destroyed in the fall now being remade and those who were separated being brought back together again. In Ephesians 2, he is going to articulate the theology that had under girded the collection that he had taken up before he wrote the letter to the Ephesians. And in Ephesians, he talked about how a Jew and Gentile had been brought together and made one new man and then presented to God together by Christ. And those who were far off being brought near and the collection is about showing to the church in Jerusalem that those who were far off had been brought near.

To go back to the whole narrative stream of Scripture, God made it beautiful, set Adam and Eve at the center of it to be ones who were his priests, his glory reflectors onto the earth and they walked away. And God said, “No, I’m not going to let you walk away and I’m not going to let my beautiful creation just go into destruction.” So, he started making promises about how he was going to redeem it all again, make it new, transfigure it so that it bears his glory again. And he chooses the line of Abraham. And the promise to Abraham is that he would have a seed and that in his seed all the nations of world would bless themselves. In other words, Israel was chosen so that she could be the means by which God would fix Adam’s mess. And then the story line unfolds until Christ comes and it’s in Christ that that work is done to bring Heaven and earth back together again. To begin, if you will, the human race all over again in this Israel that’s come into her own through Christ.

Student: So, you are saying there is an eschatological factor going on here with the monies being collected and brought it. It's not just taking care of those who can't put food on the table?

Dr. Kidd: It's not just. It is but it's not just. And to go back to the Old Testament narrative line there is this note that keeps getting sounded over and over and over again about the on-looking Gentiles who will eventually be invited to the table. In Psalm 72, Solomon writes about the nations bringing their tribute to Jerusalem and he's looking ahead to the day of Messiah's rule in Jerusalem. And what Paul is doing at the very same time that he is responding in love to the acute physical needs of Jerusalem Christians who are going through famine, he is also painting a picture of this new age that has come when Israel is being the means of the light going to the nations and the nations blessing themselves.

Question 9:

Should Christians send money to churches in modern Jerusalem?

Student: Should we now ourselves be sending money over to say Jerusalem or say the Jews living in Israel since this seems to be kind of this sort of end goal? Is that what we are supposed to be doing right now?

Dr. Kidd: I think Paul, to go back to Galatians, Paul pits the earthly Jerusalem against the heavenly Jerusalem and for Paul the Jerusalem is in Heaven now. And its earthly manifestation is in what he calls the Israel of God, the church. All those who by faith in Christ now are sons and daughters of God are members of this Israel. And so, the investment in the Jerusalem that would be important to Paul is the investment in his worldwide church, the temple where God now lives. Now, it so happens that many of his children are Christian Jews living in Jerusalem. It also so happens that many of his children that are spiritually part of the Israel of God are Arab Christians living elsewhere in the historic promised land. And part of investing in the heavenly Jerusalem is to invest in the church, Jew and non-Jew, in Palestine. But the larger picture is, as we bring our tribute to building the house that is the place where God dwells, we, like Old Testament Israel, do take this similar place of being a light to the rest of the world. Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and that means it was Israel who was supposed to be doing sacrifices that symbolized their own but also the rest of the world's redemption. They were to be in the temple offering up incense that were a picture of prayers going up to God to bring redemption, not just for themselves but for the whole world as well.

And we are in that same sort of position now where our work, our prayers, our proclamation has in view God's interest in the whole of the human race. So, anything we do to care for, not just our poor but also the world's poor, is a matter of being this kingdom of priests, of being the ones who are the go-between God and his broken world and saying, "Oh Lord, how long? Lord, have mercy." And we offer those

prayers but then we also offer those works or acts. And the writer to the Hebrews does it really kind of nicely when he talks about worship that is the fruit of lips that praise God and the works of good that we do for people. So, that's kind of Hebrews way of saying something that Paul would be very much for.

Student: So, any time that we were involved in caring for ourselves, caring for other believers and especially other believers all the way around the world, we're kind of wrapped up in this mission to bring the wealth of the nations to God's house.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, and proclaiming that the day of those who were far off have now been brought near and the light has gone to the nations.

Question 10:

How is faith as intellectual content related to faith as personal trust?

Student: Reggie, at the end of the lesson you talk about faith more in terms of theological content it sounds like. But then as we start reading faith, hope, and love it's really more about personal faith or personal involvement. How do you relate those two and how are they connected?

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, the beauty of Christianity, Rob, is that those are not opposite concepts. There is faith that is my believing, my personally leaning into Christ. And it's really interesting the way Paul and John and Jesus coined this is idiom of belief not just with the object of belief but with this prepositional phrase "into" and we are called to place our whole life into the hands of Christ. And yet that's not... Christ isn't just this nebulous person that we can refashion after our own likeness. But he is the culmination of Israel's story and we know him because of the whole biblical narrative that becomes ours. And what we get laid down in Scripture are truths about who he is and what he has done and what he will do that we have to believe in in order to believe in him. So, it's good to get a chance to clarify, it's not just believing in... it's not placing our faith in a set of doctrines that save. It's placing our trust in a person but it's a person we can't know apart from the truths that are articulated about him in Scripture.

Student: So, it's this real, it's kind of a "both/and", give and take, that there is the faith which has been handed down to us and then our own personal faith that kind of come together?

Dr. Kidd: Yes and part of the linkage is — you have to go to John for it — he is the *logos*, the word of God. And we were given *logoi*, words of God, in order to know this one who is the Word of God. And it's part of the great thing about being made in the image of God that he communicates and we can receive communication and communicate as well. And we relate, you know, by touch but we also relate through word. And the great thing that church does when we come together is we relate

through touch, baptismal waters, and the wine and the bread remind us that God comes to touch our whole beings. And we relate through word as the Word of Christ dwells among us richly. So, it's a full relationship with a living being person but who becomes present to us through the words that he left behind and that he enlivenes through his Holy Spirit.

Question 11:

According to Paul, what is the great hope for Christians?

Student: Reggie, Paul kind of talks a lot about our hope for our salvation. Like we were talking before about faith, hope and love, what exactly is this final hope in exactly?

Dr. Kidd: Well, Paul talks about a commonwealth being stored up for us and he doesn't really talk much about what that is going to look like. The book of Revelation talks about the Jerusalem coming down and the New Heavens and the New Earth and the book of Revelation gives us some description. But Paul really doesn't, does he? He talks about resurrection but he kind of leaves it at that. He even is fairly reticent about talking about the believer's existence after physical death and before resurrection, what we call heaven or theologians often sometimes call it the "intermediate state". For Paul that is simply a matter of being with the Lord and some sort of continuation of fellowship but Paul doesn't really describe what the New Heavens and the New Earth are going to look like. Sometimes I wish he did but I think for him... and it's very interesting that he would do that because we know from 2 Corinthians that he was given visions. He was you know taken up into the third heaven and just shown the glory of God. But he was even told there only so much. His task is to give us what we need to know to get from here to glory and then all I can assume is that glory itself is going to be so beyond our possibility even of imaging now that his reserve is an expression of, "Just wait."

Student: So, kind of what a lot of us tend to sort of think about is this pie in the sky, if you will, kind of just sitting around.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, a Gary Larson sort of guy with wings.

Student: That sort of disembodied state that we kind of think about, that's not Paul's hope at all.

Dr. Kidd: No, his hope is for a re-embodiment. He talks about a spiritual body but by that he doesn't mean a ghostly body. He means a body that has been made vibrantly alive and reconstituted by the Holy Spirit. And if anything those bodies will have greater density. He talks about bearing the weight of glory and I think he means that quite literally in terms of its weightiness, its density, its reality and the glory is also an

image of brightness. So, I think there are just limits to what he feels it's appropriate to say in this age.

Student: And so, Christ's resurrection is not just important to him to prove who Christ is. I mean, it's important to us for our own hope.

Dr. Kidd: Yeah, for Paul his resurrection is the first fruit of our resurrection. It's the bringing of the great resurrection.

Question 12:

Why does Paul connect spiritual gifts so strongly to love?

Student: Okay Reggie, so we have talked about faith, we have talked about hope, so we have got to talk about love. And what's interesting is he connects love with spiritual gifts. And why is that so important to him? Wouldn't just be the same to say, "I have a spiritual gift and that's great. It's a great benefit." Why is love so important to him when it comes to spiritual gifts?

Dr. Kidd: Well, it seems like gifts can be exercised quite apart from whatever motive I have and for Paul the motive behind the use of the gift is important. Gifts can be used to serve myself instead of others, or gifts can be used to edify and to benefit other people. For Paul, it's important to explain to people that your gift was given to you not for you. Your gift was given to you for other people. And what was happening in Corinth was people were using their gifts to just put themselves on display to show their status and power. And so, Paul has to bring the correction of those gifts are for other people. So that's why you get in the middle of this whole discussion of spiritual gifts, chapter 12 thru chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians, this discussion of love. You guys need to understand that your motivation has to be not about you but about the people that you are called to serve. So like he says, "If I do all these things if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing." You might benefit, you know, by my display of my great spiritual prowess. But because my goal is really self-service I am really just kind of beefing up my resume by doing it. What I really have to be focused on is your good and when I'm really focused on your good, you get the good but then I also receive the benefit as well. So it's kind of ironic. People seek their own benefit by their display of their power but really all they get is the glory of the moment and they kind of come under Jesus sanction, "Well, you have your reward." But for Paul there is a greater reward of the Lord's, "Well done, my good and faithful servants," when the service that I offer is really offered because I love you as opposed to loving you in my image.

Question 13:
Why is love greater than faith and hope?

Student: At the end of that chapter he says, you know, “And these three remain: faith, hope, and love.” Why does he say the greatest of them is love?

Dr. Kidd: Well I think, when we get to glory we won't need faith. When we get to glory we won't need hope. We won't need faith because Jesus will be right there. We won't need hope because we won't have to be leaning into it saying, “Oh Lord, how long?” We will be there. What will keep going on and on and on is love. The most profound thing about Christianity and what sets it apart from everything else is that it is based on a theology that says, “Before there was anything, there was love.” There was always love between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. There was always communion. There was always an enjoyment of relationship. And if anything was destroyed at the fall...I mean, he made the creation to be a means of expressing the overflow of the intra-trinitarian relationship. He wanted that to be expressed outside of himself and so he said, “I'll make me a world, and I'll make me a man and I'll make me a woman, and I'll make them to be like me,” just creating this ever increasing dance of love and communication and communion. And what was broken at the fall was that. And the whole program of redemption has been about recreating that and making it even richer, even deeper for us knowing not just a created love but a love that has been perfected through redemption. So, love is greatest cause it's always been there and it always will be.

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