Lesson Plans for the Bible Study: “Apostle Paul 101”
Held Thursday mornings during Lent, 2020
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Lessons

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Apostle Paul 101 – Week 1
Paul’s Identity as a Jew, Greco-Roman, and Follower of Christ

Paul’s Jewish Identity

(1) Paul was a Jew who was filled with a burning love and connection to his people even after his conversion/call (see Romans 9:1-5).
(2) The Judaism into which Paul was born was a Judaism that was struggling mightily to define itself both over against and within its interaction with Greek and Roman thought and life.
(3) Paul was part of the Pharisaic branch of Judaism—a group of laity trying to apply the Mosaic Law to everyday life—“to the field and the kitchen, the bed and the street.”
(4) Pharisees had a clear expectation of resurrection and thus life after death, both of which were denied by their rivals, the Sadducees. They anticipated God’s radical intervention in this world, which would include destruction of all evil, the resurrection of the dead, final judgment, and the establishment of God’s kingdom. These elements of expectation were present in Paul throughout his life.
(5) At the heart of Paul’s Jewish community life in the diaspora was the synagogue. It not only served as the location for worship but also provided space for educational and social activities.
(6) Although Paul almost certainly spoke Aramaic and likely had knowledge of Hebrew as well, the Bible he used in his missionary work and in his writing was the Greek Old Testament usually called the Septuagint.

Paul’s Greco-Roman Identity

(1) In addition to his Jewish education, Paul had a thoroughly Hellenistic education.
(2) Paul’s education level, at a minimum, was at the social level of the retainer class—that is, those who served the needs of elites.
(3) There is some degree of debate, but most scholars maintain that Paul was a Roman citizen (see Acts 16:37-39; 22:25-29).
(4) Paul was both well educated and a craftsman or artisan, someone who worked with his hands. In Acts 18:1-3, we learn that Paul was a skenopoios, that is, a tentmaker.
(5) In the Greco-Roman world, artisans who built up a good reputation might do well financially, but artisans who moved from city to city, like Paul, probably were not able to do as well.
(6) It is quite possible that Paul learned his trade after his conversion/call experience, both to embody the radical shift that occurred when Jesus appeared to him and to make his mission possible.

(7) Paul is a prime example of what sociologists call “status inconsistency.”

**Paul’s Christian Identity**

(1) The key to Paul’s conversion account in both Acts and at least 3 references in his letter is the appearance of the crucified Jesus as the resurrected one.

(2) Jesus’ appearance to Paul was sudden and unexpected, and it was the appearance that brought about Paul’s conversion.

(3) Through the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, God called Paul to be his apostle. With the call, God gives Paul the task or mission to proclaim the good news of Christ primarily to the Gentiles.

(4) Paul’s self-understanding as an apostle is quite close to the Greco-Roman world’s understanding of the term ambassador. That is, the ambassador comes with the full authority of the sender. In four of the seven undisputed letters of Paul, he identifies himself at the beginning as an apostle. His self-understanding as an apostle lies “in, with, and under” his entire person.

(5) Paul functioned, therefore, as one sent out to announce that God was in the process through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of bringing about a new creation of life, hope, and forgiveness for all people.
Apostle Paul 101 – Week 2
Maestro of Church Networking

Paul’s Overall Strategy
As we have seen, Paul’s mission was to announce the good news of what God had done in Jesus. While the message went out first to the Jewish people, it was also for the Gentiles. To provide a structure within which his social network could grow, Paul gathered people into worshipping, serving, and supportive groupings known as “churches.” He did that gathering through formal preaching and through conversations in the workplace and home that resulted in relationships that functioned as “fictive families” or non-blood-related families. Paul nurtured his Christ-believing social network through personal visits, visits by his co-workers, letters, and a monetary collection. Paul developed a selective process regarding where he did missionary work and where he founded congregations. He wanted to do his missionary work only in new places that did not already have believers. Instead of a strategy of moving from a city to the nearest village, and then to the next village after that, he moved normally from one large city to another. He stayed usually in provincial capitals and remained long enough that at least one congregation (normally a house church) was able to function on its own, with leadership adequate for the anticipated changes and challenges after Paul left.

Paul’s Understanding of Church
(1) Paul applied the term ekklesia to the people he had gathered together who believed his message about Jesus. The essence of this meaning is the gathered people of God, not a building.
(2) Ekklesia can be used for both the local congregation and the larger network of congregations.
(3) In Paul’s mission, believers gathered in private homes. Within the cities, Paul’s major missionary territory, there were two basic kinds of housing: the domus and the insula. The domus was a private home for wealthier and more prominent people. This was the primary location for Paul’s house churches. The insula was basically an apartment building. More recent archaeological scholarship has argued that these apartments were likely used as well.
(4) Fictive family is the anthropological term used to summarize the relational dynamics within Paul’s congregations. In reality, Paul’s congregations were a mixture of blood kin and non-blood-kin.

How Did Paul Begin Congregations?
(1) House churches served as the primary—but not exclusive—setting for Paul’s preaching. Paul was also known to have preached in synagogues, lecture halls, and open-air marketplaces.
(2) Preaching led to conversation. The two places that served as important centers for speaking with people about God’s activity and mission were the workplace and the home. Given the normal hierarchy of the Greco-Roman family, often when the head of the household converted to belief in Jesus, the entire family did as well.
How Did Paul Nurture Congregations?

(1) Paul made initial and repeated visits to the congregations he helped to found. When problems arose within congregations, Paul’s preferred style was to try to deal with the problems in person.

(2) Paul developed a cadre of co-workers who not only worked with him while he was evangelizing a given city but also represented him by visiting and nurturing house churches already begun and by extending the mission to smaller communities. Examples of key associates were Titus, Timothy, Silas, and Phoebe.

(3) Paul’s letters served as substitutes for his physical presence as an apostle, just as his associates were. Paul’s letters asserted his apostolic authority by re-creating his apostolic presence with the letters’ recipients. The letters of Paul were hybrid literary works (meant to be read aloud) that resist any precise categorization. They presume and assert Paul’s authority as an apostle, and they move quickly into sophisticated arguments and biblical interpretation. At the same time, they reveal an intimacy built on common experience and common devotion to the same Lord.

(4) A fourth way that Paul built a network of believers was by taking a monetary collection from the basically Gentile congregations of his ministry. The collection was designed to be a gift from them to the Jewish congregations in Jerusalem. This earliest benevolence offering served as material relief for the economically poor Christians in Jerusalem and as a symbol of the unity of all believers scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Five Basic Components of Paul’s Letters

(1) The salutation is the greeting and includes, in order, the name of the sender(s), the name of the person(s) being addressed, and a greeting. The salutation often contains a clue to Paul’s developing argument in the letter.

(2) Immediately after the salutation, Paul offers a thanksgiving to God for the addressees and/or some other gift of God. In Galatians, the thanksgiving is missing due to Paul’s anger and eagerness to go straight to the matter at hand.

(3) The body of the letter contains Paul’s major arguments and doctrinal meat and potatoes.

(4) Following the body, you will often find an ethical section that flows out of Paul’s major arguments. This section also includes household tables of good behavior.

(5) Paul’s letters come to a conclusion with one or more of these items: a peace wish, greetings, a laundry list of instructions, and/or a benediction.
Apostle Paul 101 – Week 3
The Seven Authentic Pillar Epistles

1 Thessalonians: The End Is Near—But Not Yet
Date and location of writing—Corinth in the years 50-52 (earliest letter of Paul)
Major issue(s)—some of the people had focused so much attention on the next world that they were neglecting life and responsibilities in this world.
Main message—Paul has written a warm, intimate letter that both encourages the recipients by reminding them of who they are as children of God and what God in Christ has done for them while at the same time calling them to live today in the light of the imminent return (parousia) of Jesus.

Galatians: Free to Be Children of God
Date and location of writing—possibly Ephesus in the years 52-55
Major issue(s)—missionaries who followed Paul wanted the non-Jewish Galatian believers to be circumcised and to follow Jewish law as a prerequisite for baptism and full inclusion into the fellowship.
Main message—Paul has written his most polemical letter in which he asserts his call to be an apostle and his reassertion of the freedom of the good news of Jesus that he had originally proclaimed to the believers throughout the churches in Galatia.

1 Corinthians: Life in the Body
Date and location of writing—Ephesus sometime in the years 53-55
Major issue(s)—Paul addresses several types of spiritual elitism in the congregation. The first elitism had to do with the elevation of certain spiritual gifts over others. The second elitism had to do with charismatics who thought they had already been elevated to a resurrected state even in this life. The divisions within the larger Corinthian community may have been exacerbated by the fact that people needed to meet in smaller groups because of space considerations among house churches.
Main message—Paul addresses life in the body—both the individual body and the corporate body. Persons who believe in Jesus find that their individual bodies are also part of a corporate body, the church, a body that is not to be divided by factions, egos, or claims to superiority. All such behaviors and attitudes are to be abandoned in light of the cross of Jesus as the individual and the church seek to live in the way of agape love.

2 Corinthians: Treasure in Cracked Pots
Date and location of writing—location unknown, written 55-56
Major issue(s)—Paul’s letter serves as a defense and making the case for his authentic apostleship in the light of attacks by rival missionaries who claim to be super-apostles. Paul’s opponents look toward the broader society’s model of the leader as one who holds great honor, spiritual gifts, slick rhetorical skills, all of which give superior claim to authority.
Main message—taken as a whole, 2 Corinthians lays out Paul's understanding of his apostolic ministry from the inside. He tells us what he considers important by boasting only in weakness. For Paul, the center of ministry is the reconciling cross of Jesus. That same cross is exhibited in the suffering ministry of those called to serve in the name of Jesus. Affliction is not the sign of an unfaithful minister, but is an indication of ministry that is consonant with the ministry of Jesus.

Romans: God Justifies the Ungodly
Date and location of writing—final stay in Corinth sometime between 56-57
Major issue(s)—(1) Prepare the Romans for his visit to them, (2) Ask them to help support his new missionary work in Spain, (3) Gain acceptance for his seasoned understanding of the gospel, (4) Heal divisions between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, and (5) Ask for prayers for his trip to Jerusalem.
Main message—the only way any person (Jew or Gentile) is justified before God is by grace through faith. Universal human sinfulness is overwhelmed by God's unmerited grace revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Philippians: Citizenship in Heaven
Date and location of writing—probably from prison in Roman between 60-62
Major issue(s)—Philippi was a colony given the name “little Rome.” The issue at hand is to instill into the Philippians a strong understanding of their identity in God’s commonwealth over and above their loyalty to the earthly empire.
Main message—in Paul’s friendliest letter, he uses language with strong political implications to urge them to live in unity and to realize that their commonwealth and Lord come from heaven, not Rome. He lifts up the example of Christ that motivates believers to live in unity and true humility.

Philemon: Life in the Christ-believing Household
Date and location of writing—either Rome or Ephesus between 60-62
Major issue(s)—the case of Philemon’s slave, Onesimus, who escapes, meets Paul in prison, converts—then what? What is Onesimus’ status when he returns to the home of Philemon?
Main message—in writing to the slave owner Philemon, Paul presents a rhetorically sophisticated amicus brief requesting that Philemon accept as a brother in Christ his slave Onesimus. He basically appeals to Philemon to make Onesimus a full, free, and equal member of his household.
Apostle Paul 101 – Week 4
Beloved Passages: 1 Corinthians 13 (The Gift of Love)

Introduction

1 Corinthians is primarily about the agape love of God. Love is not the same thing as control, nor is love the same as discipline. Control is power over others or even power on behalf of others. But God’s unconditional love is communion. It is the sharing of all things between persons who are completely open to one another in all diversity. It is mutuality and equality that cuts against elitism. Most of all, it is a desire for the presence of the other. It is sitting face to face and knowing as one is known.

The pinnacle of Paul’s message of love is 1 Corinthians 13. In this beloved passage, Paul expresses the life of the Christian governed by love, the love made real in Christ. This love surpasses all the gifts of the Spirit. Almost in poetic fashion, Paul expounds upon love in its incredible potency, patience, and permanency.

Context: Chapter 12

Stanza One: Love in Relation to Other Cherished Gifts (verses 1-3)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

What are the cherished religious practices and patterns that are critiqued or placed in perspective by the power of love?

Stanza Two: Love Expressed in Real Life (verses 4-7)

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

How do these qualities of love become evident in real-life situations?
Stanza Three: Love as a Permanent Force (verses 8-13)

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

What do we make of the contrasts in this section between the permanence of love and the partial quality of all other dimensions of life? What is the relationship between God’s love and humility?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Sermonic Thoughts on Divine Love (1934)

Love is the one thing that is beyond all differences, comes before all differences, and remains within all differences.

What is the value of a life of pleasure, honor, fame, and brilliance compared to a life lived in love?

What is the value of a pious and moral life, a disciplined life of sacrifice and self-denial, if it is not a life lived in love?

Love can wait a long, long time.

Love doesn’t want anything from the other person—what it wants is everything for that person. It doesn’t want to possess the other person, especially not to have him or her jealously all to itself.

Love believes all things, because it cannot do otherwise than believe that in the end the very final word will be that everyone, yes, everyone, is called to be overcome by love.

Understanding and love are the imperfect and the perfect.

Which of these thoughts would you display on your refrigerator or computer screen? Why?
Apostle Paul 101 – Week 5
Beloved Passages: Philippians 2:1-11 (The Gift of Humility and Downward Mobility)

Introduction

Philippians is Paul’s most joyful letter. It is a letter of thanksgiving for the Philippians’ tangible and intangible support of Paul’s missionary work. Paul expresses his warmest feelings for the Philippians (1:7), the freedom of joy in the Lord even as he is bound in chains (1:12-14; 4:10-13), and he encourages them to be of one mind in Christ (2:5). He quotes an early Christian hymn (2:6-11), which summarizes beautifully the servant Savior who humbled himself on a cross, so that God and all people might exalt him as the Lord of all.

Context: Chapter 1

What is the overall tone of this opening chapter? What does Paul tell us about himself in this section?

Preamble: Appeal to Christian Unity (verses 1-5)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love (agape), any sharing (koinonia) in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love (agape), being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition (kenodoxia) or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

What does the mind-set look like that Paul is urging the congregation to have? What does that look like in a healthy congregation?

Stanza One: Downward Mobility (verses 6-8)

who, though he was in the form of God,
    did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself (kenoo), taking the form of a slave,
    being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
    he humbled himself
    and became obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

What does it mean that Christ “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited?” How would we explain that in plainer words?
What is the contrast between Paul’s use of the word selfish ambition (kenodoxia) in the preamble with Paul’s use of emptied himself (kenoo) in the first stanza?

Stanza Two: Hyperexaltation (verses 9-11)

Therefore, God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
    every knee should bend,
    in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
    that Jesus Christ is Lord,
    to the glory (doxa) of God the Father.

What do you notice when you compare the two hymn stanzas? Who is the subject in the first stanza? Who is the subject in the second stanza?

What would it mean for a first century resident of the Roman colony Philippi to confess that “Jesus is Lord” rather than “Caesar is Lord?” What is the relationship between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to the nation?

What do the words “every knee should bend” and “every tongue should confess” say about the scope of salvation in Jesus Christ? Is the focus narrow or broad?

Prayer

Sovereign God, you have established your rule in the human heart through the servanthood of Jesus Christ. By your Spirit, keep us in the joyful procession of those who with their tongues confess Jesus as Lord and with their lives praise him as Savior, who lives and reign with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW, p. 29)