

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

Paul as our Role Model

1 Corinthians 11:1

Paul had been trying to teach the Corinthians to apply grace concepts to questions that they had written to him. They desired to understand how they were to interact with unbelievers and with each other. Paul told them that the grace life brought much liberty to the believer. Believers who don't understand how to live by grace very often conform themselves to live under some form of law. They may adopt portions of the Mosaic Law for themselves, or more likely, by living under some self-imposed, non-biblical laws they have put upon themselves, thinking that doing so will be pleasing to God. People who do this are called legalists.

Although we are free, we are not to use our liberty to please ourselves. Instead, we are to use it to edify other believers. Paul will be making that point when he discusses the Lord's supper in chapter 11, and spiritual gifts in chapter 12. Although a believer may have the liberty to do a particular activity, it may be wise for him to restrict himself from exercising that activity for the sake of the weaker brother, one who does not understand the believer's liberty. It is wrong for the stronger believer to take advantage of his liberty if he knows it will be a detriment to a weaker brother who does not have a good understanding about liberty. In the spirit of edification, it is wrong for a stronger brother to criticize a weaker brother for their lack of understanding. Likewise, it is wrong for the weaker brother to criticize a stronger brother for taking liberties he deems inappropriate. It should be pointed out that in either case, each identifies themselves as being the stronger believer.

Paul as our example

Paul presents himself as our role-model. As a role model, all believers today are to use his example as a guide of how to live a proper grace life. In this case, the Corinthian church had left Paul's sound doctrine and as a result, splinter groups had formed, each accepting different men that they were following. Instead of being unified under Pauline doctrine, they were divided up into smaller groups, each thinking that they were right. Each group watched out for their own interests instead of watching out for the needs of others (Philippians 2:4).

Paul has given them himself as an example of how to use liberty properly. 1 Corinthians 9 details how he put aside his own desires so that he could minister unhindered to the Corinthians. Although he was well within his right to ask for their monetary support, he didn't want to compromise the message. He was worried that they would be less apt to take his instruction seriously if he came begging them for money. Paul didn't want to distract them from recognizing that they were selfishly serving themselves instead of serving each other. He knew that spiritual growth was more important than getting a paycheck.

Paul was not trying to supersede Jesus Christ in telling them to follow his example. He did understand that He was the steward of the Mystery doctrine that was given to him by Jesus Christ, and that there was no other person who could add anything to that doctrine (Galatians 1:11-12; Ephesians 3:1-2; Colossians 1:25). It was because of this that he became our pattern and example for how we were to live (1 Timothy 1:16). The only way for us to live a life pleasing to God is by following Paul. We ultimately follow Jesus Christ by following Paul. The believer who follows anyone else, like Peter or even Jesus in his earthly ministry to Israel, will not be able to mature spiritually because they are following the wrong doctrine. When a believer follows Paul and his teaching, he is following Christ because Christ put Paul in his special position as steward of the Mystery (Ephesians 5:1; 1 Timothy 4:1-6).

Paul was given the Mystery doctrine so that he could teach others, so they in turn could pass it on to others (2 Timothy 2:2). This doctrine of the Mystery was given exclusively to Paul, and as a good steward he needed to protect it and share it (Ephesians 3:1–5). This Ephesians passage is often used by mid-Acts detractors to prove that Paul was one of many who received the Mystery, however, the verse actually shows that Paul received this revelation directly from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11–12) while the other apostles and prophets came to understand, through the Holy Spirit, what Paul taught them. Even today, the Holy Spirit is the Person who reveals God’s word to us as we study Scripture. The other prophets and apostles needed confirmation from the Holy Spirit that what Paul was preaching was indeed accurate and from God. Paul’s presentation to the other prophets and apostle at the Hebrew church, and their ultimate approval (Acts 15, Galatians 2), confirmed Paul as a true apostle, and that his message did come from God. If he were preaching the same thing as the other apostles and prophets, he would have no need to explain and defend his message.

The Mystery doctrine that was entrusted to Paul by Jesus Christ was then entrusted to Timothy by Paul (2 Timothy 1:13). Anyone who teaches anything other than what has been revealed to Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ is proudly going their own way, even though they are ignorant (1 Timothy 6:3–5). Leaving Pauline doctrine only leads to envy, strive and endless arguing. Paul’s doctrine unites, but accepting doctrine meant for another people or another dispensation only confuses and divides. Is it any wonder that Paul often makes the plea for us to follow him (1 Corinthians 4:16; Philippians 3:17)?

Some will use 1 Corinthians 11:1, along with other verses, to show how Paul was self-absorbed and arrogant. One verse often used to show him as a heretic is Colossians 1:24. This verse seems to show Paul bragging that he needed to add his own suffering to Christ’s work of suffering on the cross. It seemingly shows Paul saying he needed to finish the work that Jesus Christ began for our redemption.

Colossians 1:24 who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church:

The word *behind* is the Greek word *husterama* (G5303) and is interpreted to mean a lack, or a want. You could say that Paul was saying that he was suffering to fill up that which needed to be filled up (was lacking) of the afflictions in my flesh for his body’s sake.

Paul was suffering as he represented Christ in His absence. While Christ was on the earth, He suffered greatly at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles. When He left this earth, the Little Flock continued to suffer for following Him as if they were taking Christ’s place (Matthew 25:40; Acts 22:4–7). The same idea can be applied to the apostle Paul. He was raised up to be a representative of Christ, bearing the message of grace to the world. Ananias told Paul that he would suffer for the name of Christ (Acts 9:16). As Christ was rejected by men while on earth, the people who were bearing God’s message would also suffer in His stead. Today, Christ is not on the earth and therefore cannot suffer physically at the hands of men, however, the Body of Christ acts as if we are Christ on earth, and we therefore will suffer as Christ had suffered (2 Timothy 3:12).

It is in light of this that Paul says he is suffering the afflictions of Christ in his body for the sake of the Church, the Body of Christ. Those who misinterpret this passage do so because they cherry-pick only verses that seem to support their thesis. If they would have actually read into the following chapter of Colossians, they would have discovered that Paul teaches that the believer is complete in Christ and that we are fully identified with Him (Colossians 2:10–15). Paul magnified his office as the apostle to the Gentiles, but he never boasted of his personal accomplishments (Romans 11:13; 1 Corinthians 15:9).

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