

## Living the Epiphany Reality: I Belong To Paul

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The lights have all come down. The Boxing Day sales are long past and the January linen sales season is upon us. In other words, life now gets back to its normal rhythms. Real life.

In the next four weeks I want to spend some time in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians in a series I'm calling ***Living the Reality of Epiphany***.

What is Epiphany? The word comes from the Greek επιφαινω (*epiphainō*), which means "to make an appearance, to show itself." It also has the connotation of light, as in the form of the word in Luke 1:78-79 where it speaks of the coming of John, ***...the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light (epiphainō) to those who sit in darkness...***

The season of Epiphany is where we hear about the baptism of Jesus and the voice from heaven (***This is my beloved son...***) and the miracles, because these are the moments when it is made clear who he is.

But it is also the time when the rubber hits the road ***for us*** with the revelation that Christ has come. It's Epiphany where we have to find out what it all means for actual life, for how we experience life in the light of this revelation of God.

Here is why this passage today is such a great Epiphany text. The baby is born and we rejoice and receive the message of hope. But now the wisemen have gone, the boy grows up and works as a craftsman on construction sites, and then... extraordinary things begin to happen.

There is theology there but there is also anthropology. There are grand revelations of his identity, but the other side of Epiphany is the living out the revelation among real people – the anthropology of Epiphany.

This is why we are talking about Paul's effort to create ***actual communities of faith*** around the history-shattering belief that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead.

We tend to think that the ideological landscape that we face today in bearing witness to Christ is difficult, and it is. There is post-modernism, atheism, agnosticism, lots of "-isms." Paul, as we will see, took the gospel into a world of ideas every bit as sophisticated and hostile to Christian faith as our own. This has always been the context for Christian witness.

We only know about any of this because of the most prosaic of genres, the commonplace letter. It is here where the Paul's genius blazes into view for what the resurrection of Jesus means for everyday life. The greatest theologian of the Christian movement, writes letters to folks about what this all means for community. It is basically just Paul's mail.

***To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:2-3).***

Paul planted the Corinthian church in one of the more important cities of Greece, about 20 years after Jesus' resurrection. You can read about it in Acts 18:1-11. I'm a huge fan of the Book of Acts because it is the only other testimony we have, besides Paul's mail, that independently confirms what was going on in this period.

The Corinthian church, Acts tells us, is jam-packed with interesting characters: Priscilla and Aquila, Silas and Timothy, Titius Justus, a gentile believer, Crispus, the local leader of the synagogue, they were all there. It's fascinating really – it would have been super exciting to have been in that community.

It was a richly gifted community in a vibrant city, and full of passionate and talented believers with strong personalities - kind of like our church – except for the divisions!

Take a look at this picture of a tree I saw on my recent holiday. I immediately saw it as an apt metaphor for Christian community. I think it might be a banyan tree.



The theology of the Jesus message held them together, but they were all very different people. Together they formed a tree of faith. Messy, kind of a conglomeration, but rooted in Christ and teeming with life!

***He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them*** (Acts 18:11). At this point, next to Peter's oversight of the Jerusalem church, that was the record for the longest pastorate in history.

It wasn't smooth sailing. The first six chapters of the letter, written from Ephesus where he went next, back to the church, address division, disorder and some pretty shocking immorality in the community, including suspicions about Paul himself and his motives or collecting money for the Jerusalem church (there was a famine there).

But, in spite of these challenges, Paul and the church remain committed and close. He writes with passion and love. 1 Corinthians is a pretty remarkable testimony to living the Epiphany reality.

This is the very essence of the idea of Epiphany, the season where the consequences of the resurrection make their way into our daily lives, and especially into the fabric of our community of faith.

But...

***For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*** (1 Cor 1:11-13)

These weren't just trivial preferences for different personalities. They were substantive debates about the nature of Christian faith

***Chloe's people*** were likely gentile slaves from a wealthy household. To them the way of Christ was freedom and equality.

When someone says *“I belong to Cephas,”* she is saying ‘I’m a traditionalist, a Jerusalem-oriented Jewish person. I’m not ready to abandon food and circumcision laws that have been the basis of the faith for time immemorial.’ They identified this approach with the leadership of the Apostle Peter, (Cephas is the Aramaic word for rock, Peter is the Greek translation, the name given to Simon son of John by Jesus - John 1:42).<sup>1</sup>

If you *“belong to Paul”* you have the powerful tradition of Judean Pharisaism at your foundation, but Paul is a radical Jewish reformer, eschewing circumcision and food laws.<sup>2</sup>

If you *“belong to Apollos”* you like the Egyptian Jew from Alexandria, one of the most cosmopolitan and learned cities in the world at that time. ***An eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures with burning enthusiasm...but only knew the baptism of John.***

Another story there! Apollos had never heard of Jesus, but his presence shows that thriving communities of faith around John the Baptist were present in places as far-flung as Alexandria (see Acts 18:22-28 and chapter 19).

What we see is that the arguments were real and this is interesting historically for the study of our faith. If you want to see the big meeting they had in Jerusalem around this time to iron these problems out, read Acts 15.

### **From the Text**

So here we have the theology and the anthropology.

I’ve been wrestling with this because it’s fine to say ‘don’t be partisan, don’t split into divided schools of practice and thought.’

At the same time it’s too easy to reduce all of this to a slogan and say ‘keep Jesus at the centre of things.’

But what is it saying positively? That is a little more difficult to suss out.

First, Paul’s exhortation is an argument for simplicity over complexity in our faith life. Less about human theology, and more about Jesus and his ideas, more of his presence among us in the Holy Spirit: a theology of simplicity based on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Do you wonder at my preference for the gospels? It’s the where we find the master.

Is evangelism the most important thing about community living for Jesus today? Or is it social action? Is it reading prophecy and preparing for the end of the world? Or is it about personal happiness and fulfilment in life a la Joel Osteen or these people who preach a gospel of prosperity?

You can find speakers and entire denominations who focus on one or the others of these. None of them are entirely wrong, and perhaps a balanced Christian cares about all of them.

***Was Paul crucified for you?*** Which is to say that he opts for keeping our eyes on the Lord Jesus and his life, death and resurrection – a theology of simplicity over complexity.

***Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be not divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose*** (1 Cor 1:10).

I don’t think it’s saying everybody has to think the same way.



In 1 Corinthians 8:6 he gives his response to the ideas that tempt us away from the core:

***...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.***

Does this remind you of the four great truths of the Nicene Creed that we have been talking about here this past year – and which we are going to continue to talk about? God the Creator, Jesus the Son, the Holy Spirit present among us, and the church as the place of appearing on earth.

In this room today we have people from maybe a couple of dozen denominational backgrounds. We have a mixed audience of young and old, educated and not so educated, emotionally fragile, others quite strong, to say nothing of the complications of politics, contentious moral issues, here are some are life-long believers and some are not even on the path of faith.. And yet, here we are together. It's pretty cool. I love it.

But it argues for an ongoing and simple emphasis on what is essential to belief and leave the rest to the periphery.

It calls us to simplicity! The centrality of Jesus and his life, death and resurrection is the soil from which spring all good works and fruit – anything good that happens here in the months and years to come is because Jesus came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified and on the third day he rose again!

This is the theology that binds all these tree trunks of various sizes and shapes into a tree of strength.

Stand with me and let's say the Creed together.

Benediction:

And now may the one who binds us together, a big messy conglomeration of lives and experiences, transform us into a great tree of witness and love for the sake of Jesus. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

<sup>1</sup> Paul eventually labels this group rather derisively the "circumcision party." Suffice it to say it got heated. (...I wish they would castrate themselves... Gal 5:12).

<sup>2</sup> ..*all foods are clean*... Mark 7:18 and Romans 14:14, *I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself*. This is a rare instance where Paul actually seems to allude directly to a teaching of Jesus found in the gospels.