

Sermon Transcript from November 6th, 2016
The Inclusive Paul
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This Sunday and next Sunday, what I want to do is focus on one of the official representatives that Jesus appointed to go into the world on His behalf. A man named the Apostle Paul. He was originally known as Saul. Saul of Tarsus. So, you're doing The Year of Biblical Literacy. You're reading through the Bible. How's that going, guys? How's that going? No judgment. No judgment if you fell of in the Prophets. They're very long. I understand that. But, I hope you were able to reboot in August when it came to the New Testament. And if you've been doing so, then you are coming in and you've been starting to read the letters of Paul.

He's an incredibly significant figure in early Christianity. His writings. There are 13 writings in the New Testament connected to this man. It makes up over 25% of what we call the New Testament. He was a force to be reckoned with in the first generation of the Jesus movement. So, as you read into his letters, here's what's likely going to happen. There are going to be moments where you're very inspired. There are going to be moments where you're deeply challenge by things that he says. And then there are going to be moments where you're really disturbed and bothered by things that Paul says about first century slaves, about women, about issues of ethnic diversity in those churches. You're going to be bothered by how he promotes himself as an example to be followed.

"Imitate me as I imitate Jesus."

You know, that's just kind of bold to say that kind of thing. What this raises is a whole set of issues that I think modern Westerners have going on when we read the letters of Paul. Let me show you two book covers. One, the book is going to come out tomorrow. The other came out a couple years ago. And to me it just kind of summarizes how most Americans feel about Paul.

Do you need me to explain to you what's happening here? So, is Paul a racist, chauvinist jerk? That's the question being addressed in "Paul Behaving Badly." That comes out tomorrow. And, a couple years old, J.R. Daniel Kirk, "Jesus Have I Loved, but Paul?"

I won't do a raise of hands, but my hunch is that there's a whole bunch in the room and you're like, "What? I don't know. What's the problem with Paul?"

Like, you love reading Paul's writings. You've read them for a long time. They're very inspiring and meaningful to you. My hunch is that there's a whole bunch of other people in the room who you, on a deep level, get what these books are trying to get at. When Jesus announces the Kingdom of God to the poor, when He says, "Love your neighbor as your self," and His whole mission was to include people in these celebrations of the Kingdom. And the poor and the marginalized, we love Jesus.

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is here."

Paul said, "The wrath of God is revealed against the godless."

Jesus said, "Love your neighbor."

And Paul said, "Yeah. Expel, excommunicate the immoral man from your church."

Right? Anybody? I'm the only person who notices that he's different, right? So, Western readers have hang-ups with Paul. And in academic circles that are not tied to any kind of Christian community at all, all the rave is to hate on Paul and talk about what a close-minded person he was and how unfortunate it was that he became so influential in the early church. That's kind of the party line in academic study of Paul.

So, I don't know if this resonates with you at all if you've ever read into Paul's letters and found him difficult to understand. And if you do find him at least difficult to understand, you need to know that you're in good company. He had a coworker, the Apostle Peter, who wrote a couple letters in the New Testament, and in the last chapter of his second letter, Peter says, "Our beloved brother, Paul, we love him. God gave him wisdom. Man, he's hard to understand sometimes."

It's in the Bible that Paul's hard to understand. So, you're not alone. But, it's true. On all of

the hot topics in modern western culture of race and sex and gender and power and community formation and privilege and all these kinds of things, a first reading of Paul's letters, at least through in English, finds Paul landing mostly on the wrong side of those debates according to American opinion. And it tends to find Jesus on the right side of those debates. Jesus have I loved, but Paul?

So, I don't know if this resonates with you at all. Here's what I have found. I remember being a new Christian, I was in my early 20s and I'm reading the Bible for the first time. And I remember what it was like to read Paul's letters for the first time. And I was stirred, other times challenged and other times like, "What? What's going on here?"

And I have found, as a priest, in my own church community up in Portland, that I'm not alone. I wasn't alone in this. There are many people in my own church community, and I assume in this one, that love Jesus, His call to the Kingdom of God here on earth as in Heaven, but we struggle with Paul. So, here's what I'd like to do with this time and then next Sunday is help boil down what Paul was all about. Because, here's what I have found: what I have found is, nine times out of ten, the objections that people have to things that Paul said or did are usually based on reading those letters fairly... I don't want to say "shallow," but in English and a first or second pass. And the things that offend people the most, those lines get taken out of context and usually plopped and just translated in English right into our modern debates about these topics.

And what we don't take time to do is to understand that each letter was written to a different person, to a different community. Each letter has a long backstory attached to it. And Paul wasn't an American. Right? He was a first century Jewish rabbi who became a Messianic rabbi, he wrote in Greek, he was tri-lingual at least and he lived 2,000 years ago on the other side of the planet. Now, you guys, my wife and I have a difficult time understanding each other. Right? And we speak the same language and grew up in the same culture and we live together, for goodness sakes.

So, reading and understanding Paul's letters, it requires immense cultural sensitivity. It requires patience to learn the whole story of who he was and each of these churches and the backstory behind it all. It requires a community of people to come around and learn together and it requires effort to understand his letters. And nine times out of ten, I have found personally that doing that work not only just resolves the challenges I might have with Paul's letters, but actually allows me to hear what Paul was actually saying in a whole new way that I'd never even thought about before.

So, what I'd like to do today and next Sunday is just focus on two core themes that unify his whole mission, what he was all about and that run throughout all of his letters. They're kind of like ground zero, these key points for what Paul was all about. And if you can have these anchors in place, reading into Paul's letters as many of you are doing this month and next, I think things will click for you.

So, that's our mission should we choose to accept it. And you don't have a choice, because you're here. Are you guys with me?

So, here's an irony. It's an irony in modern Western-Americans reading Paul and getting offended and calling him whatever; a chauvinist, racist bigot or what have you. There's actually a deep, deep irony that we're mostly unaware of when we do that. And it's this: Paul's signature achievement in the early decades of the Jesus movement, the thing that he was most passionate about and the thing that he created was a viral movement of networked house-churches full of very, very diverse kinds of people. His passion was to create a movement, a network, of multi-ethnic, culturally diverse house-communities in the most strategic, important cities in the ancient Roman empire, and that all of these communities honor each other's differences, create immense space for cultural difference and even difference on certain, what they considered, moral issues. The main unifying factor that brought all of these very different people together was allegiance to the love and service of King Jesus.

And Paul accomplished this. Paul introduced a revolution into the human history of religion. There had never been a movement like what he was a part of starting in the ancient world. People had no idea what to do with his communities because the Roman world had never seen such a thing before. In Paul's day, religion is something you're born into, it's completely bound up to the gods of your people group and of your city and of your family. And for people to break that identity and to choose allegiance to a new god and for a Greek and a Macedonian and a Roman and a Jew and a Libyan and an Egyptian and Cyprian to all eat meals together every single Sunday in allegiance to the one true God was absolutely unheard of. This kind of thing had never happened before, and this was Paul's brainchild and it was his greatest contribution to

the Church.

And to me, there's such a deep irony, there's such an irony, that here we are, 21st century Americans, looking down on Paul because we've taken half of his lines about gender and race and slavery out of context, by the way, and then we look down on Paul when his greatest achievement is the thing that somehow America, in 200 years, has been absolutely unable to achieve. Are you guys with me? Do you see the irony?

"I wonder if racial tension is an issue in our culture."

Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? And we are going to look down on Paul, whose life passion was to create culturally diverse communities unified in their allegiance to King Jesus. Are you with me here? I get a little impatient at this point because the irony's too rich. It verges on hypocrisy. So, here's what I would urge us to do. I want us to sit down this Sunday and next Sunday and just patiently listen to the inclusive/exclusive Paul. It breaks our categories; it doesn't fit any of our political or social categories. And there were no categories for what he was doing in his day. The Jesus movement through Paul, Jesus appointing Paul, created a whole new category, and it's what we call the history of early Christianity.

So, here's what I'd like to do. If I was going to try and summarize Paul, how would I try and do it? Well, I tried and then I realized, "No, I don't want to do it. Let's just let Paul do it himself."

All of the literature in the New Testament connected to Paul or his letters, mostly letters to church communities that he started and that existed for some time already. But, a couple of them are to church communities that he didn't start. One of those is the church in Rome. Paul did not start the church in Rome. It had existed for some time before he ever wrote to it. And when he did write to it, it's because he wanted to address the ethnic tensions that were threatening to tear this church apart.

So, here's how Paul introduced himself to a church full of people that he mostly didn't know. And this is a church being torn apart by Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic division. And here's how he introduces himself.

Romans 1:1: **"Paul, a servant of the Messiah Jesus, called to be an apostle..."**

We'll pause real quick here. "Apostle" – this is one of these ironies. We're reading an English translation. But, for some reason, that word never got translated. It's a Greek word spelled with English letters. "Apostle." It means "an official representative."

So, **"He was called to be an [official representative] set apart for God's good news—which he promised long ago through his prophets in the Sacred Scriptures. And this good news is about God's Son, whose physical lineage was from the line of David and through the Holy Spirit he was established as the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus the Messiah our Lord."**

Amen?

"Through him I was graciously made his representative to call all the nations to faithful obedience for the sake of his name. And that includes you who are in Rome, also called by Jesus the Messiah and who are loved by God."

Let's just keep this up here right here. So, Paul, he was a radically zealous Jewish rabbi. He belonged to a group called the Pharisees. It was a religious-political pressure group that didn't have power in Jerusalem, Israel's capital city, but they had immense influence. Kind of like a lobby or something like that. He hated Jesus. He hated the movement that sprung out of Jesus. He was certain that Jesus was a false prophet and that Jesus disciples were crazy and going to lead Israel astray. So, he did everything in his power to try and get them arrested and killed. So, what Jesus did was He just put a kibosh on that real quick.

Paul was on his way to a city. You guys read about it in the story if you're reading through The Year of Biblical Literacy. Jesus confronted Paul in a very radical encounter and called Paul to follow Him as a disciple. And then He commissioned Paul as an apostle, a representative, to go take the story about the resurrected Jewish Messiah out to all of the nations and to begin to spread and form these communities of Jesus' followers outside of Jerusalem and outside of Israel. And that became his whole life passion. And here's Paul's deep conviction.

He says, "I'm called as this representative because the whole story of Israel told in the Old Testament sacred Scriptures has come to its fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He's physically from the line of David, from the line of Israel's ancient kings."

And something happened with Jesus of Nazareth. He talks about it in all of his letters. He believed that Jesus was the God of Israel become human to embody the love and the justice and the mercy of God here for us and on our behalf. He believed that Jesus was the human that we are all made to be and called to be, but perpetually fail to be. And he was that on our behalf. He talks about it all throughout his letters, this Jesus from the line of David. That He went to His death on purpose in order to take into Himself the consequences of all of the selfishness and the sin and the evil and the moral failure that we all perpetuate and participate in everyday. All of the ways that we have created the world as we know it.

And Jesus took the consequences of all of that onto Himself on the cross and He allowed our evil to destroy Him. But, because this God's love for this world and this God's love for humanity is so great that it's more powerful than our sin and it's more powerful than the consequences of our sin, which is death. So, God's love, through the power of the Spirit, raised Jesus from the dead. He's the truly human one. He is God in human flesh. And He is now the exalted King not just of Israel, but of the world.

So, for Paul, the only logical thing to do is to go out among the nations and tell everybody that there's a new King. But, it's not just the king of Israel, it's not just the king of Rome, it's not just the king of Egypt, it's the King of humanity. It's Jesus. It's the Son of God. He's the King of the world. He lived and He died and He was raised not just for Israel, but for every human being. To be for us what we could never be for ourselves and to make us into the people that He's called us to be. This is the essence of Paul's message and good news.

So, look at what this motivates him to do. This is in the yellow right down here. "I was made his representative to call all of the nations..."

This is what I call "the inclusive Paul." Paul's vision of God's love was so gigantic, it so exploded out of his heart and his mind, that the only logical thing to do in light of the story of Jesus was to tell every single human who King Jesus was. Because, there's only one story capable of speaking to all of the billions and the different types of humans. It's the story of the creator God become human to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. It's the radically inclusive Paul. But, also notice what the radically inclusive Paul is calling all nations to. To faithful obedience to King Jesus for the sake of His name. This is what I call "the exclusive Paul." This is what we'll talk about next week.

So, Paul has this idea that the only way to truly unify all of humanity is to call all humanity to some center of focus. The Roman empire, of course, was the rival in Paul's day, and they called all humanity to recognize the divinity and the authority of the emperor. That's the unifying story and that was not working out so well for most ancient people. All calls to unity are a call to some kind of exclusive center. And for Paul, the only way to unify all of humanity is to tell the story of the creator God become human in the person of Jesus. It's the exclusive Paul. So, while there were clear challenges and boundary lines he put around what it means to live as a follower of Jesus, it was a radically inclusive call to all nations. And he did it. Like, he actually did it. He actually formed these communities. We know of dozens and dozens of them throughout the largest and most important cities. He actually pulled it off. He did it.

How are you guys doing? Okay. So, here's what I want to do. I want to just take a quick tour of a handful of crucially important passages in Paul, and you're going to see this passion for the unity of Jesus' followers as diverse, multi-cultural communities. This was his heartbeat. If this wasn't happening, he wasn't being faithful to Jesus. It's like a red thread that runs through all of his letters. And if you make this your center of gravity in reading through Paul's letters, I guarantee all kinds of things will start clicking into place for what this apostle was all about.

So, let's first go to Genesis 12, because, for Paul, the roots of this inclusive call to all nations to serve in obedience to King Jesus, this has deep roots in the story of the Scriptures. The reason that God called the family of Israel into existence in the story of the Bible was – here's the story. This is where it begins on, on page 12 of the Bible.

"The Lord said to Abram," – whose name later gets changed to Abraham – **"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.**

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the families on the earth will be blessed through you."

Now, just by repetition alone, what's the key important word in this here? Bless. And this comes right after the story of the tower in the City of Babylon in Genesis 12, which is the culmination of the human failure that started in the Garden of Eden story. So, all humanity is up in arms against the creator God, and what is God's ultimate, long-term response to His enemies? He sets in motion a plan to bless His enemies; the rebellious nations of the earth. And he chooses one random guy, Abram, later named Abraham, and He's going to do something through that family that will result in blessing and redemption and salvation going back out to all the nations of the world. This is the core storyline of the whole Bible.

So Paul, he was raised on this story. And growing up like every Jewish person in his day, he's wondering, "When is God going to do this? When is God going to act finally to do something so that the family of Abraham becomes this blessing to all the different families of the earth?"

And then when he had this radical encounter with the resurrected Jesus, it was a light bulb. Like, "Oh my gosh. This is it. This is it. This is the fulfillment. He's from the line of David. He's from the line of kings of the very family that God said He was going to use to bless the nations of the earth and then here He is. He's living for all humanity. He's dying for all humanity. He's being raised from the dead and He wants to give His life as a gift to all humanity."

I mean, what other candidate would Paul be looking for as to the fulfillment of this promise? And so Paul, it lights a fire in him. His whole life, every waking moment as far as we can tell, for the 30 some years that he followed Jesus after that until he was executed in Rome for being too zealous about Jesus, this 30 years was an immense contribution he made to the early Church and to human history, and it was all rooted in this promise right here.

So, let's say you lived in what today is kind of northern central Turkey, a region that was called Galatia in Paul's day. And let's say you live in one of these cities in Galatia and you're a day laborer or whatever and you immigrated up here from Cypress because life is really hard there. So, you immigrated here and you hear in the town square there's this leather worker named Paul. And he's just constantly talking to people about how there's a new king of the world. It's the risen Jesus. And your imagination is captured. So, you go and apparently these people who listen to Paul gather in a house-community. So, you go show up at one of these house-communities and it's crazy. There's three Jewish families. One of them is a really wealthy land owner. So, he's there with his Egyptian slave. There's a Roman metalworker, there's three other people from Cypress that you didn't know lived in Galatia. And there's a whole bunch of homeless people. One of them is Asian, one of them is Macedonian. And you're sitting in a house. Then, all of a sudden, Paul starts to tell the story of Jesus and the story of humanity and the story of how we're all such failed versions of who we know we're trying to be for ourselves, and that despite our failure, the creator God loves me and that He came among us in Jesus and He died for me and He was raised for me.

And then here's what these people do: they eat a meal together. Like, you have all these different kinds of people and all these different ethnic groups. You have slaves, you have landowners and they're sharing the same food together. There's nowhere else in any city in Galatia where anything like this is happening. And then something crazy happens. The 25 of you go out into the courtyard and there's a fountain and a little pool and then one of these people is professing allegiance to King Jesus. And then what do they do? They get dunked under water. It's just... what is that? You've never seen anything like that before. What is going on here? What's happening?

This was the initiation symbol into these church communities of Paul. What did the symbol mean? Well, let's let Paul tell us in his letter to the Galatians.

He says, **"So in the Messiah Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into the Messiah have clothed yourselves with the Messiah."**

Paul develops, in this teaching and numerous of his letters, this image of going into the water is like being immersed in the story of King Jesus so that your immersion in the water is this symbol of being submerged into death and that you participate and retell in the story of Jesus' death and your own death. And then when you come up out of the water, it's this symbol of resurrection and new life. And that when you are baptized, what's true of

Jesus is now true of you. It's the new humanity.

And in this new human family, **"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in the Messiah Jesus."**

Can you imagine saying something more charged and electric in Paul's day? To that room of people that I just described, he's saying, "You're brothers and sisters now."

This is just unbelievable. This is the most audacious social project that anybody attempted in the first century, and it comes from the mind and the heart of Paul who has been commissioned by Jesus. Here's how Scott McKnight, who's an incredible New Testament scholar, he's also written an incredible book. I think I told them to buy some to sell to you afterwards, because you should really read this book. It's a very practical, funny, well-written theology of Paul's vision of the Church. It's called "A Fellowship of Differents," and here's how he puts what Paul was accomplishing here:

"Paul made sure that the earliest Christian churches were made up of people from all over the social map, and they formed a fellowship of differents..." – typo intended – "...full of people who certainly did not agree on very much except, perhaps, that life in Roman cities was really dirty and difficult. That's about the only thing they would agree on. And this was the heart of Paul's mission, to create a fellowship of differents and difference, a mixture of people from all across the spectrum."

He believed that the Church is God's world-changing social experiment of bringing different people together to the same table to share life with one another as a new kind of family. And baptism was one of the key symbols because the rich Jewish landowner got baptized and the Egyptian slave got baptized. The homeless Egyptian got baptized. Everybody got baptized. Everybody had sins that needed to be forgiven. Everybody was given the same gift of life. And when they gathered to sing to Jesus and to eat at the table together, all of the things that make them different outside of the family of Jesus, all of the boundary lines, socioeconomic or ethnic, that create power, relationships and differences of privilege and so on, outside the church community all of that gets erased. When we walk into this gathering, we are one family in the Messiah Jesus.

How are you doing? Just somebody say "amen" or something. You know what I'm saying? So, we live 2,000 years into this heritage. And whether you love Paul or whether you hate Paul, our culture is a direct beneficiary of this movement right here. For the best of it and the worst of it that's been created. But, we're sitting in a culture that takes for granted what Paul forged radically in the first century of the Church. It's absolutely remarkable.

People eating at the same table together? This was a whole other statement. Because, eating these meals together always culminated in the Sunday gathering and taking the bread and the cup, which we also do symbolically. You guys do it here. What's the meaning of it? Well, the meaning of it is retelling the story of Jesus' death. His broken body and His shed blood. But, look at how Paul also adds another layer of symbolism to the bread and the cup to make this precise point right here. This is in 1 Corinthians 10.

So, he says, **"It is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks,"** – he's referring to the cup of wine (or grape juice) – **"Isn't it the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?"**

So, when we eat these symbols, we are ingesting the story. As we eat and drink and retell the story of Jesus and His presence is here with us in the Spirit, what's true of Him is true of us. We have died with Him. We have been raised from the dead with Him. We are one family. So, look at where he takes it.

He says, "Listen, there's one loaf of bread that we're all eating from," – which isn't really the case right here, so I'll let you guys figure out how you're going to work the symbolism on that one. So, we're talking about 25 people in a courtyard around a table. There's one loaf of bread for all of us. So, we are many, so many different kinds of people, but we're one body, for we all share in the one loaf. It doesn't matter who you are, we are all participating and people who benefit from the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let me show you what another early historian of Christianity says. This guy's name is David Harrell. I don't think he would self-identify as a follower or a disciple of Jesus. He's a historian of early Christianity in the Roman world. And this is what he has to say about

what Paul thought he was doing through baptism and the bread and the cup:

"Paul saw these early Christian rituals, baptism and communion, as creating a key social achievement to bring together many people into one body and to construct a new form of corporate solidarity. Both of these rituals, they symbolize and reinforce a worldview in which the death and the resurrection of Jesus are the central events of a cosmic story. They give meaning to the world and at the same time they embody the central theme of the early Christian society. A communal solidarity in Christ that transcends all other socio-ethnic distinctions."

Do you see how revolutionary this was in Paul's day? So, it leads Paul to say some things that will blow your mind if you really sit and think about them. Like this one from his letter to the Colossians. He's so bold as to call these networks of 25 people in these homes, here's what he calls them. He calls them the "new humanity." New humans.

"You have put on the new humanity, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here in this humanity there is no Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but the Messiah, the truly human one, He is all, and is in all people."

Now, there might be something, a question that gets raised here for you, at least for some of you. So, what Paul's saying is that all of our differences, gender, socioeconomic, ethnic, is he saying that they're erased? Is Paul trying to create uniformity or homogeneity? And this is where you have to read on into his letter. So, in his letter to the Romans, what he actually ends up saying is saying, "Listen, there are Jewish followers of Jesus and they're going to honor Him through obeying the laws of the Torah, obeying the Sabbath, eating kosher."

And that's exactly how they need to follow Jesus because they are Jewish followers of Jesus. But, then you have Greek followers of Jesus or Macedonian followers of Jesus and they will follow Jesus and they won't do it by eating kosher and they won't do it by obeying the Sabbath. He actually demands that every ethnic group retain its own distinctive, unique heritage, but reshapes it all in the service of the truly human one, the risen King Jesus. He doesn't create communities of homogeneity. What he creates is a space where there is one unifying factor: allegiance and following the teachings of King Jesus. And that creates space for immense amounts of difference and diversity.

Was Paul a chauvinistic, racist jerk? I think that is to use modern categories and to misunderstand him in the most uncharitable way possible. What he managed to produce was something which our American values of diversity and tolerance have yet to fully achieve. He did it and he did it in these small networks of the early Christian movement. This is absolutely remarkable. And as this heritage of Paul's churches went on – I'm going to quote one last historian – what these groups were able to achieve in huge Roman cities, the kind of influence. Two of these churches that he started, these networks, one was in Ephesus and one was in Corinth, these went on to become two of the most influential churches in the centuries that followed.

In what ways? What did these churches do? Rodney Stark, an amazing, amazing historian and sociologist of early Christianity, he puts it this way. This is the last nerd that I'll quote from here. This is really interesting.

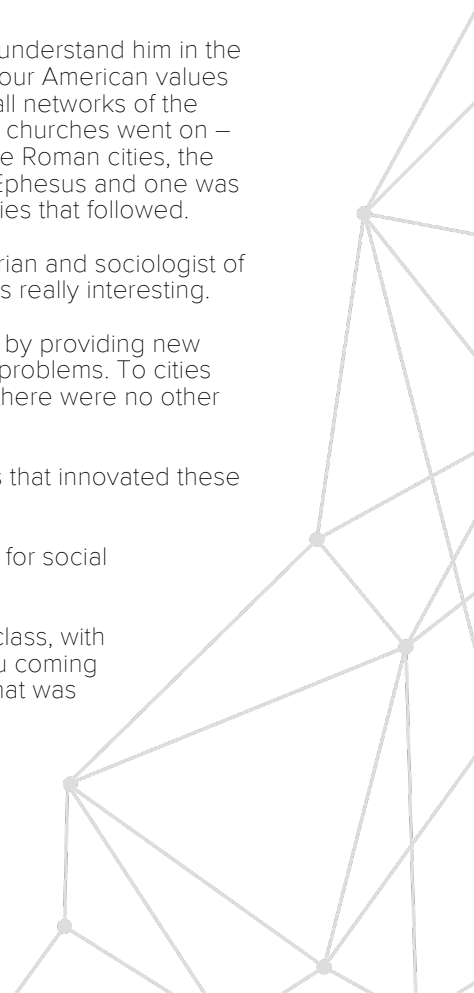
He says, "Early Christianity served as a revitalization movement in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social bonds that were able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with homeless and impoverished, the Christians offered charity and hope when there were no other social institutions that existed to help the poor."

The Roman empire didn't have any social systems to help people. It was the churches that innovated these system.

"To cities filled with strangers and newcomers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for social attachment."

And now you can see why, because it had nothing to do with your gender, with your class, with your income, with your place in society or with your ethnicity. It only had to do with you coming to see the love of Jesus that He showed you in His life and death and resurrection. That was what drew these people together.

"To cities filled with orphans and widows, the Christians offered new and expanded



sense of family. To cities torn by ethnic divisions, the Christian communities offered a new basis for social solidarity."

This wasn't simply a new urban movement; it was a new culture. It was a new way of being human beings here on Planet Earth. It was capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable. Now, I'm trying to help us get the inclusive Paul. His mission to announce King Jesus among all of the nations, it was so radical and it achieved something so remarkable in the history of early Christianity.

How are you guys doing? Maybe you've heard this before. Maybe you have. But, this is the center of gravity. Everything revolves around this. The reason why he got so worked up about women in the letter of 1 Timothy, read it in context, you guys. These were really wealthy Roman women who were used to privilege and status in the Roman world and then they come into the church community in Ephesus and, first of all, they treat it like a fashion show, right? They're going to the church gatherings dressed like they're going to a Gallio with the emperor. And then what they do is they just assume that they will be the ones who get the opportunity to go up front and start sharing with the community. And Paul's like, "No."

It's his passion for the unity of these Christian churches that he says most of the things that we find crazy and offensive. But, once you see why he's trying to do them, it changes your whole reading of Paul. So, this is my hope to at least just kind of reset the default for how you think about Paul. This was what motivated his passion, to create one new humanity that gave its allegiance to King Jesus.

Let me land the plane. So, yay. Inclusive Paul. Hooray. You know? What I'm not trying to do is remove the fact that there are real challenges that he sets before these early Christians. We're going to focus on that next week. But, here's the thing, you guys. Any attempt to create a unity out of lots of different kinds of humans requires a center. It requires some story that's bigger and that calls all of these different kinds of people and their different stories and their different cultures to say, "That's a part of who I am, but it's not my fundamental identity. My fundamental identity is this thing that we're all attracted to.

So, here we are in the West. We're 2,000 years later and there's a narrative at the baseline at our culture that, in theory, it's the big experiment that we're all living in. We're 200 years in. And it's, "Can you create a unified nation whose exclusive center is that everybody gets to do what they want and pursue life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and that's our center."

There's certain limits you put around that, but that's the unifying narrative of the American dream. "Don't tell me what to do." Right? Don't tell me what to do. And let me just ask you: how is it working out? I'm not a sociologist. I'm not an American historian. But, I live in America. I can offer my own perspective. But, what on earth is going to hold a nation as diverse as America together? So, what Paul's call was is that the true hope for the unity of humanity was to come and give faithful allegiance to the creator God who became human as the kind of human that I couldn't even be for myself. And He died for me and He was raised for me and it's the exalted King Jesus. It's the hope for the unity of the human family.

That's a very bold thing to say in today's world, but that's exactly what the early Jesus movement was all about. And so, I would just submit it to you. Like, what is your central identity marker? We live in a country. There's an identity there. We are all made up of very different ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic backgrounds. There's an identity attached to each of those. What would it look like to truly recover this amazing vision of the unified human family that Paul's whole passion was to create? It opens up many questions. Many, many questions get opened up at this point that we can't answer right now, but that are worth pursuing. But, I do want us to see that if we neglect Paul or write him off as a closed-minded bigot, we are rejected some of the greatest wisdom that our culture desperately needs right now.

What he was able to do and accomplish and what he's working out in his letters to these communities is exactly the kinds of issues that our culture desperately needs wisdom about. How do you honor difference in another but yet call all of us together to something bigger than all of our different identities to something greater? How do you do that in the context of actually relationships in a neighborhood? And Paul did this and there's a reason why his letters became recognized as Scripture, as God's Word, because this is a human story and this is the challenge that every single one of us is called to in the 1st century and here sitting in the 21st.

I've opened up a can of worms. You're welcome. You're welcome. But, I hope at least I've tried to kind of move the needle in helping us recenter our default of what Paul is all about. Let me conclude.

The Risen King Jesus is the hope of the world. The Risen King Jesus is the human embodiment of God's love for you despite your worst failures and sins and selfishness, God loves you. And in the person of Jesus, God's love and His mercy and His justice all came perfectly together. He lived for you and I. He died for you and I. He was raised for you and I. He's present here with us by the power of His Spirit. He wants to make us into new and different kinds of humans, and we believe that He can and is doing so as we gather together to take the bread and the cup and worship the Risen King Jesus. Amen?

Let me close in a word of prayer.

Jesus, You are beautiful. You are the one in which every single person in this room, all the different kinds of people and all of the different stories, we believe that in You all of our stories find their greatest fulfillment; find their greatest meaning. Jesus, we believe that Your love is the hope of the world. Thank You for living and dying and being raised for us. I pray that You would make this community right here, this room of people, into a new humanity, and out of that unity it is able to embody Your love and Your justice and Your grace and Your challenge to this city.

Jesus, this is a bold vision to live out. We need Your grace and wisdom as we do it, and we trust that Your Spirit will guide us forward. So, we pray in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.