

Creating Authentic Community: Utopian Dream or Do-able Reality? How Jesus' Apostle Paul Can Help Us©

A Three Week Series for Westwood Presbyterian Church, February 2016

by

DR. S. SCOTT BARTCHY ©

(Emeritus Professor of Christian Origins, Dept. of History, UCLA)

Part Two: *Paul's Powerful Vision of a "Society of Siblings"*

0. The most basic question each of us should ask ourselves: What is the nature of Ultimate Reality (God)? Here are some answers from a survey reported recently by the Huffington Post: Omnipotent, Fiction, Nonexistent, Almighty, Imaginary, Amazing, Creator, Awesome, Everything, Love.

1. Reminder: start at the beginning: What we know from the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) about God's purposes: Three "red threads" run through all the diversity in God's activities reported in those 39 books:

1.1. God created and sustains the physical and spiritual world.

1.2. God is "community-forming power," who seeks to create and sustain a people who live in harmonious and nurturing relationships with each other. (See the Ten Commandments.)

1.3. Since all human societies tend to develop both economic exploitation and social discrimination, God has a special concern for those who "fall through the cracks," for those who are or who become "poor," both economically and socially.

2. Filtering and Focusing: Jesus of Nazareth both filtered out some beliefs about God (such as God hating God's enemies, and God's support of patriarchy, blood-line exclusivity, Temple religion, and solving problems by violence) and focused his followers' attention on these three "red threads."

2.1. Jesus emphasized by his teaching and personal behavior that by nature, God is "community-forming power," with a special concern for people who had been marginalized and discriminated against by "normal" society: the poor (financially and socially), the weak, the "unclean," and the sick (whose illness had often been attributed to God's judgment---see John 8).

2.2. All ancient Judeans (even the exclusive Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls) believed that God created a community. The big question of Jesus' and Paul's generations was: who was in, and who was out? Jesus had practiced "radical inclusivity" in his social life, especially at meals--in God's name. His critics were especially enraged by his "open table fellowship" (see Luke 15).

2.3. Jesus focused his teaching on the admonitions in the Ten Commandments and by the Prophets in Israel: What God cares about the most is how his people treat each other.

Note: The first conviction of Jesus' earliest followers was that he was right in what he was teaching about God and the new era in God's program for the world---not that he was "divine" as such. For them, the question was not whether Jesus was like God (that is, like the God they had been taught about as they grew up) but whether God was like Jesus!

3. Transformation: When Paul of Tarsus became convinced that God was like Jesus, he left behind many of the defining values and practices with which he had been raised---and then had fully embraced and intensified when he became a Pharisee.

3.1. Paul, as an apostle of Jesus, wrote: "God has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

3.2. As a Christ-follower, Paul joined Jesus in practicing Jesus' astonishing "radical inclusivity." Now, in the confidence that Jesus was right about God, Paul could enter any place and interact with anybody without fear of contamination. He was convinced that the power of Jesus' Spirit in him was greater than that of any spirit or evil force in any human being he met.

3.3. To do so, he had to change his mind about God's view of purity. For Paul (and Jesus before him), keeping yourself "pure" was no longer a preoccupation with making sure that you did not come into contact with certain people, no longer a concern about what food you ate or avoided or about whom you ate it with, no longer worrying about what you did on the Sabbath Day or performing other rituals, or about respecting the "holiness" of the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul followed Jesus in redefining "purity" entirely in terms of the quality of relationships between human beings.

4. This critical change opened Paul's mind to his willingness:

- to "hang out" among Gentiles and seek to win them to his new view of God's community--without going through the purity-rite of circumcision.
- to his new view of women as his friends and co-workers and as independent moral agents before God, no longer dependent for honor on the males in their families.
- to measure the "holiness" and maturity of his converts by the way they treated each other.
- to continue Jesus' dramatic practice of defining his followers as his "sisters and brothers" (see Mark 3:31-35 with parallels in Matthew and Luke) and to challenge all Christ-followers to treat each other with the love, respect, and mutual helpfulness that they had been taught to do in their biological families (called "general reciprocity").

5. "Brothers and Sisters" became Paul's favorite term for his converts, 40 times in 1 Corinthians alone (see p. 3 of this handout), but this fact has become a secret from most readers of his letters, largely because of culturally incompetent translators (yes, that's what I said!).

5.1. The translators of the NRSV, for example, substituted non-family-related words in 13 of the 40 passages in 1 Cor., using instead "believer, friends, beloved"---terms too easily read in our culture as referring to individuals, not relationships. In Paul's letter to Galatians, the translators substituted non-family terms 5 of the 10 times Paul wrote "brothers and sisters."

5.2. On the other hand, a good thing: the NRSV translators correctly render the plural Greek word "adelphoi" as "brothers and sisters" rather than the male-exclusive "brethren" found in the KJV and RSV, and as "brothers" in the NEB and NIV.

6. Our own experiences with our siblings may also hinder us from feeling the full force of Paul's powerful vision of a society of siblings.

6.1. In the ancient Mediterranean world, the tightest unity of loyalty and affection was experienced in the sibling group of sisters and brothers. This fact stands in striking contrast to the family values of modern Western culture, where it is commonly anticipated that such emotional bonds and deep trust will be found in marriage, not among siblings.

6.2. A enlightening example: 1 Cor. 6:1-8 in the NRSV and the NIV: the individualistic term "believer" is substituted for "brother" when Paul seeks to shame them for taking each other to court.

6.3. Another example: Romans 14:13: NRSV obscures the power of Paul's rhetoric by substituting the pronoun "another" for the relational noun "brother" when rendering Paul's exhortation "never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a **brother**."

Recommended: Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Fortress Press, 2001).