



Reflection # 7. Paul and Forgiveness

Paul struggled with forgiveness. Not only was he the victim of much physical abuse - “imprisonments, countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning” (2Cor.11:23-25) - he was mocked, slandered, criticized, reviled, backstabbed, hated. However, his “life in Christ” enabled him to forgive and to seek reconciliation, although not without deep suffering. For example, Paul wrote an affectionate letter to the people of Philippi where he had been beaten and imprisoned and to Philemon, asking him to receive his runaway slave, Onesimus, back as a brother in Christ.

His most troublesome church by far was Corinth. In 54 AD, while in Ephesus, Paul received shocking news of problems galore in that city - factions, incest, lawsuits in pagan courts, prostitution, homosexuality, scandals at eucharistic celebrations. Much of the division was caused by ‘Spirit People’ - wealthy, better-educated people who indulged sexual appetites (they regarded the body as evil), ate what they wished, and practised “glossalalia” thus showing they were superior! Paul responded sharply by humiliating the Spirit People, using sarcastic language and contempt (1Cor.4:8-10, 4:18-21; 11:20-22). Big mistake!

Timothy, who was in Corinth when the letter was read aloud, was shocked at Paul’s emotional explosion and insensitivity. The Spirit People, deeply wounded, became Paul’s enemies and joined with the Judaizers in attacking Paul’s integrity. Timothy rushed back to Ephesus to inform Paul of his terrible mistake. Damage control was imperative! Paul was crushed! Depressed, anxious, fearful, Paul sailed to Corinth, but detoured to Macedonia and returned to Ephesus (2Cor.1:3-9). He then wrote a tearful letter back to Corinth (2Cor.2:4). This letter is lost.

But the Spirit People were still angry with Paul, calling him untrustworthy, seeking flattery, not a true friend, not an authentic leader. Paul replied by asking them to forgive the very person who had attacked his reputation the most viciously (2Cor. 2:5-11) and to care for him. Note that it was to the Corinthians that Paul had earlier expressed his most eloquent thoughts on love (1Cor.13).

Paul wrote another letter in the spring of 55, explaining that suffering and weakness were signs of a genuinely Christian leader. Being creative through one’s suffering is authentic human living, he said, and makes visible the authentic humanity of Christ (2Cor.4:5-6).

Read: 2Cor.4:7-11; 2Cor. 4:16-18; 2Cor. 5:18-21.

1. When have I experienced opposition to my ministry?
2. How have I handled attacks on my personality and reputation?
3. How have I become creative through my suffering?

Hymn: “Where There is Love” #631