

People inside and outside the church often seem amazed that Christians argue; shocked when the church feels the painful edge of disagreement. Some other people conclude that only Christians argue, thinking that in a mosque or a synagogue people are always very pleased with each other; or that in an ashram in India or a monastery in Nepal no one ever quarrels. That's naïve.

There's nothing wrong with people arguing, if when they argue something good comes of it. There's vicious arguing that only tries to hurt the other person, but there are also the fair fights of families committed to finding a solution to a problem. Paul is having a family squabble with the church at Corinth. It's a complex discussion. To complicate it further, the quarrel is going on long distance by very slow mail and we hear only one side of it. We hear Paul's side of the story, but it's enough to surmise what's going on.

In Truman Capote's first published story, “My Side of the Matter,” he begins, “I know what is being said about me and you can take my side or theirs, that's your own business. It's my word against Eunice and Olivia-Ann's word and it should be plain enough to anyone with two good eyes which one of us has their wits about them” (reprinted in *Story*, Spring 1990, p. 40). He goes on to tell this hilarious story, from his side of the matter of course, in which we immediately figure out that not only is he slightly batty, but everyone else in the story is batty too.

In the same way, we can sense the other side of this church fight from Paul's letter. Paul's opposition in Corinth is holding out for spectacular Christianity, superstar Christianity, and a faith that's sparkling if not downright gaudy. I think of it as Christianity with rhinestones. Paul himself is a sickly person whose disabilities are obvious to all and who, by the standards of his day, is not a very good public speaker. He gets across his point okay, but lacks the touches that keep a crowd bending forward, mouths dropping. No matter the great work he's done, the dangers he's lived through, or his experiences that have almost yanked him by the hair of his head to heaven, he's not dazzling enough for the congregation in Corinth. They want a Joel Osteen-type preacher. If they were going to choose their ideal spiritual leader (and it would be nice to have him in town more often), they'd want someone tall and recently retired from the NFL, definitely handsome and currently living off the income of his second platinum music release. They're believers who prefer beautiful Christians.

Besides, forget how Paul looks and speaks, Paul persecuted the Christian church in his dark past and he's in jail a lot. Do you really want to listen to that sort of a person? That's their side of the matter. So here's what Paul says: “*For what we preach is not ourselves.*” It's not as though Paul doesn't use illustrations from his life in his teaching; he certainly does. Paul often speaks about himself. But Paul in his teaching isn't saying “Notice me!” He knows he's just a messenger. He's not like today's TV news people who themselves become celebrities and are interviewed by other news people, and who get caught in unethical behavior just like the politicians and the celebrities do.

Paul concentrates on what God does in Jesus Christ, and he says that Jesus is, well, off the scale. If we read the very last verse, verse 7, we hear him mention God's extraordinary power in Jesus Christ. Jesus is beyond what anyone before has been or done, known or experienced. Jesus has surpassed every extremely good notion of God anyone ever had. This, Paul says, is our message: the goodness of God in Jesus Christ and the power of that love offered to us through him. Paul makes his point quite clearly when he says, “*For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light*

*of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*” The light from creation and the Holy Spirit's light in our hearts connect in the person of Jesus Christ. God shines through Jesus.

In Jesus we see God's character and personality as well as God's power. In Jesus we perceive what's under, behind, and beyond this world: God, and God although giving us laws and making demands of us, loves us more than we can imagine. Paul is speaking about the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. But in Jesus we finally see God's presence and purpose in the clearest and most personal way. Far beyond the Old Testament, he's what the Old Testament was leading to. God radiates from Jesus. In Jesus we see the dawn of God's new world, the first light over the eastern hills of a brand new chapter of life on earth.

The light of Jesus' resurrection starts something like what Winston Churchill meant when he spoke to the House of Commons the day after the U.S. declared war on Japan. Churchill said, “In the past we have had a light which flickered, in the present we have a light which flames, and in the future there will be a light which shines over all the land and sea” (*A Sense Of History*, p. 35). In the same way, spiritually, a worldwide struggle continues and the world is gradually and inevitably being enlightened by Jesus Christ.

We can think of driving on a back road at night during a lightning storm. We are navigating through a world shrouded in the deepest blackness by walls of rain, and suddenly as far as we can see the road is visible because of this huge electric branch in front of us zigging and zagging between the clouds and the earth. You could light and heat New York City for a year with such a bolt of lightning. Then, after our eyes have had this gigantic flash bulb constrict our pupils, the dark seems to be darker than ever. The lightning bolt compares to the power of Jesus, and without him the world is very, very dark.

Paul writes about Jesus' conspicuous and visible power that changes lives. Jesus pulls people out of their chaos of darkness and shows them what life is all about. There's enough of God's power in Jesus to enlighten us all for eternal life. This marvelous good news from God lifts our spirit, straightens our spine, and quickens our pace. It contrasts startlingly with the weak ordinary people who tell it.

Paul puts it this way in verse 7: “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*” The message folded up on the inside is wonderful, no matter how crumpled and worse for wear the envelope around it might be. That's us. We're the envelope, merely a container in which the message is shared. The good news within belongs to God. The Corinthians can understand that. They can go to the local mall and for a couple copper coins buy an earthenware jug. No problem if the jug breaks. They're expendable. Just mold more mud and fire it.

That's us, Paul says—not valuable in worldly terms—yet entrusted with God's exceedingly good news for the entire world.

Despite our inevitable perplexities and imperfect insights, the good news about God's love in Jesus Christ is given to us to share with others. We might think it's crazy to surround a van Gogh in a cheap frame or to store the Hope Diamond in a cardboard box; but we are God's chosen vessels—ordinary humans entrusted with a message of inestimable value.

Even though the church is made up of common, bungling, even argumentative people like us, or people like Paul who can't seem to keep out of trouble, God chooses to have the good news come to us and go through us to others. God's eternal truth is wrapped up in our temporary, flawed lives. We as Christ's church can say, “I'm ordinary. I'm sinful, and Christ isn't the priority of my life, as he should be.” We can say, that and it's true, at least a good part of the time; but we can't go on to say, “Find someone else instead of me to spread the good news about Jesus.”

First of all, there isn't anyone else. God only has people like us. More importantly: It's when we admit our weakness and our lack of faith that we're most open to God's strength. When we gasp out loud: "Who am I to announce Jesus Christ to the world?" we begin to see the great treasure we carry. The message that God is so good and that God has promised to be with us even in our weakness, frail vessels that we are, is a priceless treasure, for sure.

Often, as I'm walking down the aisle of our church at the close of a service, after the prayers have been prayed and the sermon has been preached and the benediction has been given, I have to remind myself, "God will be glorified... by even me and my words." That says a lot about God. God has chosen each one of us to do divine work, granted us the most holy task of sharing God's love in word and deed.

Paul explains, *"For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."*

That is Paul's side of the argument succinctly stated. Accept it or reject it. Embrace it or denounce it. But that's the message. And it's a message that is off the scale because it's such good news. God bless this simple witness to his word...Amen.