

“Too Intelligent?”

Romans 5:1-5

We're among friends, aren't we? Doesn't Paul the Apostle sometimes get under your skin? He was obviously quite intelligent, and some of us blessed with less advanced thinking don't always appreciate those who are smarter than we are, especially when they act superior. I have a friend who is so intelligent he can intimidate people. And he knows it. It's part of his charm, so he says. I'm not always convinced it's so charming.

I was in a meeting one time with a group of ministers and sharing ideas about ministry, talking earnestly about how we could keep up with all that is going on in church life. This is perhaps an aside, but you must already know that the religious landscape is being pushed way beyond its boundaries these days. The church in which I was ordained in 1983 doesn't really exist anymore, and I'm not just talking about what has happened in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Every denomination as well as non-denominational churches have been affected. Churches are going through myriad changes right now, some of those changes of course can be attributed to the pandemic the world is experiencing, but other changes are simply connected to the rapid pace of life 2000 years after the Founder of Christianity walked the earth. In fact, there have probably been more changes in church life in the last twenty years than in the entire span of Christian history before that. Meetings like the pastors group I attended are going on everywhere because church leaders are scrambling to deal with the complexities of the challenges confronting today's and tomorrow's church and world.

One thing is irrefutable. We need smart people in the church. Paul was in many ways ahead of his time. And let's give him this much: he had the intestinal fortitude to live on the basis of his convictions. I've heard said that when Christ met Paul on the Damascus Road, he converted his soul but not necessarily his personality. Paul was as tenacious after becoming a Christian and a missionary as he was in the early years when he argued in the councils of the Pharisees and persecuted the early believers. Give Paul an issue in which he believed deeply, and like a bulldog he would sink his teeth into it and not let go.

It stands to reason, then, that Paul was opinionated. I'm condensing his remarks somewhat when I frame it this way, but look at the record. You'll find it to be true. To the women in the church at Corinth he said they were to keep their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11:6) and their mouths shut (1 Corinthians 14:34). Go ahead and look it up, if you don't believe me. He told them if they weren't married to remain that way, but if their urges were too strong to do that, to go ahead and get married. Who gave Paul the authority to talk to them this way? He does say that this is his own opinion and not any clear word he received from

the Lord. But that in itself sounds somewhat arrogant, doesn't it? He's going to give them advice whether God has his ear on it or not.

Intelligent. Strong-minded. Opinionated. You can go ahead and add pushy to the list. He was in the habit of going from town-to-town to start churches. Once they started growing, developed some leadership, and looked as if they could do ministry effectively and stand on their own, Paul took off for the next challenge. But he couldn't leave his churches alone. He wrote them and in some cases re-visited them. We are richer for it, of course, because if he hadn't done that our New Testament would be much shorter.

But, I doubt very seriously if Paul ever woke up in the morning and said to himself, "I think I'll write some holy scripture today." No. He woke up thinking, "I've got to write that church in Corinth and bring them around to doing a better job! Those churches in Galatia are a mess. They need to hear from me!" He just couldn't leave the churches alone.

When pastors take a new church position, their predecessors are supposed to fade into the background and not interfere. Not Paul. He stayed in touch. He never forgot a name. He got involved. Paul was pushy! Intelligent. Strong-minded. Opinionated. Pushy. But there is one thing you can't say about Paul. You can't say he was a braggart. Oh, he does share his personal story, and makes himself look good in the process. He tells about having been a Pharisee of the Pharisees. You talk about a climber. Paul was catching the notice of important people in Jerusalem. He had studied under Gamaliel, not only as a Jew of high-standing but he had Roman citizenship too. Blue-blooded. That's what Paul was.

But then he said all that was worthless compared to the glory of knowing Christ. The word he uses, to be perfectly honest, is not a very nice word and belongs in the bathroom, if anywhere. To tone it down a bit...he says it is *rubbish* compared to knowing Jesus Christ. No, if Paul is anything, he is not is a bragger. Except when it comes to God. The language he uses is a bit involved, but it makes its point. *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God"* (vv. 1-2).

He's not through. He says, *"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope"* (vv. 3-4). He frames all this talk about boasting around the atoning death of Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Bragging on God. God's salvation brings us hope, and according to Paul, that's worth bragging about. God's salvation,

whether we appreciate it or not, also brings suffering. We can brag even about that, says Paul. And God's salvation brings reconciliation, something worth bragging about indeed.

Hope, sufferings, reconciliation. But somehow the church has forgotten how to do that. We've forgotten, if we ever knew, how to brag on God. After all, when was the last time you had a conversation with someone and in the course of talking about all the stuff that's going on, the pandemic, or racial injustice in our country, you also bragged about God? You talked about hope? Beyond your bad back, or that kidney ailment kicking up again, you bragged about your sufferings? What about Christ's atoning and reconciling death on the cross? When was the last time you bragged on God for that?

What I mean is, when was the last time you told someone what God has done for you? Can you remember when you let another person know that your life has been graced by the One who was willing to go to such great extremes for you to live eternally? Why do you suppose we are so hesitant to share our faith? Perhaps it's because in our heart of hearts we don't think it's a big enough deal to talk about. Or we're afraid of being rejected, which may lead to a certain degree of suffering. We don't brag on God because we're not sure this salvation thing is worth bragging about all that much. We've been in church so long we've just gotten used to it. Our experience with Jesus feels like an old comfortable sweater or pair of shoes. It's just something we wear; nothing to talk about much. And besides, it's personal, something we prefer to keep to ourselves.

Fred Craddock tells about a boyhood experience. His family had lost their farm and moved into town. Craddock was a shy buy, and he says the isolation of the farm is one reason that was true. "Socially inadequate" is the way he put it. When school started he put on his "new" clothes that had been given to him by means of a couple of charities in town and he made his way to class. The teacher said, "Let's get acquainted and start our school year by everybody telling what you did on vacation." A bad start.

There was a girl who had spent a week in Florida, another who had gone to Niagara Falls. To Fred, these places were pictures in books, and these other students had actually gone there. Another student and his family had visited Washington, D. C. and seen the historical monuments and all that. Little Freddy was sitting in the back of the room growing more nervous by the moment as eventually, he knew, it would be his turn to tell what he had done on vacation. What was he going to say? He had been on the farm all summer. He hadn't gone anywhere.

Graciously, they ran out of time, but Fred knew it would be his turn the next day. Later, at home, his father could tell he was worried. "What's the matter, son?" "It didn't go well in

school today.” “Why not?” “The teacher wants us to tell what we did on vacation. All I did was dig potatoes and pick and shell purple-hull peas and things like that. I don’t have anything to tell.”

“Sounds to me like your teacher is asking you for a lie, so go ahead and give her one.” “But you and Mama have told us we’re not supposed to lie.” “That’s true, but you’re also supposed to listen to your teacher.” “What am I going to say?” “Well, just pick out the good parts of several of the other stories and put it all together. You’ll be all right.”

Sure enough, the next day it was Fred’s turn to tell about his vacation, and he tied one on. He told about how he had gone up to Washington and New York. He was somewhere this side of Niagara Falls when his teacher interrupted him and told him to meet her in the hall. “You didn’t do all that.” “No ma’am,” he said. “Well, why did you say all that?” “I was embarrassed.” “Why were you embarrassed?” “Cause all I did was work on the farm all summer,” confessed Fred.

Craddock says if he had known then what he knows now, he would have told those boys and girls that he and his family didn’t go on a vacation that summer. He would have told them about sweet potatoes. When sweet potatoes are at a certain stage of growth, they’re kind of a long bulb with a tail, which is actually the root. You can take a sweet potato by that tail, he says, and with enough practice you can knock a squirrel off a limb. Even better, he says, you can send your sister screaming into the house. There are a lot of neat things to do on the farm in the summer. I should have told them all that, Craddock says. I would have been the envy of the whole class. (Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (eds), *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 46f.)

Remember that the next time you’re given an opportunity to brag on God. You may think it’s not worth talking about, but you never know. You just never know. We talked about living as God’s saints last week. We don’t make people saints after dying like other traditions, nor do we pray to them, asking them to intercede on our behalf. But just in case Paul is now Saint Paul, and is looking down on us, we can make him proud by bragging on God. We don’t have to be know-it-alls. We just have to tell someone what God has done for us. Amen.

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