

Advice to Church Leaders II: Building Bridges

Text: ROMANS 1:1-7

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INTRODUCTION. Quite often, when the Apostle Paul wrote to one of his beloved churches, he faced a problem. And, the problem was almost always created by a group of people from the “party of the Pharisees” (ACTS 15:5). This group of people relentlessly followed Paul wherever he went. They were a very zealous (and jealous) group of people who took great delight in alienating the Apostle from his converts. For instance in ACTS 15:1-2, we see Paul and Barnabas in sharp dispute and debate with people who came down from Judea to the church at Antioch. They were teaching Christians that unless they were circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, they could not be saved. This teaching alienated Paul from his converts, because it contradicted the very gospel that Paul had preached to those Christians. Another example is GALATIANS 1:6-9. There, in his letter written to the churches in Galatia, Paul writes, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.”

When we read Paul’s letters to the churches, we can sense a tug-of-war going on. People of strong influence were trying to convince the people of one thing, and Paul was trying to convince them of another thing. But, I personally feel that the problem Paul faced as a church leader in his day is really not all that different from the kind of problem that church leaders face today. In fact, I believe we can say that the environment church leaders face today is even more hostile than the environment faced by the Apostle Paul. Today there are many more groups of people and individuals who are preaching a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. We are constantly being bombarded by false teachings from the radio and television and Internet and popular books. And, when the people we are trying to lead fall under the influence of these false teachings, the result is alienation. A chasm is created between us, as leaders, and the people we are trying to lead.

Sometimes this chasm is created even before we start leading. This is especially true when the group of people we have decided to lead or have been assigned to lead have been influenced for a period of time by a lot of different teachings that contradict the gospel we are preaching. Any leader coming into such a situation is going to be held in suspicion from the

start. He will have to earn his right to be heard.

THE LEADERSHIP OF APOSTLE PAUL. Such was the case with the Apostle Paul. Paul had a strong conviction that God had called him to the church at Rome to use his influence to help the brothers and sisters in that church grow in their relationship with God. The gospel he was bringing with him would be considered a new teaching among the majority of people who lived in Rome; they would have been pagans who believed in and worshiped many gods. But, some of the people living in Rome would have been Jews or Jewish believers. Paul knew that he would face the same kind of opposition among that group of people that he had faced among Jews in the other churches he had started and visited.

So, before the Paul even arrived in Rome, he wrote a letter that has now become a part of the New Testament. The letter begins with words that build a bridge between a leader and the people he has been called to lead. To those of us who are leaders or who aspire to become leaders, these words serve as a model. Every one of us needs to build bridges. Whether we are a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, a youth sponsor or a small group leader—whatever leadership role we may have—every one of us needs to earn the right to speak to the people we are trying to influence. This is especially true in an environment like our own with so many different kinds of gospels being preached. *So, with that in mind, let’s take a close look at how a master bridge builder went about crossing the great chasm that existed between him and the people he wanted to influence, people whom he had not yet even met.*

PAUL ESTABLISHES HIMSELF. The first seven verses of ROMANS 1 reveal several things Paul did in an attempt to earn the right to speak. The first thing he did was to establish his own identity. This is recorded in verse 1. The second thing he did was to introduce his message. That is recorded in verse 2 through verse 5. Then [thirdly], in verses 6 through 7, Paul shared about his calling.

“This is who I am. This is the message that I want to preach. And, it is to this group of people that I have been called to preach the message.” By establishing these facts about his identity and his message and the

target group to which he had been called to preach, the apostle actually built a bridge from his own heart to the hearts of people who were still undecided about him as a leader. *The secret behind the success of this master bridge builder is that he did not have a secret agenda.* Nothing was hidden. People may have ended up not liking the person. They may have decided to disagree with his message, or feel very uncomfortable about the target group to whom he had been called to preach. However, they did not have to second-guess his intentions or be confused about what they were going to hear. And, when the apostle did come and invite certain people to hear him when he spoke the message, there would be no surprises. And, the reason why was that Paul was open with them about these things from the very beginning. Without such openness, it would have been very difficult for people to follow him.

Politicians work hard to portray a correct image of who they are and establish a clear agenda of what they intend to do. They also try to make it clear who will benefit from what they intend to do. Politicians know well that a leader must do these things in order to persuade people to follow. How can we choose to follow someone about whom we know nothing? *As leaders and potential leaders in a church, we will never have the influence we should have in other people's lives unless we clearly establish our identity and our message and our calling.*

People must first see that we, as leaders, understand who we are. Paul had no doubt about his own identity. Paul believed strongly that he was a person who had been chosen by God to deliver a message. A person with such a strong conviction is not afraid of any hazard that might come his way. He is not afraid to die. Such a leader becomes a tower of strength to those who agree with his values. But, such a leader becomes a terror to those who hold different values. Paul's enemies quickly learned that the only way to silence his message was to destroy him.

Last week, we celebrated the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. He is a good example of a strong leader. He believed strongly that he was a person chosen by God to deliver a particular message. To those who believed the message, he became a tower of strength. But, he became a terror to those who opposed the message, and in their minds they had no option but to destroy him.

All of us must strive to become strong leaders. We must first work hard at establishing our identity. A close look at the words Paul used to describe his own identity should help us in the process of establishing our own identity. Let's take a look at those words.

Paul's Identity. In verse 1 of the first chapter of ROMANS there are three key words that describe the way Paul thought about his own identity. They are *slave*, *apostle*, and (one) *set apart*. Think about the meaning of these words.

First of all, think of what it means to be a slave of Jesus Christ. Paul lived in a world where human bondage was a way of life. Rome was built on the foundation of slavery. Men were bought and sold and bred like animals. They were overworked and maimed and killed at the whim of their masters. Rome by law granted the slave owner the absolute right of ownership. Some rich men owned tens of thousands of slaves. And, a man was considered poor if he did not own at least ten slaves. Some historians compute the slave population of the city of Rome as two slaves to every free man.

There is no way to tone down the radical word Paul used in verse one to describe his relationship to Jesus Christ. The term *servant* used in some translations almost seems too mild. The Greek word must bear its full weight in the social context in which it is found. Paul wants his readers to know that he is totally controlled by the One to whom he belongs, One who has bought him with a dear price. That is the first thing about himself that he wants his readers to know.

The second thing has to do with his commission. He is not just a slave who sits around doing nothing. He is a slave with an order from His master. He is an apostle. The One who owns him has commissioned him. In his writings, Paul often used the word *apostle* to describe himself. In the Bible, the word *apostle* refers to men appointed by Christ to carry out a very specific task. An apostle is one who has been sent to do something.

According to 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-18, the task of preaching the gospel that Paul had been sent to carry out was not something he did just because it was the natural thing for him to do. *Even if he did not feel like doing it, he still had to discharge the trust that had been committed to him.*

Many people tell me that the reason they don't share the gospel of Jesus Christ to other people because it goes against their personality to do so. But, that excuse does not make any sense to the slave carrying out his Master's orders. The slave must obey whether or not he feels like it and even if it goes against his personality.

Paul was a slave who had been sent out by His Master to perform a specific task. These two things were clear in His mind. And then, there was a third thing; namely, that His Master had chosen him to be single-

minded in performing his task.

[Thirdly,] the words “set apart” are used to round out the how this apostle viewed himself. In our society today we breed athletes to win. Even from the time some people are in grade school and middle school they are trained to focus on the goal of winning in a certain sport. All their energy and zeal must be devoted toward reaching that goal.

The apostle Paul knew well what it meant to be set apart. As a young man, he had not been bred to win an athletic competition, but he had been bred to be zealous and focused on one particular task. He had been trained to be single-minded in what he did. The Greek word translated as *set apart* is the same word that gives meaning to the term *Pharisee*. Pharisees were people who considered themselves set apart to serve the Law of Moses. Paul was a former Pharisee. He had outstripped all his fellow Pharisees in his zeal for the traditions of his ancestors. But now, he had a new focus. He now had an understanding that he had been chosen—from the time of his birth and even before his birth—to reveal God’s Son in his ministry to the Gentiles.

One thing Paul could never be criticized for was a lack of zeal. Prior to his conversion it was zeal to persecute the church; after his conversion, it was zeal to proclaim the message of Christ. Many Christians believe they have been chosen by God before the foundations of the world to be saved. *Far fewer people who profess to be Christian have the conviction that they have been set apart by God before the foundations of the world to proclaim the gospel.* If more people had that conviction, we would see a lot more zeal in the church.

So by looking at the words *slave* and *apostle* and *set apart* we are able to get a glimpse at how Paul looked at himself. The first thing he wanted his readers to do was to understand how he viewed himself. That was the first step he used to build a bridge across the chasm of suspicion, a bridge that would lead to their hearts. The second step was to share the vision of the message he had been sent to proclaim. It was to share the vision of the gospel message.

Declaring the Message. There is no other message more vital to mankind than the message of the gospel of God. In order to build his bridge, the Apostle Paul needed to impress upon the hearts and minds of his readers that the message His master had commanded Him to preach—and that he was determined to preach with every ounce of energy in his body—this message is more important than anything else that has ever been said or will ever be said.

In verses 2 through 4 we see Paul stressing the importance of the message by telling his readers that this gospel did not conflict with their scriptures. In fact, it was the very thing the prophets of old had talked about. Those prophets had talked about a Messiah coming, and now He had come. The message is all about the Messiah. According to genealogy he is David’s son, but the powerful acts of God have also declared Him to be God’s Son: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then, in verse five, *Paul gives a very brief testimony of his own encounter with the Messiah.* He confessed that it was Jesus who had given him the grace and had made him the apostle that he now is. Paul probably was thinking about his own conversion experience that took place while he was traveling on the road to Damascus with orders to arrest Christians. It was there that Jesus showed him grace. Paul’s conversion was quick. He heard the voice of Jesus; and as soon as he heard, his heart was filled with fear. He said, “What shall I do, Lord?” The first response of faith is always obedience. “I believe in You. Now just tell me what I should do, and I will obey.” That is how Paul responded on the road to Damascus.

Shortly after that God answered Paul’s question. He first revealed the answer to Ananias. Ananias was the first Christian to follow up on Paul’s conversion. The Lord spoke these words to Ananias, “Go (to Paul)! This man is my chosen instrument to carry out my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name (ACTS 9:15).” Many years later the Holy Spirit said to the praying group at Antioch, “Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them (ACTS 13:2).”

The second step the Apostle Paul used to build a bridge to the hearts of the people is to stress the importance of the gospel message that he was coming to preach. His whole letter is devoted to explaining that message in detail. And, he would eventually come in person to explain it in even more detail. All that would come later. The important thing at the beginning was to build a bridge, and Paul did that by stressing that the gospel message he was coming to preach was of vital importance. “This gospel is about the very person that the prophets had hoped would come, and now God has used His mighty works to declare He has come, and my own life testifies to the fact that He has come and poured out His saving grace.”

Yesterday the leadership of our church attended a seminar on stewardship. Our speaker asked us if we had ever heard the saying, “Money follows vision.” He told us that the statement is a myth. He said, “That which motivates people to give is not just vision. It is

leaders who have a vision and have demonstrated that their vision produces results. People will follow such leaders, and they will financially support such leaders.”

Paul Shares His Calling. In trying to win the confidence of his readers, the Apostle Paul said, “I have a vision. It is the gospel of God. It is the Person of Jesus Christ. And, this vision has produced results in my life.” We all need to build bridges with the people we desire to influence, and such a testimony is a vital step in the process.

And then, there is also the matter of who we hope to influence with our leadership. Our fallen natures make it necessary to emphasize this point. All of us have a tendency to be prejudiced. When it comes to helping other people, all men have a tendency to discriminate. Included in our comfort zone are people who think like us and talk like us and act like us. Our fallen nature makes it very difficult for us to move beyond our comfort zones. Why should we move beyond our comfort zones? Why should we make a special effort to mingle with people who are different than ourselves?

The answer is simple. They need the gospel message. The genius of the epistle to the Romans is that it is universal in nature. No one is excluded. In building his bridge, Paul made it clear that he was coming to share the gospel message to the Gentiles. But, in verse 6, he made an obvious reference to let them know that they were also included. “And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” And then, in verse 7, we read, “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...”

The logic is simple and straightforward. This gospel is for everyone who believes. If any man anywhere has discovered a universal remedy for sin and keeps it for himself and people like him he is totally irresponsible. It is like having a sure cure for cancer locked in your own safe just in case you those who are like you may need it someday.

The benefits of salvation are summed up in verse seven. “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace and peace are two of the most comprehensive words in the Bible. **Grace** refers to all of God’s redeeming acts throughout eternity. It takes us from Old Testament prophecies to the cross and from the cross to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. **Peace** is the assurance that I as a person have been brought into fellowship with God through Christ.

Paul desired that all the people in Rome, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds could experience

these benefits. He desired that all the people in the whole world could experience these benefits.

APPLICATION. I have little desire to debate written statements made by churches that define target groups. And, I have little desire to debate whether or not the name of our church will ever change or should ever change. Nor do I have a desire to prove that our church can become more ethnically diverse than what it is. What we become in the future is not my responsibility. My responsibility is in the present. And, it all has to do with attitude.

With all my heart, I must desire to reach all the people in my community and in my world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And, the desire must be more than words. I must be emotionally moved when I see the suffering of other people even if they are different from me and outside of my comfort zone. And, I must act upon the orders that have been given to me by my Master. I must do something practical to take the precious gospel that has been entrusted to me as a steward and pass it on to all people.

We must not worry about what things appear to be like on the surface. It is our attitudes that are important. It is our attitudes and not our name that will define what we become in the future.

As church leaders and potential church leaders, we must understand that the people we want to influence will not naturally follow us. Suspicion and doubt separate us from those we desire to lead. It is for that reason that we must build bridges. So let’s consider using the model of a master bridge builder to help us. It will not guarantee that everyone will follow us. In fact, if we use Paul’s model, the suffering we experience will probably increase. It did for Paul. Those who oppose the gospel message will realize how determined we are, and they will conclude that the only way to silence us is to destroy us in one way or another. But, if we use Paul’s model, then we will become a tower of strength to those who hold the same values.

Our church and community needs vision. But, even more than that, we need leaders who have vision. You don’t have to take a course or attend a seminar to experience the same qualities that made the Apostle Paul such an effective leader. You only have to know who you are and believe in the power of the message you are preaching and have a desire to share that message to all people, even those outside of your comfort zone. If you can let the people who you are trying to lead see these qualities, then you can be sure that God will use you in a significant way to build His kingdom.