

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paul's letter to American Christians

I would like to share with you an imaginary letter from the pen of the Apostle Paul. The postmark reveals that it comes from the port city of Troas. On opening the letter I discovered that it was written in Greek rather than in English. After working assiduously with the translation for several weeks, I think I have now deciphered its true meaning. If the content of this epistle sounds strangely Kingian instead of Paulinian, attribute it to my lack of complete objectivity rather than Paul's lack of clarity. Here is the letter as it stands before me.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to you who are in America, grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

For many years I have longed to see you. I have heard so much about you and of what you are doing. News has come to me regarding the fascinating and astounding advances that you have made in the scientific realm. I have learned of your dashing subways and flashing aeroplanes. Through your scientific genius you have dwarfed distance and placed time in chains. You have made it possible to eat breakfast in Paris, France, and lunch in New York City. I have also heard of your skyscraper buildings with their prodigious towers rising heavenward. I am told of your great medical advances and the curing of many dread plagues and diseases, thereby prolonging your lives and offering greater security and physical well-being. All of that is marvellous. You can do so many things in your day that I

could not do in the Greco-Roman world of my day. You travel distances in a single day that in my generation required three months. That is wonderful. What tremendous strides in the areas of scientific and technological development you have made!

But, America, I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress. It appears to me that your moral progress lags behind your scientific progress, your mentality outdistances your morality, and your civilization outshines your culture. How much of your modern life can be summarized in the words of your poet Thoreau: "Improved means to an unimproved end." Through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighbourhood, but you have failed to employ your moral and spiritual genius to make of it a brotherhood. So, America, the atomic bomb you have to fear today is not merely that deadly weapon which can be dropped from an aeroplane on the heads of millions of people, but that atomic bomb which lies in the hearts of men, capable of exploding into the most staggering hate and the most devastating selfishness. Therefore I would urge you to keep your moral advances abreast of your scientific advances.

I find it necessary to remind you of the responsibility laid upon you to represent the ethical principles of Christianity amid a time that popularly disregards them. That was a task laid on me. I understand that there are many Christians in America who give their ultimate allegiance to man-made systems and customs. They are afraid to be different. Their great concern is to be accepted socially. They live by some such principle as this: "Everybody is doing it, so it must be all right." For so many of you morality merely reflects group consensus. In your modern sociological lingo, the mores are accepted as the right ways. You have unconsciously come to believe that what is right is determined by Gallup polls.

American Christians, I must say to you what I wrote to the Roman Christians years ago: "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and

eternity. Your highest loyalty is to God, and not to the mores or the folkways, the state or the nation, or any man-made institution. If any earthly institution or custom conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to oppose it. You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God. In a time when men are surrendering the high values of the faith you must cling to them, and despite the pressure of an alien generation preserve them for children yet unborn. You must be willing to challenge unjust mores, to champion unpopular causes, and to buck the status quo. You are called to be the salt of the earth. You are to be the light of the world. You are to be that vitally active leaven in the lump of the nation.

I understand that you have an economic system in America known as capitalism, through which you have accomplished wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world, and you have built the greatest system of production that history has ever known. All of this is marvellous. But, Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your capitalism. I still contend that the love of money is the root of much evil and may cause a man to become a gross materialist. I am afraid that many among you are more concerned in making money than in accumulating spiritual treasures.

The misuse of capitalism may also lead to tragic exploitation. This has so often happened in your nation. I am told that one tenth of 1 per cent of the population controls more than 40 per cent of the wealth. America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses and given luxuries to the classes. If you are to be a truly Christian nation, you must solve this problem. You cannot solve it by turning to Communism, for Communism is based on an ethical relativism, a metaphysical materialism, a crippling totalitarianism, and a withdrawal of basic freedom that no Christian can accept. But you can work within the framework of democracy to bring about a better distribution of wealth. You must use your powerful economic resources to eliminate poverty from the earth. God never intended one people to

live in superfluous and inordinate wealth, while others know only deadening poverty. God wants all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and he has left in this universe "enough and to spare" for that purpose.

I would that I might be with you in person, so that I could say to you face to face what I am forced to put down in writing. Oh, how I long to share your fellowship!

Let me say something about the church. Americans, I must remind you, as I have told so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. When the church is true to its nature, it knows neither division nor disunity. I am told that within American Protestantism there are more than two hundred and fifty denominations. The tragedy is not merely that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that many groups claim to possess absolute truth. Such narrow sectarianism destroys the unity of the Body of Christ. God is neither Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, nor Episcopalian. God transcends our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to know this, America.

I am happy to hear that there is a growing concern for church unity and ecumenicity in America. I have word that you have organized a National Council of Churches and that most of your major denominations are affiliated with the World Council of Churches. All of this is marvellous. Continue to follow this creative path. Keep these church councils alive and continue to give them your unstinted support. I have the encouraging news that there has been some recent dialogue between Roman Catholics and Protestants. I am told that several Protestant churchmen from your nation accepted Pope John's invitation to be observers at a recent ecumenical council in Rome. This is both a significant and healthy sign. I hope it is the beginning of a development that will bring all Christians closer and closer together.

Another thing that disturbs me about the American church is that you have a white church and a Negro church. How can segregation exist in the true Body of Christ? I am told that there is more integration within the entertaining world and other secular agencies than there is in the Christian church. How appalling this is!

I understand that there are Christians among you who try to find biblical bases to justify segregation and argue that the Negro is inferior by nature. Oh, my friends, this is blasphemy and against everything that the Christian religion stands for. I must repeat what I have said to many Christians before, that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Moreover, I must reiterate the words I uttered on Mars Hill: "God that made the world and all things therein . . . hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."

So, Americans, I must urge you to be rid of every aspect of segregation. Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ. It substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship, and relegates persons to the status of things. It scars the soul and degrades the personality. It inflicts the segregated with a false sense of inferiority, while confirming the segregator in a false estimate of his own superiority. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. The underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of racial segregation.

I praise your Supreme Court for rendering a historic desegregation decision and also persons of goodwill who have accepted this as a great moral victory, but I understand that some brothers have risen up in open defiance and that their legislative halls ring loud with such words as "nullification" and "interposition." Because these brothers have lost the true meaning of democracy and Christianity, I urge each of you to plead patiently with them. With understanding and goodwill, you are obligated to seek to change their attitudes. Let them know that in standing against integration, they are not only opposing the noble precepts of your democracy, but also the eternal edicts of God himself.

I hope the churches of America will play a significant role in conquering segregation. It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons and challenge the status quo. The church must move out into the arena of social action. First, you must see that the church removes

the yoke of segregation from its own body. Then you must seek to make the church increasingly active in social action outside its doors. It must seek to keep channels of communication open between the races. It must take an active stand against the injustices which Negroes confront in housing, education, police protection, and in city and state courts. It must exert its influence in the area of economic justice. As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils. If you as Christians will accept the challenge with devotion and valour, you will lead the misguided men of your nation from the darkness of falsehood and fear to the light of truth and love.

May I say just a word to those of you who are the victims of the evil system of segregation. You must continue to work passionately and vigorously for your God-given and constitutional rights. It would be both cowardly and immoral for you patiently to accept injustice. You cannot in good conscience sell your birthright of freedom for a mess of segregated pottage. But as you continue your righteous protest always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Be sure that the means you employ are as pure as the end you seek. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using love as your chief weapon. Let no man pull you so low that you hate him. Always avoid violence. If you sow the seeds of violence in your struggle, unborn generations will reap the whirlwind of social disintegration.

In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you have neither a desire to defeat him nor a desire to get even with him for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. By having this attitude, you will keep your struggle on high Christian levels.

Many persons realize the urgency of eradicating the evil of segregation. Many Negroes will devote their lives to the cause of freedom, and many white persons of goodwill and strong moral sensitivity will dare to speak for justice. Honesty

impels me to admit that such a stand requires a willingness to suffer and sacrifice. Do not despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake. When you testify for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical. You may even be called a Communist merely because you believe in the brotherhood of man. Sometimes you may be put in jail. If such is the case, you must honourably grace the jail with your presence. It may mean losing a job or social standing with your particular group. Even if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian. Do not worry about persecution, American Christians; you must accept this when you stand up for a great principle. I speak with some authority, for my life was a continual round of persecutions. After my conversion I was rejected by the disciples at Jerusalem. Later I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem. I was jailed at Philippi, beaten at Thessalonica, mobbed at Ephesus, and depressed at Athens. I came away from each of these experiences more persuaded than ever that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities . . . nor things present, nor things to come . . . shall . . . separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The end of life is not to be happy nor to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, but to do the will of God, come what may. I have nothing but praise for those of you who have already stood unflinchingly before threats and intimidation, inconvenience and unpopularity, arrest and physical violence, to declare the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. For such noble servants of God there is the consolation of the words of Jesus: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

I must bring my writing to a close. Silas is waiting to deliver this letter, and I must take leave for Macedonia, from which an urgent plea has come requesting help. But

before leaving, I must say to you, as I said to the Church of Corinth, that love is the most durable power in the world. Throughout the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good. This has been the chief quest of ethical philosophy. This was one of the big questions of Greek philosophy. The Epicureans and the Stoics sought to answer it; Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it. What is the *summum bonum* of life? I think I have found the answer, America. I have discovered that the highest good is love. This principle is at the centre of the cosmos. It is the great unifying force of life. God is love. He who loves has discovered the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality; he who hates stands in immediate candidacy for nonbeing.

American Christians, you may master the intricacies of the English language and you may possess the eloquence of articulate speech; but even though you speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, you are like sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

You may have the gift of scientific prediction and understand the behaviour of molecules, you may break into the storehouse of nature and bring forth many new insights, you may ascend to the heights of academic achievement, so that you have all knowledge, and you may boast of your great institutions of learning and the boundless extent of your degrees; but, devoid of love, all of these mean absolutely nothing.

But even more, Americans, you may give your goods to feed the poor, you may bestow great gifts to charity, and you may tower high in philanthropy, but if you have not love, your charity means nothing. You may even give your body to be burned, and die the death of a martyr, and your spilled blood may be a symbol of honour for generations yet unborn, and thousands may praise you as one of history's supreme heroes; but even so, if you have not love, your blood is spilled in vain. You must come to see that a man may be self-centred in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. His generosity may feed his ego and his piety his pride. Without love, benevolence becomes egotism and martyrdom becomes spiritual pride.

The greatest of all virtues is love. Here we find the true meaning of the Christian faith and of the cross. Calvary is a telescope through which we look into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking into time. Out of the hugeness of his generosity God allowed his only-begotten Son to die that we may live. By uniting yourselves with Christ and your brothers through love you will be able to matriculate in the university of eternal life. In a world depending on force, coercive tyranny, and bloody violence, you are challenged to follow the way of love. You will then discover that unarmed love is the most powerful force in all the world.

I must say good-bye. Extend my warmest greeting to all the saints in the household of Christ. Be of good comfort; be of one mind; and live in peace.

It is improbable that I will see you in America, but I will meet you in God's eternity. And now unto him who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to him be power and authority, for ever and ever. Amen.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pilgrimage to nonviolence

In my senior year in theological seminary, I engaged in the exciting reading of various theological theories. Having been raised in a rather strict fundamentalist tradition, I was occasionally shocked when my intellectual journey carried me through new and sometimes complex doctrinal lands, but the pilgrimage was always stimulating, gave me a new appreciation for objective appraisal and critical analysis, and knocked me out of my dogmatic slumber.

Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I had never found in fundamentalism. I became so enamoured of the insights of liberalism that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything it encompassed. I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.

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A basic change in my thinking came when I began to question some of the theories that had been associated with so-called liberal theology. Of course, there are aspects of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, and its refusal to abandon the best lights of reason. The contribution of liberalism to the philological-historical criticism of biblical literature has been of immeasurable value and should be defended with religious and scientific passion.

But I began to question the liberal doctrine of man. The