

Not a Pleaser
Galatians 1
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First & Central Presbyterian Church
Wilmington, Delaware
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He was reputed to be, “the most trusted man in America.” His was the voice that announced the shooting of President Kennedy, and his was the face, tight with emotion, that announced the President’s subsequent death. He covered the nascent space program, adding his own element of amazement and wonder; he was the first to anchor televised coverage of the Olympic Games; and his “no-win” assessment of the Viet Nam War is said to be a significant factor in Lyndon Johnson’s decision not to run for a second full term.

Walter Cronkite was a fixture in nearly every American home for almost twenty years beginning in 1962. He was spokesman and commentator during one of this country’s most turbulent eras and his broadcast was objective, concise, and most of all, trusted. He closed most of his news programs with the tagline, “and that’s the way it is...”

Americans believed that when Walter Cronkite said “that’s the way it is” – that it really was. The message and the messenger merged in inextricable credulity giving confidence in communication and comfort in courier during a time when this country’s faith and trust waned in a president who proclaimed, “I am not a crook,” proved to be just that. Cronkite, on the other hand, earned his place on the small screen in our living rooms and appeared to honor that invitation with integrity, character, and honesty. He rarely permitted emotions to color his words and when closing his broadcast with opinion or commentary, omitted his standard benediction.

There isn’t a preacher alive who doesn’t crave Cronkite’s rapport and tensile bond that he had with listeners and viewers—the vast majority of whom he’d never met nor did he know them personally.

Pastors, on the other hand, strive to infiltrate the lives of their congregations and, in particular, to intersect at times of greatest stress. One of the most indelible lessons I heard in seminary came from a recent graduate who said about his church, “they’ll listen to just about anything from the pulpit if you visit their mothers in the hospital.” People, not just those in the pews, will listen, even when agreement is a distant hope, when they know that you care – honestly and personally. The most homiletically gifted preacher will fail in their call to ministry if they are not a pastor first. The message can’t be trusted if the messenger isn’t willing to invest in the lives of the congregation.

Walter Cronkite managed to do that with millions of his audience members despite the fact that he was merely a two-dimensional presence. In contrast, the Apostle Paul invested years of his life, day in and day out, with the people of Galatia, yet apparently never garnered the moniker, “most trusted man” of that region. Although he labored among them, giving of himself freely and nearly completely, whatever level of trust,

confidence, and integrity that was laid as a foundation of their relationship, crumbled as he was embarking on his next new church development.

Paul, as we know, had issues and while he wrestled with his personal demons he was, by all accounts, a person of deep passion and integrity. There was nothing lukewarm about the evangelist's commitment to both destroying and then promoting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Few are more rabid than the reformed. A whiff of second-hand smoke in the face of one who recently kicked the habit never fails to elicit indignant and emotive response. Paul was on fire about Christianity: first as fervent opponent who supervised the stoning of Stephen, and then, following his enlightening experience on the road to Damsacus, a zealous evangelist for the cause of Christ.

However, Paul, was at a distinct disadvantage. He wasn't a charter member of the "I walked with Jesus" Facebook group and he had veered from the original mission statement of the church – meaning he expanded its target market from just Jews to Gentiles much to the chagrin of some of the folks who were on the cradle role with Jesus.

Consequently he was a little sensitive about his less than robust credentials.

Typically, when addressing a letter in the days of old, following a brief yet warm greeting, one would include a few sentences of gratitude for the addressee. In all of the other authentic letters of Paul's in the Bible he includes an opening paragraph in which he highlights all of the wonderful programs and outreach of the congregation, he re-connects with old friends and colleagues, and then he gently underscores some of the major themes of ministry. It's typically flowing and generous – even prone to hyperbole – proof that Paul could be a pleaser when he wanted to lull his reader into a gratuitous haze of accord.

Galatians, quite to the contrary, proves that at times, Paul was not a pleaser.

He first introduces himself – as an apostle, as one sent – not from some human organization or entity, but from God in Jesus Christ himself. Paul directs the letter not to just everyone in the church, but "to all the members of God's family who are with me!"

I remember a president who, after his second election, in essence said that he looked forward to working with all Americans who agreed with him! Paul's clear that even in days after it's founding, the church in Galatia was partisan and had split into camps. He apparently had little use for those who were not in his camp and shows his contempt by blowing passed any section of gratitude or thanksgiving and writes instead:

"I am astonished!"

That translates from the original Greek as something like, "what is the matter with you people?"

Paul is ticked – and he doesn't pull any punches.

Clearly someone is accusing him of spreading a false message and so Paul faces the crisis of his authority head-on: "True, I didn't walk with the earthly Jesus – that's no secret and my detractors are right about that. But that doesn't dilute the truth of the gospel and in as much as I worked hard to defeat it, I'm now willing to die for it."

He wasn't the most trusted man among Christians in Galatia, as too many had known him in his former life, and most knew that he was a Johnny-come-lately – but Paul's point is that the messenger and the message aren't mutually dependent. Should we believe something just because we like the person promoting the thought? Plenty of charismatic preachers and politicians have relied on that tactic – but Paul dismisses such ploys and asks rhetorically, "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

I'm not sure a lot of pastors would put that line in their cover letter for a job application: "Just so you know, I am a servant of Christ and not interested in pleasing people the likes of you!"

There's a line that we all walk to stay in relationship with people and at the same time to do what we believe is the right thing, the faithful thing – even if it's not what they want to hear or do.

I'm sure every relationship, every profession deals with that tension – but I'm most keenly aware of how it impacts my role as a pastor here.

How do we spend our money and resources – is it more faithful to do we save for a rainy day of building repairs or do we spend it now in ministry to the city?

Is it more faithful to protect our building as a bit of a monument to ourselves or do we wear it out with groups and events using it as intended?

Is our worship and music meant to be professional and somewhat unapproachable or do we allow lay people of varying talent to participate and lead?

If we're committed to the equality of all persons and preach about basic civil rights for gay and lesbian persons – if they're not allowed to be married here is it faithful that we should be the wedding chapel for the Hotel DuPont?

I wonder how long a church like this can stay in business. Without our income from the endowment we'd be a fragment of ourselves. How long do you think we'd keep the doors open on congregational giving of \$180,000 or even \$200,000 per year?

These are conversations that we need to have, that should always be in the front of our minds, that should challenge us to live the Gospel of Christ as its been given us – for if

we learn anything from Paul, it's that our loyalty is not to one another regardless of how much we like and trust each other –that we're not here to be pleasers – but that we're called to be servants of Christ and while none of us walked this earth with Jesus, all of us know that Christ walks with us and in that we have our confidence, our hope, and our trust. Amen.