

PAUL: AN APOSTOLIC EXAMPLE

By D.A. Carson

“Remember me in all things,” Paul writes, “and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you” (1 Cor. 11:1).

There are several reasons why this passage demands that we ponder it.

First, the theme is frequent in Paul’s letters, reflecting the high importance that the apostle himself assigns it. Because in those days most sons learned their trade by imitating their father, Paul can turn the father/ son relation he has with his converts to the same end: “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me” (1 Cor. 4:15-16). A primary reason for sending Timothy to them was so that he might remind them of Paul’s “ways in Christ,” which is in agreement with what Paul actually teaches (4:17).

Second, implicitly Paul expects this important task of modeling the Christian way to be undertaken by others. He is certainly not holding himself up as the only believer to be imitated. If he exhorts the Corinthians to follow his example, it is because he follows the example of Christ – which of course others are to do as well (e.g. Phil. 2:5). If he tells the Philippians to “note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern” (Phil. 3:17), surely he is saying that such people themselves are to be imitated, because they imitate Paul, who imitates Christ. When Paul reviews some of the Christian graces amply displayed in Timothy and Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:19-30), part of his purpose is to provide models for others to value: “Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem” (Phil. 2:29). This means we should hear 1 Corinthians 11:1 not only as a call to imitate Paul, but as a call to be those whom others imitate.

Third, the specific contexts of the various commands to imitate Paul reflect the wide sweep of what the apostle has in mind. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, for instance, Paul is bringing to a conclusion his lengthy treatment of meat offered to idols (8:1-11:1). A major part of his argument has been his own apostolic example (chap. 9): though he has many “rights,” he has not used them where they get in the way of the progress of the Gospel. His personal self-discipline (9:24-27) and his principled self-denial are alike designed to save as many as possible (9:22). And in these matters Paul is to be imitated.

If Timothy and Epaphroditus are held up as models (Phil. 1), it is because Timothy is exemplary in being concerned for the well-being of others, and Epaphroditus in willingly risking his life for the sake of the Gospel – and then being more concerned about how the believers back home will be distressed when they hear the news than about his own discomfort.

Fourth, the perennial importance of this theme has become especially acute in contemporary Western culture, for at least two reasons.

(1) Ancient pagans could be ever so religious, but for most of them their religion had little to do with ethics. A disturbing drift in much current evangelicalism is repeating the pattern. Large-scale hypocrisy even among ministers is no longer shocking. At one time ministers of the Gospel were perceived to be among the most reliable, honorable, truth-telling people in the culture; now we rank with used-car salesmen.

But many people want to see the truth, not just hear it. We remember the line from *My Fair Lady*: “Words, words, words: I’m sick of words. Sing me no song, read me no rhyme, don’t waste my time, *show* me.” This is not a subtle plea for Christian “witness” that holds to high moral standards but never gets around to articulating the Gospel. We need words; we have a message to proclaim. But that message is adorned and given new credibility when people perceive that it has taken root in our lives. One of my students, a bachelor in his mid-thirties, was recently asked by a post-doctoral scholar from China to whom he had been witnessing and who had become very interested in the Christian faith, “Are you a virgin?” The ensuing discussion showed that the Chinese scholar was simply checking whether or not practice matched profession.

(2) Because our culture retains fewer and fewer values from its Judeo-Christian years, fewer and fewer practical habits of life are picked up by osmosis. They must be taught and *modeled*. How do you have family devotions? How do you bring up your children? How do you pray? What are habits that husbands and wives can adopt to bring their marriages into greater conformity with the Word? What do you do with your money? What does Christian hospitality look like? How does one nurture a godly mind? What does it mean to be passionate for Christ and His gospel? How do I share my faith? Exactly what does self-denial mean?

Sing me no song, read me no rhyme, don’t waste my time, *show* me. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

D.A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago, is at Tyndale house, Cambridge, England this year.