

“Would Paul Have Been a Good Presbyterian?”

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Romans 8:28-39

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We are beginning our annual fall sermon series this morning, and—as I hope you have read in your Harbinger—our topic for the upcoming weeks is the Apostle Paul.

During the course of this series, we’ll explore some of the ways that Paul’s radical message of the love and hope in Jesus Christ is good news for us today, as much as it was for the early followers of Jesus in Paul’s day.

Along the way, we’ll address a variety of questions:
Are Paul’s beliefs perfectly aligned with our Presbyterian beliefs?
Where has Paul influenced our own church’s theology for the good?

And what do we do with the problematic passages Paul wrote?

What did Paul believe about sin?

About the cross?

About reconciliation in a divided world?

What did it mean, according to Paul, to be a member of a church?

And how does all that affect the way we participate in our church?

A few notes as we begin, just to make sure we’re all on the same page:

1. Paul’s missionary work basically took place in the 50s. So we’re talking roughly 15, 20, 25 years after the ministry of Jesus.

2. Paul's letters were written before the Gospels were written. I hope you know that. If you didn't, now you do. What that means is that the letters from Paul give us the earliest glimpse that we have of what the early church looked like.
3. The early church did not look the same. Paul's take on what it meant to follow Jesus was different in particular ways from what others at that time proclaimed about Jesus.
4. The Gospel writer Luke talks a lot about Paul in the book of Acts. We're not going to be focusing on Luke's description of Paul in this sermon series. We may reference it along the way, but the primary sources will come from what we know Paul himself wrote.
5. There's debate among biblical scholars about whether certain letters that were attributed to Paul were actually written by Paul. Most of our focus will come from the 7 letters that we know for sure Paul wrote:

1 Thessalonians
1 & 2 Corinthians
Galatians
Philippians
Philemon
Romans

Enough introduction.

To get us going in this series, I chose one of my favorite passages from Paul in all of scripture:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What’s Paul talking about here?
He’s talking about BELONGING.

In life and in death, we belong to God and can never be separated from God.

BELONGING is a very important idea for the Apostle Paul.

Do you remember the first scripture passage we heard today?

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

According to Paul, we not only belong to God.
We also belong to one another.

So...to answer the question that is our sermon title for today:
“Would Paul Have Been a Good Presbyterian?”

With respect to Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul would have made an excellent Presbyterian! Because belonging is at the heart of so much of who we are and so much of what we believe...

Dinaw Mengestu is an Ethiopian American novelist who came to this country as a boy, a refugee, back in 1980. His family was resettled in Peoria, Illinois.

“It was a startling American childhood,” he writes, “made more so by the fact that we spent our weekends at a Southern Baptist church on the other side of town. My parents, raised in the Ethiopian Orthodox church, had never heard of Southern Baptists before coming to America.

“But every Sunday, there we were, in the front pews, the first and only Black family to have ever attended that church.”

Not too long ago, Mengestu says that he took his wife and two children on a cross-country road trip, and they took a detour into Peoria, to see where he grew up.

“I wanted to see if we could find Sharon, one of the members of the church my family had been especially close to... We arrived unannounced at her doorstep just in time to take her to lunch... On the drive to the restaurant, Sharon pointed out the Greek Orthodox church near her home.”

‘Your mom and dad tried to go there,’ she said, ‘but the priest... told them not to come back. He said they would be more comfortable somewhere else.’

Mengestu said he had never heard that story.
Sharon went on.

‘Your parents had a hard time fitting in,’ she said.

Mengestu was about to ask Sharon how they were able to fit in at the Southern Baptist church that became their home, but Sharon saw the question coming.

‘Your mom and dad met with Brother Gene, and he saw that they were good people and told them they would be welcome in his church. Before you all came, though, he went around and called every single person [in the church]. He said if anyone gave your family a hard time,

they'd have hell to pay for it. And that was it. I don't think anyone bothered you at all.”¹

Now...I would ever do that—call all of you, to talk one-on-one about belonging, about accepting everyone who walks through our doors...there's no need to do that at this church.

But I do want to preach about belonging.

Because there may not be a more important message and focus for followers of Jesus in our society today.

- When the surgeon general warns about the epidemic of loneliness for adults in our country, and the myriad of health problems that it causes...
- When teenagers are struggling with mental health stability at greater rates than ever before...

I wonder if Paul's message is precisely what we need to hear. That we belong to one another.

As David Brooks notes in one of his recent books:

“Researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education recently asked ten thousand middle and high school students if their parents cared more about personal achievements or whether they were kind.”²

What do you think those students said?

¹ Dinaw Mengestu, “The Border Is Not the Problem,” Time, July 20, 2024, found at [The Border Is Not the Problem | TIME](#).

² David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, New York: Random House, 2019.

“Eighty percent said their parents cared more about [their] achievements [than whether they were kind].”

In other words, “individual success over relational bonds.”³

We are desperate...for belonging.

Or let’s bring it even closer to home.
 How many of you remember your first Sunday in these pews?
 For those of you who do, I want you to think about the question
 that I suspect you were asking at that time:

Will this church be the right fit for me?
 Will I...do I...belong here?

It’s a powerful thing, when someone shows you—without even
 knowing you—that you belong...

In fact, it can alter the course of your life.

I’ve told you before about how I still remember the names of my
 elementary school Sunday School teachers in the Presbyterian church in
 which I grew up in Michigan...

Mrs. Morrow, Mrs. McCullum.
 But they’re not the only ones.

I remember Mrs. Taggart.
 Mrs. Taggart led my children’s choir.

³ Ibid.

And she performed a miracle.
 Do you know what it was?
 She made Ben Dorr believe that he belongs...in a choir.

I remember how Mr. and Mrs. Trebilcock led my youth group every year. Year after year, they gave up their Sunday evenings, and they went with us on weekend retreats, all to make their church a place where teenagers felt at home...

I remember how John Wylie was on the Pastor Search Committee with me when I was 15 years old, and he came over to my house to talk with me about what I thought the church needed from a new pastor at my church. He wanted the opinion of a sophomore in high school!

Why am I telling you this?
 I'm not trying to bore you with names you don't know.

I'm telling you that I would not be in this pulpit today, if all those people hadn't told me, in so many different ways, that I belonged...

It makes a difference, when churches show someone they belong.

A little over forty years ago, the Reverend Fuad Bahnan was pastor of a small church in Beirut, Lebanon. This was during the conflict between Israel and Lebanon back in 1983.

Anticipating that [there would be a] siege to Beirut, Bahnan's congregation purchased and stockpiled large amounts of food.

The siege came.
 West Beirut was totally cut off.
 Very little food was allowed in.

So the Session of Bahnan’s church met to make arrangements for distributing the food they had stockpiled. They all assumed they would share the food with their own congregation, and if there was additional [food], with other Christians in Beirut...

But then, a much-respected elder — a woman — stood before them and said, “If we do not demonstrate the love of Christ in this moment, who will?”

After all, they had all this food!

After that elder spoke, the church decided they would share their food with neighboring Muslims first. If there was food left over, they would share it with other Christians in Beirut. And if there was any left over after that, THEN they would share it among their own congregation.

Their actions stunned the city.⁴

Do you see how RADICAL Paul’s message about belonging can be?

Now...one more point about Paul, that I failed to mention at the beginning. Paul liked to give his churches HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS.

So, I want to be as consistent with Paul as I can in this sermon. And I thought I’d give you a homework assignment. I can see by the looks on your faces that you’re thrilled with this idea.

⁴ I first heard this story in a sermon preached by the Rev. Tom Are, “The Right Question Makes All the Difference,” at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, June 30, 2024. The story comes from Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001.

It's not a hard assignment.

I want you to consider the following question this week.

What are you willing to give up in order to help someone know that they belong?

That church in Lebanon—they gave up their food.

That church in Peoria—they gave up their prejudice.

Those people in my home church—they gave their time.

What about you?

Here's an example that we've discussed before.

How many of you sit in the same place in these pews every Sunday?

Would you be willing sit in a different place each Sunday until, say...Thanksgiving, so that you could see different people in this room and get to know new people in this room, and in doing so...strengthen the sense of belonging that exists in this room?

Or maybe you want to hold onto your seat.

But you'd be willing to let go of some of what's in your bank account.

Would you be willing to increase your pledge for 2025, so that another child at Thornwell, or another neighbor who needs United Ministries, or a formerly incarcerated person involved in Soteria...would have the resources they need and know that in Greenville, they belong?

Would you be willing to volunteer with WPCYG--our youth group--when Mary Kathleen tells you that we need another adult for a youth trip, or to spend time with our teens during the Sunday School hour?

Would you be willing to give up time that you spend in worship in this room on Sunday mornings, to help teach our kindergarteners and first graders in Children’s Church in the Children’s Church room on Sunday mornings?

Heck, I bet I was the age of those kindergartners when Mrs. McCallum and Mrs. Morrow taught me. Just think—if you do that for our kids this year, you may have your name mentioned in sermon by a future Presbyterian pastor from this church 45 years from now!!

Would you be willing to lead a WestConnect group this fall?
It’s not hard to do.

Your leadership could make the difference between someone feeling like they attend worship here, don’t really know anyone here...and someone feeling like they truly belong here.

That’s your assignment.
To consider what you could give up
to ensure that beyond a doubt
someone knows that they belong.

One more word about your homework assignment.
I know school started for many of our kids this past week.

So I’d like to speak to our elementary students, and the middle school and the high school students—parents, you can listen, but I’m talking right now to your kids.

How many of you, during the course of this school year, know that you will have at least one parent who asks you:

“Have you finished your homework yet?”

How many of you like it when a parent asks you that?
It gets kind of predictable, doesn't it?
I've got a proposition for you today.

Here's what I want you to do.

Next Saturday, I want you to go over to your Mom, or go over to your Dad, and say, "Hey...just checking in. Just wanted to see if you're done with our homework yet."

Can you do that for me?
Turn the question back around on your parents?

Now I can see that some adults in this room look relieved.
Because they don't have kids in the house, no one to check up on you.

But don't be so sure.
I was thinking about what that pastor at the Baptist church did,
Brother Gene.

Called all these members of his church.
I don't think I'm going to do that.

But if it did do it...
If I called you this Saturday night, just to check...will you have your homework assignment done?

(Amen.)