

Sunday, February 5, 2012: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

## **In the midst of ethical and doctrinal problems, says Paul, what is most important is to love all people.**

by [Gretchen E. Ziegenhals](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

Last summer we attended a family reunion in Alberta that commemorated my husband's family's 60 years in Canada. The weekend was filled with games, food and a worship service that included the first hymns that the German immigrant family had learned in English.

Descendants of the immigrants stood to tell their stories. In emotional and halting words, Uncle Emil described how the Nazis had forced him and hundreds of other 16-year-old Germans into the army. The boys were captured almost immediately by the Allies, who herded them into an open-air field where they stood packed in like cattle through three months of nightmarish winter.

Two-thirds of the teenagers died from exposure and starvation. When the war ended, soldiers opened the gates and released those who were still alive. Uncle Emil described how he stumbled out of the prison and into the nearest town. He knocked on the first door he came to. The family that opened the door took him in, fed and clothed him and adopted him as their son until, years later, he was able to locate his own family and immigrate to Canada.

The love that family showed to Emil with no questions asked gave him hope and faith in God's grace and mercy at a desperate time. The family had seen horrible acts of inhumanity and lived through terrifying days and nights, but despite their fear they were willing to take in a stranger. Their act helped the Wirzba family survive.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, the young church was experiencing turmoil and competing loyalties. "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters . . . that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be

united in the same mind and the same purpose." In the midst of their ethical and doctrinal problems, says Paul, what was most important was that they love all people. This was their only obligation. Like the family that welcomed Emil, the Corinthians needed to know love that knows no boundaries and does not choose sides, even in times of war. "For though I am free with respect to all," Paul wrote, "I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them."

Samuel Wells and Marcia Owen call this radical love "being with." In their book *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence*, they describe gun violence in Durham, North Carolina, and the ways in which they are keeping company with those who are suffering from that violence.

Wells distinguishes four models of engagement: working for, working with, being for and being with. He explains that being with is at the heart of his work with the poor. As you learn to love the stranger, he says, you "experienc[e] in your own body some of the fragility of relationships, self-esteem and general well-being that are at the heart of poverty." Being with has only one motivation, he insists. It can only be done for love. In this we imitate how God loves us. God is with us for no other reason than that God loves us for our own sake.

Owen describes how volunteers organize prayer vigils at sites where violence has occurred. Recognizing that we are all children of God helped her realize that being with is the opposite of violence because it means "living without enemies." The families may not remember what was said about their loved one at the site, say Wells and Owen, but they are grateful that others are present to acknowledge their loved one as a child of God. It's not an easy witness: the vigil planners are sometimes challenged and scorned as "outsiders." But experience has shown them that when God's love is present there are no outsiders.

The book concludes with the story of Tony, a man who was released from prison and met by a reentry team that included Owen. These teams of Christians commit to being with ex-offenders who are trying to live a life accountable to a community, a church and scripture. The team members who worked with Tony for years were devastated when he was killed, a victim of gun violence.

At Tony's funeral, 30 young people, many of them gang members, came forward to declare their faith. A man well known in Durham's culture of violence came up to the microphone. "No retribution," he declared. "If we're going to honor Tony, we will not

shoot each other. We're not going to do violence in his name."

"I have made myself a slave to all," writes Paul, "so that I might win more of them." The practice of being with leads Christians to witness quietly with touch and with words of love to those who most need our presence and the love of Christ.