

A letter from Paul to Christians in the US

Let me cut to the chase, brothers and sisters. Is this what you think living in Christ looks like?

by [Michael J. Gorman](#) in the [August 28, 2019](#) issue



Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the church of God that happens to be in North America. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As you know, one of my favorite ways to speak about our life together is with the short phrase “in Christ,” or “in the Messiah.” That phrase will be the subject of my letter. It is what you sometimes call “spirituality”; it may surprise you that it also means “mission.” It is what a mutual friend calls “cruciformity,” or cross-shaped living.

But before I get too far into my letter, let me go back to those first two words: *grace* and *peace*. These are not epistolary niceties. They constitute the core of my message, the heart of God’s heart. It is evident to me that you are very comfortable with the word *grace*. It is far less apparent to me that you understand the word

peace—shalom. To be sure, this word means inner peace and security. But it signifies much more. It means wholeness and harmony, right relations between us and God, within the human family, and between us and the rest of creation. *Peace* is one of those scriptural words that sums up what God is up to in the world—the mission of God.

The buzzword in many of your churches today is *missional*. If you want to be missional, start with this text. What an amazing witness to Jesus the Lord that would be—a community that practices peace, both internally and externally. This is not merely pragmatic or, worse, idealistic advice. It is what God is up to in the world in Christ, making peace by the blood of his cross in order to reconcile all things to himself, as my letter to the Colossians says (Col. 1:20).

Think of the powerful witness of that Amish community in Christ in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in 2006, when five innocent children were murdered and five others were injured by a gunman in their schoolroom. Their peacefulness and forgiveness touched the world and continue to do so as the shooter's mother bears witness even today. So does the school built to replace the murder site: New Hope School. It was and is amazing, even from my current vantage point.

But now I want to get back to basics. What does it mean to be “in Christ”? First, to be in Christ is to be *in community*. Yes, it is important that individuals put their salvation into practice in daily life, but the point of my letters is to form communities into more faithful communities. Together the church is a witness in the world.

Secondly, to be in Christ is also to be an *alternative* community, even an alternative *political* community. Your Christian communities need to be more political. I do not mean that you should be trying to grab political power or looking for ways to restore Christendom's civic muscle and influence. That was and is a really bad idea. Why? Because the central reality of our gospel, the one message I preached everywhere, is Christ crucified—and that is the antithesis of worldly political power.

What I do mean by *political* is that the Christian community is an alternative way of being in the world, an alternative way of ordering relationships, an alternative “body.” Actually, it is not only *an* alternative. It is *the* alternative—a sign of the new creation that God has inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

One of my favorite Christian writers, C. S. Lewis, once penned these words: “Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the

rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.” (Who would have guessed that C. S. Lewis would anticipate the so-called apocalyptic approach to my theology?)

This benevolent sabotage is not aimed at the state or any other institution. It is not a Christian takeover, a religiously based coup d'état. The goal of the church is not to take over anything but to be a foretaste of something—the new creation that has come and is coming.

All of this leads to my third point about being in Christ. To be in Christ as an alternative community is to be a *living exegesis, or faithful interpretation, of the gospel*. It is to become like Christ and therefore, in a profound sense, to become the gospel by becoming communal commentary on it. That, brothers and sisters, is true fellowship—participation in God's work.

I have observed the North American church's fascination with the cross of Jesus. I share this commitment to Christ crucified, as I said to the Corinthian church: “I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ—that is, Jesus Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 2:20). Of course, this does not eliminate the resurrection. But it does remind us, in the words of one of my insightful interpreters from the last century, that the cross is the signature of the one who is risen.

But I sense from your hymns and sermons, your books and tapes, that for you the cross is mostly about the cross as the source of your salvation. You are fond of arguing about which “model of the atonement” is correct. Well, of course the death of Jesus is the source of our salvation, but it is also the shape of our salvation. That's what I mean when I said “work out,” or put into practice, your salvation.

So people of the resurrection will always be people of the cross. They will learn to wash feet, as my colleague John reported in his Gospel. I actually wrote a poem about that event, with a short introduction (Phil. 2:5-11).

I am quite pleased that some churches still sing this poem. A translator friend refers to it as my “master story,” and I approve of that characterization. It is a story of downward mobility, of renouncing power and prestige and status for the benefit of others.

Let me cut to the chase, brothers and sisters. Is this what your in-Christ community looks like? Is this how you decide your priorities? Your budget? Your mission activity?

If you truly believe that Christ crucified is the power of God, and if you want the power of God to be at work in and through your Christian community, you will seek to become a community shaped by my master story—which is really God’s master story.

You see, the crucified Jesus was a Christophany—revealing what the Messiah is like. But it is also a *theophany*—revealing what God is like. And it is also an *ecclesio* phany—revealing what the church is supposed to be like. And ultimately it is also an *anthro*phany—revealing what human beings are meant to be like.

It may appear from Philippians 2 and John 13 that this kind of servanthood is only a model for life within the community. But that is not what Jesus or John meant, nor I. If you read my letter and John’s Gospel carefully, you will see that this self-giving love is meant to be offered to all people. It is what defines you as a Christian community—and what may very well get you in trouble when you take it to the streets. Just read the first chapter of my letter to the Philippians, or the book of Acts, or what happens to the foot-washing Jesus and his disciples.

The church’s inner and public lives must match, just as the individual believer’s private and public lives must match. That is why I told Philemon that the slave Onesimus, newly converted to Christ, was coming back to him “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord.” In the flesh means “out there in the world” and “in the Lord” means right here in the church.

To participate in the mission of God is to discern, in your particular context, what it means to embody the story of Jesus and thus to “become” the gospel to and for all. “Become” not in the sense of replacing the gospel, as if you or I were the savior, but in the sense of bearing witness to it in a coherent individual and corporate life of word and deed.

The paradox in all of this is that life comes through death. The life of the world comes through the death of the Messiah, not least because God raised him from the dead. So too, life for the world comes through our cross-shaped existence, which is, paradoxically, being raised to newness of life. I know, it makes no sense at all. But it is true. I experienced it throughout my life.

I should offer a few practical words about implementing this vision. With the Spirit’s help, it is not as difficult as it might appear. First of all, work at caring for one

another and unity in your own congregation. It will spill over to other contexts.

Second, as I told everyone, but especially the Corinthian believers, flee from sexual immorality and idolatry, including especially the false gods of Rights and Power. These are the fundamental sins of every culture, but especially yours, and they undermine your integrity as a missional contrast society. Absolute Rights and Absolute Power are absolutely idolatrous. Embrace virtue, and there you will find the joy of the Lord. Embrace weakness, and there you will find the power of God.

Third, as I also told the Corinthians, speak and live the gospel not only in your fellowship but also with your unbelieving family members at home (see 1 Cor. 7:10-16) and with your friends (see 1 Cor. 10:23-11:1).

Finally, as I (once again) also told the Corinthians, make your worship services truly missional. You are fighting about what kind of music, worship style, “messages,” and doughnuts or bagels will be most “appealing” to seekers. You are trying to make the gospel palatable. That strategy is demeaning both to our Lord and to those seekers. You have no business trying to make the gospel palatable, but you should, as I told the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14), make it intelligible.

I lived in the time before Christendom in the Roman Empire. You now live in the time after Christendom in North America. So our contexts are remarkably similar despite all the differences. I therefore resonate with the words of Bryan Stone, who summarizes his book *Evangelism after Christendom* as follows: “The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.”

My last words for you would be these from Ephesians, which I consider to be a commissioning prayer. I hope that it will inspire the conversion of your imagination as you—individually and together—try to discern where and how God is calling you to be the church more fully and thereby to participate in the saving, healing mission of God in your part of the world. “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to

know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

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