Paul’s Example of Kingdom Priorities

I can sum up my long experience of more than 49 years (since I was 18 years old) with the following assessment: I am an ex-dispensationalist who finally learned the Gospel of the Kingdom of God! I hope you can fathom that this means quite a miraculous change, since a classic dispensationalist relegates Jesus’ actual words (and especially his bold Kingdom message) to a previous “dispensation” or time period. Just as Saul of Tarsus underwent a drastic change from hostility towards Jesus and his followers **to** genuine adherence to Jesus as the anointed Messiah, so we can change vastly, even if we have been formerly stuck stubbornly in erroneous ruts for decades! In The Way International (TWI), we were, in a sense, staunch “Paulists”, having regarded Paul’s church epistles as very exclusively “addressed to Christians”, in stark contrast (according to our blinded minds) to Jesus’ outdated teachings presented in the four gospels. Nevertheless, there is an extremely sad irony evident in how badly we (as die-hard dispensationalists) collectively misunderstood Paul’s biblical example and teachings! Though I now find myself standing **against** the adamant mindset which I so sternly embraced, (at some level), for over thirty years, I humbly do so without bashing the beloved people who were misguided along with me. By God’s amazing mercy, transformational **change** is always a real, viable option! Praise God for that!

Paul wrote, (1st Cor. 4:15-16), “Even if you had ten thousand tutors in Messiah, you do not have many fathers, because in Messiah Jesus I became your father through the Gospel. I beg you therefore to be imitators of me.” He also wrote, (1st Cor. 11:1), “Follow my example, just as I follow the example of Messiah.” He gave other similar exhortations, such as Philippians 4:8-9. So, even though there are many keen Scriptural models (and other dynamic examples) to emulate, there is something quite special about Paul’s concerted imitation of the Messiah.

Acts 20:17-37 is a marvelous section which focuses specifically on Paul’s ardent model of faithful integrity despite crushing pressures and obstacles. Among other factors, in verses 21-22 and 31-32, “I [Paul] did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, teaching you publicly and from house to house. I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance [a change of heart and life direction] towards God and faith in our lord Jesus Messiah…. So be on guard! Do not forget that for a period of three years I never ceased to admonish everyone, night and day, with tears. And now I entrust you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are holy.”

 Along with Paul’s total Jesus-like (John 15:15) commitment **not** to withhold anything which was profitable to them, in this same context of Acts 20 (verses 24-25), he totally **equated** the fully preached “gospel of the grace of God” with “preaching the Kingdom.” This truth constitutes a major Kingdom emphasis concerning Paul throughout the book of Acts! One might keep in mind that in southern Galatia (Acts 13 and 14), despite persecutions, Paul and Barnabas offered **encouragement** to continue in the faith, saying (14:22), “It is through many trials that we enter the Kingdom of God.” In Ephesus (19:8), Paul **persuaded** them about the Kingdom of God. Why in the world would someone bother to “persuade” folks about outdated tidbits of history which are no longer relevant? Also, if one reads 28:16-24, he/she sees that Paul spoke to some leading Jews in Rome, explaining from morning to night, testifying about the Kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus. Then comes the decisive conclusion of the book of Acts (28:30-31) in which Paul has relative freedom (while renting a house for two years), even though he was a prisoner; “he welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and teaching about the lord Jesus Messiah with complete openness and without restriction.” From clear, abundant evidence throughout the book of Acts, as seen above, it would be wildly far-fetched to theorize that Paul separated his own gospel preaching from Jesus’ dominant, consistent thesis: repent (change) now due to the certainty of the approaching Kingdom of God!

When Paul formally defended himself before Felix (Acts 24:10-16), he demonstrated that he was not fearful about being mistreated by either Jews or Romans. He wisely used the occasion to boldly herald what mattered most to him. “But I confess this to you: According to the Way which they call a sect, I serve the God of our fathers, believing everything taught in the Law and written in the prophets. I have the same hope in God as they have, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust [upcoming, essential Kingdom realities]. That is why I do my best to always have a clear conscience before God and before people (v. 14-16).” What a vital attitude: having a God-fearing **conscience** - because of authentic Kingdom hope!

Paul once again defended himself before Agrippa and Festus in Acts 26, earnestly striving to reach others present with pertinent gospel truths about Jesus (26:4-29); then (Acts 27), he very lovingly and prayerfully took care of 276 “neighbors” on a ship, speaking God’s encouragement and assuring that they eat so they could survive the shipwreck (v. 21-26.) As far as we know, only three of them on the ship (Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus) were believers.

When Paul wrote (1st Timothy, chapter 6) about the attitude of “slaves” (indentured servants) toward masters, he emphasizes his uncompromising devotion to the **sound, healthy** words of Jesus himself! Far from separating his own gospel ideas from those of Jesus (in the tradition of adamant dispensationalists), he wrote (v.3 -4a), “If anyone teaches other doctrines and does not agree with the health-giving words, namely the teachings given by our lord Jesus Messiah, and thus with the teaching which promotes godliness, he is conceited, understanding nothing…” This theme of **sound, healthy** words (such as those taught by Jesus in the four gospels) is further highlighted in a few verses in the books of Timothy and Titus. In 2nd Timothy 1:13-14 we see, “Hold on tightly to the pattern of **sound words** which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are found in Messiah Jesus. Guard the good deposit that has been entrusted to you, through the holy spirit which lives in us.” One might keep in mind that Jesus’ own words (John 6:63) “are spirit and are life.” In Titus 1:9 we read, “He [a genuine elder] must hold to the faithful Gospel-word as it has been taught, so that he will be able both to encourage others with that **sound teaching** and also to refute those who contradict it.”

Perhaps 2nd Timothy 2:22-26 illustrates, in a sense, the potential effectiveness of Paul’s keen example of using **sound, healthy** words – while he exhorts Timothy to do the same. “Flee from the evil desires of youth and pursue uprightness, faith, love and peace, in company with those who call on the lord from a pure heart. But reject foolish and ignorant disputes, because you know that they generate only conflict. And the lord’s servant must not be engaged in conflict, but be kind to everyone, competent to teach, and patient, with gentleness correcting opponents. Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the trap of the Devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” What a powerful possibility for deliverance from outright evil comes from the gentle, patient use of **healthy words**!

Though Paul’s writings might include some things which are difficult to understand, they are carefully regarded as Scriptures (2nd Peter 3:14-18) which should **never** be twisted in foolish, destructive ways, such as, (for example), making them **contradictory** (in a dispensational way) to Jesus’ pertinent Gospel message of the coming Kingdom of God!

Though Paul’s valid, Kingdom-focused example shines through more than half of Acts and in thirteen thought-provoking letters, we will conclude this very cursory study by listing 6 key points regarding Paul’s model, which we can now enthusiastically emulate.

1. For decades Paul was an avid preacher and teacher of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, not withholding **anything** which was profitable for his listeners. One example of this involves his ministry in Thessalonica. Though he was there for only a few short weeks (Acts 17:1-9) and had to leave under pressure, Paul wrote detailed truths to them about the coming hope in two letters, including how the deceiving times of the future man of sin (the Antichrist) would precede Jesus’ return (2nd Thessalonians, chapter 2.)
2. Paul refused to be distracted by financial gain; he worked hard with his hands (Acts 20:33-35), being a tent maker. He did not confuse financial gain with godliness (1st Timothy 6:5-11), which error is so commonplace among many modern proponents of the “prosperity gospel.” When Paul, as a prisoner, needed generous financial help from the Philippians, he received it with totally ethical motives (Philippians 4:10-19.)
3. Paul did not merely distribute information in a cold, distant, bureaucratic way! He personally and intimately poured out his heart and life to folks (as we briefly viewed in the mention of the shipwreck chapter: Acts 27.) See 1st Thessalonians, chapter 2 and 2nd Corinthians, chapters 6 and 7.
4. Paul was a remarkable model of extreme patience and understanding, while dealing gently with folks at different levels of learning and maturity. He could masterfully “become all things to all people” in order to save or win some (1st Corinthians 9:19-23/ Romans 14:1-15:7 and Acts 21:17-26.) He did not fly off the handle harshly and dogmatically with those people still needing to grow and mature.
5. At the same time (while being so very patient), he was not reluctant to boldly elucidate new covenant truths. He urgently refuted the wrong-headed legalism of continuing to submit to circumcision and other old covenant requirements (Acts 15:1-3/ all of Galatians and Colossians 2:16-23.) He truly achieved and **exemplified** the balance between patient gentleness (point 4) and uncompromising, bold assertions (point 5) so that the authentic Gospel might be clearly made known. Paul successfully avoided the common pitfalls of falling into unfruitful, exaggerated extremes.
6. The final point would be Paul’s faithful dedication as a man of perpetual prayer. The model prayers in Philippians 1:3-11/ Colossians 1:3-12/ Ephesians 1:15-21 and Ephesians 3:14-21 indicate his constant, heartfelt commitment to help others produce lives of fruitfulness with in-depth spiritual wisdom and understanding. Instead of being distracted by worldly politics (as so many are nowadays), he simply encouraged Timothy to pray for such leaders in the world (along with prayers for all fellow human beings) - to the end that God’s intervention help us lead tranquil, quiet lives with all godliness and dignity (1st Timothy 2:1-5) as we arrive at knowing the central truth of the entire Bible: “namely that there is one God and one mediator between that one God and humanity, Messiah Jesus, who is himself human.”

Although one could add other aspects of Paul’s supreme example of imitating and following the Messiah Jesus, these six points can serve as a simple set of reminders as we pray continually (Matthew 6:10) that God’s coming Kingdom arrive here on earth. Along with Paul, who toward the end of his life (2nd Timothy 4: 6-8) knew that he would be richly rewarded with the crown of righteousness for having **fought the good fight**, we can likewise “love his appearing” and be faithful to the vibrant Jesus-centered truths taught and emulated by Paul. Jesus’ undeniable, historical resurrection is a prototype and a proof of God’s ultimate plan to raise **all** the dead with the lord’s powerful return (1st Corinthians, chapter 15) and usher in his Kingdom and our mighty, certain, kingly inheritance. Far from being mere wishful thinking (that God through Jesus will make all things turn out right in the end), we should confidently, like Paul, be (15:58) steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the lord, knowing our labor is not in vain in the lord.

A relevant, fairly recent book which I recommend, is: ***Paul: A Biography*** by N.T. Wright.