

14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

When does irony become hypocrisy?

In writing to the Christian community in Rome Paul intended neither to be ironical nor hypocritical yet he is surely one or the other. In a passage which forms part of a much larger section dealing with the practical challenges of living a Christian life in a non-Christian world, Paul is here emphasising that judgement of one's fellow Christians is absolutely not acceptable.

14:4 Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?

14:10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?

Yet within the same passage Paul distinguishes clearly between those who are "*weak in faith*" --- and those who are not. It is a distinction that is squarely founded upon a judgement --- and it is a subjective judgement – in this case his own.

It is – in one sense --- easy to understand Paul's behaviour ---- he is, after all, a Pharisee – one who has been brought up to know Jewish doctrine and the laws of Judaism which have grown up around the doctrine to guide or prescribe behaviour --- depending upon your point of view. Not only is Paul a creature of religion, and one with laborious rules affecting behaviour in close detail --- --- Paul is also steeped in the idea that a religion has doctrines --- doctrines which contain and lay-out orthodoxy – in other words what is a correct understanding and what is not.

Despite his dramatic conversion and his clear conviction that salvation lies in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – rather than in any kind of qualification earned through our obedience and good behaviour --- Paul seems nonetheless unable to shake off his background

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when it comes to the critical business of PRAXIS --- that is living one's faith on a day to day basis – individually and collectively.

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Paul has a conviction that he is commissioned by Christ to be an Apostle --- a conviction which is hugely powerful and absolutely sincere. The burden that places upon him is very heavy --- and is too much for him --- as it would be for anyone. It is the most natural thing in the world that Paul should fall back upon his past experience when trying to respond to what were urgent and existential issues as the Church took its first tottering steps in the world. The infant needed protection and guidance; nurture and discipline as all infants do. But as is always the case with following Christ --- it is one thing to understand the teaching – one thing to know how to pass that teaching on verbally ----- but it is quite another to embrace it to oneself.

In an age when we are having to be much more attuned to the danger that our language will be heard as pejorative by others --- when it will elicit negative reactions which will close down the possibility of true communication ---- in an age when we have to learn to choose our words thoughtfully and carefully --- most of us will feel a red alert as soon as we hear one person describing another as weak. It is offensive --- and it is divisive --- its truth or falsehood entirely dependent upon realities of which we almost certainly cannot and do not know. The 7 stone stripling may, in fact, have the courage of a lion but you will not see that simply by assessing his physique.

What Paul seems to set aside is that other critical element of the teaching of Jesus --- which lies in his emphasis that the true battle ground between sin and godliness lies within. The campaign must begin at the deepest levels where our attitudes are formed --attitudes which always dictate our language and our behaviour. Physician, heal thyself! And the irony lies in the fact that although Paul recognises and understands that the reason it is unjustifiable to judge ones fellows lies in the fact that none of us deserves other than condemnation before the judgement seat of God --- yet he still lacks the humility and the grace truly to embrace that truth to himself. In that is sin --- and it afflicts every single one of us --- Paul included.

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Why do most of those who aspire to leadership ultimately fall short of the mark? It is because we are all, inevitably and eventually, exposed as hypocrites. Our behaviour falls short of our rhetoric. Paul's dream of establishing a Christian community to shine a beacon of hope within the darkness of 1st century Rome was absolutely sincere and it was absolutely within the commission of Christ. Yet the Church which grew from that toddling infant to be the 2000-year-old institution which it now is ---- has never achieved any true modelling of an ethical Christian excellence --- nor will it. Instead – it has fallen – inevitably and consistently into hypocrisy --- failing to live up to its own rhetoric. Hence its low standing in the world today.

The answer to that truth --- the hope for the Church if there is to be hope --- lies not in renewed efforts to purge ourselves of hypocrisy --- hugely important though that struggle is and will always be. The answer lies --- the hope lies ---- in Christ alone. And it lies not – in any final analysis in Christ's ethical teaching – his moral code – important though that is. The answer lies in the fact that God is in Christ --- incarnate. That in Jesus the Word has taken flesh. That is a mystery which will never be contained in any doctrine or any ethical code. It is a mystery of greater significance than anything else I know, and it is a mystery before which we can only stand in awe and wonder and humility. Everything else flows from there and the moment we lose touch with that place, then hypocrisy will inevitably follow. Such is the grace of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen