



University Christian Church – Austin

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Facebook Body Building

Pent. 4, b, June 28, 2009

2 Cor. 8:7-15

Last Sunday just before we gathered in the sanctuary for morning worship, I ran into Abe Parker in the hallway just outside the church office. Many of you know that Abe is working with Ron Slockett our Director of Campus Ministry as an Assistant, and among other things is collecting information about models of campus ministries in our area and around the nation that have been successful. The goal is to inform our own search for the best way to reach out to the students in the community.

I had asked Abe to get in touch with Melinda McLain, Marti McLain's daughter, who is a pastor in California and who has had experience with several campus ministries there. Abe reported that he had had a very worthwhile communication with Melinda and that he could summarize briefly her advice in one word -- Facebook.

Abe went on to say that Melinda reported across the country campus ministries are learning that they have to reorganize the way that contacts in programming are done -- Facebook. The younger generation lives and organizes life around Internet and cell phone communications. Abe's implication was that we at University Christian Church and the Disciples Student Fellowship need to get on that bandwagon.

My mind quickly connected Abe's report with what you and I have been hearing on the evening news about how the resistance to the regime in power in

Iran has organized protests by the use of Facebook and Twitter and text messages from cell phone to cell phone and e-mail and blog posts.

Sunday evening I googled the search words “ Iran and protests “ and was shown hundreds of results, the first of which was a Facebook page which chronicled recent protest activities there. The author, though unidentified, was clearly not an English speaker because some of the English phrases were odd. I found two sentences on the page especially powerful:” **Here there speaks no fanatic, here there is no 'preaching', here faith is not demanded: out of an infinite abundance of light. Here falls drop after drop, word after word.** ⁱ” The effect of the page was to draw me in to community, a body of people who cared about the Iranian people....

We live in a new age, my sisters and brothers, an age in which distances and travel times have melted into near nothingness. There is an increasingly capable worldwide network of relationships that can morph in the blink of an eye, as it did this past week around the killing of young Neda Soltan in Tehran. The younger generations have grown up in this electronic web and are comfortable in it, but many of us who are older are having a hard time adjusting our thinking to it.

On a related front, perhaps it slipped under the radar of your awareness as it had mine, that Pope Benedict declared a “Year of Paul” stretching from June 28, 2008 until June 29, 2009, tomorrow. Pope Benedict had hoped that the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Protestant Christian churches of the world would all together focus on the missionary zeal and enthusiastic evangelism of the apostle Paul for this year and that we would be inspired to emulate him in our own missionary work on behalf of the spirit of Jesus Christ. ⁱⁱ

In establishing this focus Pope Benedict remarked on the legendary meeting of saints Peter and Paul in Rome before they each suffered their martyrdom. The Pope reminded the church of the embrace that these two symbolic figures engaged in before they died. Since those days these two saints have come to represent two aspects of Christian living. St. Peter has represented the important need to stand in the richness of our tradition, that organic push of the church from its tradition forward into the future. St. Paul - on the other hand- has represented the call to innovation, leaping out ahead of the day’s populace and embracing the new

potentials as a way of understanding God's own pull forward from the present- so in need of redemption- to the future where God's vision, God's yearning for our world, is realized. Tradition on the one hand and innovation on the other both dynamic forces that together can build an ever more faithful Christian community - the body of Jesus Christ.

In the case of the apostle Paul, his innovation, his readiness to use whatever approaches were available to him, was not confined to the fact that he understood his ministry to the Gentiles, the people who were not the children of Israel, that is to the whole world, outside of Israel. It wasn't just the object of his and evangelistic concern, it was also his use of the technology of his day.

Recall Paul's letter that we now call 2 Timothy in chapter 4 verse 13. Paul is a prisoner in Rome with a personal future that looked bleak, indeed. Paul writes to Timothy: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments."

The books he mentions are what we would call scrolls. As a child growing up in the synagogue services in my home town, I experience scrolls just like those Paul requested. We would ceremoniously take the scroll of the Torah - the first five books of the Bible that had been hand written -out of the cabinet in which they were housed-- and for a few moments paraded them before the gathered congregation. I can tell you from experience these five books of the Bible were very heavy in that form! It was not easy to transport such scrolls. They were one long strip of papyrus written only on one side. In the time of the apostle Paul it was these books, these scrolls, that were prized by the scholars of the day and were housed in rooms with cubbyholes for the placement of the scrolls.

Paul said to Timothy "When you come, bring the cloak.... the books, and above all the parchments." The parchments were the new invention of the day. They were sheets of papyrus, lightweight, able to be written on both sides and then stitched together on one edge to form a much more transportable notebook of sorts. The scholars of the day frowned upon this way of recording literature. These parchments weren't readily adopted by the upper class of the Roman world, but their disdain meant nothing to the apostle Paul. He knew his intention! He was going to spread this word of Jesus Christ the fastest way he could. He was going to

cover as much territory as possible. He found that he didn't need to be everywhere in order to be about ministry.

You see, even locked in a jail cell in Rome Paul could write on these parchments reminders to the little Christian churches he had helped found and nurtured on his journeys. He could remind them of the riches of their calling as disciples of Jesus.

Through his letters, his parchments, carried by messengers to community after community, Paul could encourage them in the midst of their persecutions to remain faithful. He could instruct them as they started straying from the central truth that he had taught them. Or as in the case of our message today in second Corinthians, he could challenge those Corinthians to take a look at the material possessions that they were there blessed with and to remind them that they had Christian sisters and brothers back in the city of Jerusalem who were in dire need.

2 Cor. 8:13-15 ...it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

He used this new fangled parchment invention to carry words of challenge and encouragement that he could not deliver in person but would still be able to move those who would receive his letters because of their ongoing relationship with him even over time and even over great distances.

Curious, isn't it? It is just these parchments, these letters to struggling churches, that were gathered by the Christian communities around the Mediterranean who were thankful for Paul's instruction, who realized that after he was gone they might not get better instruction from any other source. So it was these Christians who would stitch together this letter from Paul and that letter from Paul and out of them formed the first Testament of the work of the Holy Spirit in their Christian communities. It is these very letters that form the vital core of our New Testament today, as Paul's work is far and away more prominent in our New

Testament than any other writer. Each one of those letters was written in the cheapo fashion of the day, on materials frowned upon by those in high society.

In retrospect, this is how it has happened over and over again through our history:

- In the early 1800s Alexander Campbell discovered the power of a new tool to get his message of Christian unity out to the world. Campbell used the new vehicle available to him, the pamphlet.
- In 1908, Disciples Minister, Charles Clayton Morrison founded the Christian Century magazine as a way of drawing Disciples and ecumenical leaders together through stories, and letters, and encouragements using the tool newly available to him. To this day the Christian Century remains the primary journal that binds together mainline and ecumenical Christian leaders across a far-flung United States and throughout the world.
- Many of us remember how in the mid-20th century radio and television were used as tools to share various forms of the gospel to audiences far and wide.

And now, as the Year of Paul draws to a close tomorrow, perhaps it is appropriate for those of us who are Paul's spiritual heirs to not only commit ourselves to that missionary living and that zealous desire to spread the good news we have been granted to others. Perhaps it is also our opportunity to commit ourselves to learning to use and embrace whatever new vehicles of communication come on the scene to spread that same gospel in a way that it can be heard for this generation of people who still need the good news:

- the Internet and these new forms of wireless communication,
- podcasts of sermons and studies,
- religious educational videos on You Tube,

and so much more have forged new ways in which the members of the body of Christ can communicate with one another, that can bring the hope and faith of the Christian message to those far beyond our day-to-day face-to-face encounters.

Using these new options and as well as the reliable older forms of communication you and I are empowered like no other Christians in history to translate our Gospel into thousands:

of messages of Christian encouragement;

of works of art,

Even people who were once homebound and physically handicapped can now can now:

Organize community building events;

Mentor growing Christians afar off;

With stories and sharing bring joy to the hearts of others and in that way Bring together the body of Christ in a host of ways that would cause Paul to leap with joy! Better than ever, we can become ONE IN CHRIST!

And with the new power, the new possibility we are given comes the responsibility to use our time & our abilities wisely, in the service of God's will for us.....Luke 12:48 reminds us of Jesus' words" From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

As Abe said last Sunday morning, " I don't know much about Facebook yet, but I guess I'd better learn." Yes, there's a lot learning needed, and a lot of commitment on our parts to embrace the possibilities inherent in this new way. With Paul as our inspiration, let's get to it!

ⁱ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=115210055140>

ⁱⁱ I discovered this proclamation in an article by Leonard Sweet , *Paul's "We-With" Body-Building* whose article spurred many of the thoughts I'm sharing here.