

Note: ET&N is now blogging! Clicking "Blog" under the masthead will take you to the ET&N weblog, where you can comment on or respond to ET&N essays. In future ET&N installments, the "Discussion" section will include a link to the weblog and, when appropriate, highlights of blog discussions. Clicking "Reply" above will launch your default e-mail program for a personal reply.

This issue of ET&N was originally billed as "Church Arithmetic," but I changed my mind after Sunday's class because I was reminded of something I wanted to share. This thought comes from Bob Peterson, a great teaching brother who was an elder at our church and a house church leader until he moved to Oklahoma a couple of years ago. He did this in a class on 1 Corinthians, and I've never forgotten it. He may have heard it from someone else, I suppose, but he gets the credit from me. Some day I'll come back to "Church Arithmetic."

Who Never Fails?

Then

Almost everyone - even including non-believers - knows Paul's famous "Love Chapter," or at least parts of it. It appears in his letter to the church in Corinth, which was experiencing some significant problems in the congregation(s). He writes of the importance of each member of the body and their God-given gifts (chapter 12), concluding with "And I show you a still more excellent way" (12:31b).

*"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. **Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails;** but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)*

The middle portion of the chapter is often read at weddings and has inspired a wonderful four-part song often sung in the congregations with which I've been associated. It is as thorough a description of what **agape** (self-sacrificing) love is

and is not that anyone is likely to find, and certainly one of the most treasured passages of Scripture.

Now

What Bob Peterson did in that memorable class was to change 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a to the first person. Read this aloud:

I am patient, I am kind and not jealous. I do not brag and am not arrogant, do not act unbecomingly. I do not seek my own, am not provoked, do not take into account a wrong suffered, do not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoice with the truth. I bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. I never fail.

Reading 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a in the first person is a convicting experience! If you're anything like me, you have to stumble over those words because we all fall so miserably short of such a description even though it is precisely what we are called to. John tells us that Jesus said, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34-35). We are to be known by the world not by our impressive buildings, great sermons, moral standards, systematic theology, or even our good works. We are to be known by how we love one another, and He is referring to all those who put their hope in Him and seek to follow Him - not just our local congregation. We are known by how well we match up to the kind of love exhibited by Jesus and described by Paul.

This fact is true of Christians both individually and collectively. The church, as the body of Christ, is called to exhibit love. How well do most churches live up to Paul's description?

The church is patient, the church is kind and not jealous. The church does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly. The church does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. The church bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The church never fails.

Can this really be said about the church as it exists in our time? While the media routinely ignores all the good done by the church, it's probably our own fault because we supply them with so much fodder for its bad-news mentality. Groups like the Westboro Baptist Church, with its godhatesfags.com website (see footnote) with a counter that claims over five million visitors, may undo the good of a hundred Katrina relief missions. Westboro, with its pretentious "Warning!! Gospel Preaching Ahead" alert and its outrageous protests at military funerals, may be the single best current illustration of the church's failure, but there are myriad lesser examples. Westboro's sin may be directed, from their perspective, toward those who are outside the church. There are plenty of examples - both now and throughout history - of hatred and intolerance directed within the church.

Unfortunately, that's the way it's always going to be in the church because it is composed of human beings. Thankfully, however, there is One who fulfills Paul's description. In his first letter, John writes, "*We have come to know and have*

believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16).

God is patient, God is kind and is not jealous. God does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly. God does not seek his own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth, God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God never fails.

It will not do to hide behind the fact that God is perfect, while humans are sinful, for Jesus commanded, "*you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48). Furthermore, we have no excuse because "*His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence*" (2 Peter 1:3). Because of the gifts given to each believer, the church has enormous potential to genuinely change the world. That it largely has not is a byproduct of our shameful disregard for John 13:35, for Jesus said "all men will know you are My disciples IF you have love for one another." The implication is that if we do not have love for one another, all men will know we are NOT His disciples!

Footnote: Contrary to the preaching of Westboro's Fred Phelps, God **does not** hate homosexuals. Yes, homosexual behavior is an abomination to Him (Leviticus 18:22), but so are cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5), remarriage (24:4), dishonest business transactions (25:13-16), procrastination in charity (Proverbs 3:27-32), loaning with interest (Ezekiel 18:12-13), and pride (Proverbs 16:5). He hates the action, but He still loves the person. No where in Scripture is it said that God hates the individuals who perform any of these abominations.

On the other hand, Solomon tells us that "*There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers*" (Proverbs 6:16-19). From the description of the actions Fred Phelps encourages, it appears that he is guilty of six of the seven. Even so, I am confident that God loves Fred Phelps and his congregants. Their actions, however, must grieve Him enormously. The Westboro Baptist Church is yet another example of the problems that ensue when a single, autonomous, rigid leader controls a congregation, in contradiction to genuine biblical leadership.

Discussion

Joyce in Florida

Hi Dick,

I have an Ekklesia Then & Now file in which I save your articles for further study and reference. Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge!

I just now quickly read your "Who Never Fails" article and intend to go back and re-read it at a slower pace when time permits. It is filled with so many good things that I need to meditate on. However, something you said really "jumped out" that I believe needs to be addressed as it might be misleading, confusing, and/or troublesome to some who are not familiar with the Deuteronomy 24:1-4 passage which addresses divorce and re-marriage. (For clarity and convenience, I have pasted that passage herein below and highlighted it in green) I printed in

"bold" the portion of your statement to which I am referring.

In your article you said: Footnote: Contrary to the preaching of Westboro's Fred Phelps, God does not hate homosexuals. Yes, homosexual behavior is an abomination to Him (Leviticus 18:22), but so are cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5), remarriage (24:4), dishonest business transactions (25:13-16), procrastination in charity (Proverbs 3:27-32), loaning with interest (Ezekiel 18:12-13), and pride (Proverbs 16:5). He hates the action, but He still loves the person. No where in Scripture is it said that God hates the individuals who perform any of these abominations.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (NIV) reads:

" If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, [2] and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, [3] and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, [4] then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance."

It seems clear, that passage does not teach that all "remarriages" are an abomination to God. It does say that after a divorced woman has married a second husband and then becomes divorced from her second husband (or her second husband dies) and then she goes back and re-marries her first husband--that is detestable (an abomination) to the LORD. The Deuteronomy 24:1-4 passage does not say it would be detestable (an abomination) to the LORD if a woman remarries her ex-husband if she has not been married to a different husband following her divorce from her first husband.

Yet today many church leaders and other people insist that if a person has divorced his or her spouse for any reason other than adultery and marries someone else then he/she must divorce his/her second spouse and must either remain single the rest of his/her life or remarry the first spouse! Contrary to what those leaders and other people believe--that would be a re-marriage that would be detestable to the LORD and would bring sin upon the land! At least that is my understanding as relates to that passage of scripture.

Thanks again for sharing your knowledge--and insight.

[DS] It's nice to see that there are "Bereans" out there who search the Scriptures I reference. [I forgot to include the biblegateway.com links to the verses and passages I cited but did not quote, but Joyce obviously pulled out her Bible.] Actually, I used the term "remarriage" advisedly, knowing that some might react as Joyce did. The kind of "remarriage" Deuteronomy refers to, as Joyce points out, is very specific. The subject of marriage and divorce is frequently contentious within the church. For those seeking a thorough treatment of the subject, I recommend *Down, But Not Out* by ET&N subscriber Al Maxey, who also writes a regular e-mail essay (Reflections).

Glen in Albuquerque, New Mexico:

Dick, enjoyed the article very much. Are you familiar with Henry Drummond and his masterpiece *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. It concerns the same portion of text as your article. If you would like I would be happy to forward you a copy.

[DS] Glen was referring to "The Greatest Thing in the World," published in about 1880 and which I found online. If you've never heard this brilliant exposition on 1 Corinthians 13, let me offer one quote: "Never offer men a thimbleful of Gospel. Do not offer them merely joy, or merely peace, or merely rest, or merely safety; tell them how Christ came to give men a more abundant life than they have, a life abundant in love, and therefore abundant in salvation for themselves, and large in enterprise for the alleviation and redemption of the world. Then only can the Gospel take hold of the whole of a man, body, soul, and spirit, and give to each part of his nature its exercise and reward." To read the entire essay at a Henry Drummond

page, go to <http://henrydrummond.wwwhubs.com/greatest.htm>. Thanks to Glen for referring me to this wonderful essay!

From Lonnie in Mississippi:

Dick, I am an elder with the _____ church in _____. Your link was recommended in a newsletter from Fred Peatross or Edward Fudge, not sure which one recommended your studies, but glad someone did. I only recently began reading your work and signed up for Ekklesia, but already appreciate your in depth studies. In your notes at the bottom you mention "Wayne from Maine" and materials that his congregation put together for their leadership. Would you contact him for me and ask him to pass what he has my way. The Skyway church is small and we don't have the resources to put together such documentation, so I am sure this will give us ideas as we try to strengthen the work here in Rankin County. Thanks for you and your work. May God bless you.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17: 10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: New Testament Apocrypha: Letters (June 27)

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