

The GREETING

Imagine the arrival of a letter from Paul in one of his communities. It was already a minor miracle for it to have reached its destination safely. Another would be necessary to achieve its desired impact on the community.

Finding the addressees

In a world where streets had no names, and houses no numbers, the messengers—unless they were returning to their hometown—certainly had difficulty in finding the recipients. There were no church buildings that stood out from their neighbours. Christians met in homes. So Paul must have directed his letter-carriers to an individual house or apartment. We do not know how good Paul’s visual memory was, but even if he gave precise directions, there was no guarantee that the landmarks he recalled still existed. Business premises regularly changed hands. The tavern on the corner might now be a bakery. A grocery store could have taken the place of a restaurant. Even if the messengers found their way to the correct address, there might be no one at home. Like everyone else, believers occasionally moved, sometimes because of a chance to ascend the social scale, sometimes through necessity. With great regularity houses collapsed or were burnt down.

Such problems highlight the extent to which Paul was forced to trust those who agreed to carry a letter for him, and hint at the anxiety with which he awaited a sign that his letter had been received. Irresponsible messengers might have made no effort. Conscientious ones might have failed. Fortunately, he knew that everything did not depend on him. He believed that the Holy Spirit was active among his converts, and that they were responsible for their own lives.

Insight, not obedience

Yet as the one who had begotten them in Christ, Paul could not stand aside as they struggled to discern the will of God. Their previous religious beliefs, their inherited social attitudes, their relations with others in the community, all led to greatly differing perceptions of what God required of them. Amidst such confusion Paul felt that he had a

role to play. It was not to tell believers what God required. Ready-made answers would keep them in a childish state, and he wanted them to be mature. His goal as a pastor was to promote, not slavish obedience, but independent insight. All he could do was to challenge them when they were going wrong, and to nudge them gently in the right direction.

Part of a wider movement

The paradox of the local Christian community is that it is both a whole and a part. It is independent in that the Holy Spirit guarantees it all the gifts necessary for its development. In this sense it needs nothing from outside. Yet it is also a facet of a much greater reality. Each local church is an incarnation of the ideal preached by Jesus. It gives continuing reality to the fact that Jesus is the power and the wisdom of God. This quality, however, is shared by all churches. Each, then, must hold much in common with others if the unity of the Jesus movement is to be real.

Each community, therefore, has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, both of which are channels of divine communication. The Corinthians were very conscious of the action of the Spirit among them. Their awareness of this privilege, however, expressed itself in a sense of superiority, which threatened to isolate them. Other Christians, they felt, had nothing to teach them. Thus, at the very beginning of the letter, Paul has to remind them of his broad mandate, and of the fact that there are others in many places who also call on the name of the Lord Jesus.

PRAYER

O God, make us conscious of the action of the Holy Spirit in others as we thank you for the gifts with which we have been endowed.