

In writing to the church in Corinth, Paul gets to the heart of the matter, as he so often does. “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation,” he reminds the Corinthians, “the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”¹ The new life to which Christ calls us is always Good News, and it must have seemed particularly so to the Corinthian church.

The ancient city of Corinth was located a little less than fifty miles from Athens. It was a seafaring, port city of about 800,000 residents. Its lively commerce made it a city of enormous wealth (at least for some). It also made it a city that might be described as a Las Vegas on steroids. Besides involving lots of money, life in Corinth also involved lots of chaotic license. It had been around for eight hundred years before the Romans completely destroyed it in the second century B.C. as part of their conquest of the Peloponnesian Peninsula, after which the city, rebuilt by Julius Caesar, became thoroughly Roman — with all of the advantages and disadvantages that entailed.²

Along with the benefits of Roman commerce came many of the more unseemly aspects of Roman culture. Corinth was regarded as perhaps the prostitution capital of the Roman Empire with some scholars estimating that there were at least a thousand cult prostitutes plying their trade in the city. This estimate may be dubiously high, though the city’s association with prostitution is attested to by Paul himself.³

There’s no doubt, however, that Corinth was perhaps the buckle of the Roman Paganism Belt. Inhabitants might choose to worship at a large temple to Apollo, the sun god, found in the city. Or, if Apollo wasn’t quite their cup of tea, they might venture over to another large temple to Asclepius, the god of healing and medicine, seeking a cure for whatever ailed them. Or, in a burst of civic pride, they might want to pay their respects to Octavia, the Emperor Augustus’ sister, at the temple dedicated to her. Or, if none of the foregoing struck

¹ 2 Cor 5:17 (NAB)

² See Drake Williams, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, John D. Barry, ed. (Bellingham, WA: 2016)

³ See Matthew S. Beal, “Corinth,” *Lexham Bible Dictionary*

their fancy, they had plenty of other temples to choose from — temples to Dionysius, Neptune, Pan, Artemis, Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, and Aphrodite. Pick ‘em.⁴

In short, life in Corinth was often characterized by a certain social, cultural, and religious hedonism. Much of this turmoil found its way into the church in Corinth, as Paul lamented on more than one occasion. The Corinthian church was plagued by its own fascination with wealth, power, social class, internal bickering (bickering that often led its members to sue each other), and a degree of sexual immorality that at times might have offended even proper pagans.⁵ Paul had his hands full with the church there.

As a result, it’s not terribly surprising, perhaps, that Paul drew their attention to the “new creation” they were in Christ, and that “new things” had — and would — come. Thank goodness, he suggests. Change isn’t always a bad thing. Sometimes it’s the best thing. And when it comes to the life of faith, it’s a necessary thing. By definition, conversion is change.

Paul was on solid ground in this sentiment. Jesus made the same point throughout His ministry. There’s no discipleship without change: changed circumstances and a changed us. We see this illustrated in numerous encounters He had during His ministry. At the outset of His ministry, for example, after Jesus had healed Peter’s mother-in-law, Mark tells us “the whole town was gathered at his [Peter’s] door,” following which, the crowd gathered again the next morning after the Lord had withdrawn to pray. Peter sought Him out to tell Him that “everyone is looking for you.” “Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also,” Jesus responds.⁶ The work of Christ is never frozen in a particular time, place, or experience.

Zacchaeus found this out, too. As Jesus passed through Jericho, Zacchaeus, a tax collector, perched atop a tree so the crowd wouldn’t block His view. Zacchaeus was perfectly content to stay there, but Jesus called him down and no doubt startled him by announcing that

⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mk 1:30-38 (NAB)

he would have dinner with him that very night.⁷ Sometimes when the Lord wishes to invite us into a deeper relationship, He calls us away from our comfortable perches.

That discipleship involves change is something Jesus imparted to Mary Magdalene, as well. When Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb and found it empty, she asked the person whom she assumed was the gardener where the Lord's body had been taken. Of course, the "gardener" was the resurrected Christ, but Mary didn't recognize Him until He called her by name, whereupon she reached out to embrace Him. "Stop holding on to me," Jesus tells her, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father."⁸ The Holy Spirit will only come to Mary, the Apostles, and the other disciples after Jesus' Ascension. Sometimes we have to give up clinging to past blessings in order to make way for new ones.

There are many such examples in Scripture, including today's Gospel in which Jesus tells His disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go [ascend to the Father]. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."⁹

The late Blues musician Johnny Adams used to perform a song, "Walking on a Tightrope," that included the line, "The future never makes it until the past, the past is gone."¹⁰ There's a lot of truth to that, though in the spiritual life, future blessings never involve a repudiation of past ones, just hearts that are open to receive new inspiration and grace.

⁷ Lk 19:1-7 (NAB)

⁸ Jn 20:17 (NAB)

⁹ Jn 16:7 (NAB)

¹⁰ Johnny Adams, "Walking on a Tightrope," *Walking on a Tightrope: The Songs of Percy Mayfield*, Rounder Records, 1989