

The Rod of Paul (1 Corinthians 4:21)

Written by K B Napier
Friday, 02 April 2010 14:29

With monotonous regularity, I hear from critics that we must always approach people 'with love'. That is, we must never speak hard words and must never get tough. Yet, this goes against the grain of what is the proper, vital, living, dynamic activity of a Christian. Of greater importance is the fact that such a 'wet' approach to people is not true to God's word, nor is it spiritually edifying.

Let us look at what Paul says to the troublesome Christians at Corinth

Most Corinthians were very rich. They abused their Christianity because of their riches and they still retained many unsavoury practices that rightly belonged to the pagan temples. They fought against and amongst each other, by linking themselves with different preachers such as Paul, Apollos, Peter, etc. Paul rebuked them in no uncertain terms over these partisan schisms.

In 1 Corinthians, 4: 21, Paul asks a significant question of the Corinthians:

"What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?"

Let those who peddle undying streams of 'love' in all circumstances please take note of those words! I have vivid recollections of those who speak to me 'in love', but whose hatred or antagonism is like a fiery furnace under their 'loving' exteriors! Far better that they should admit to their hatred, rather than be hypocrites.

Paul is here breaking the rules of the modern-day "love-'em-to-death" movement. He is offering the Corinthians a choice: he could either visit them in anger or he could come in love. Notice that - **either/or**! He did NOT say he would come and love them no matter what they did. In his writings Paul makes much use of the Hebraic form of argument, where opposites or comparisons are given to illustrate a point and to elicit a response. The present text is no exception, because he offers a choice between two extremes - love or hardness.

The word for rod is **rhabdos**, meaning a staff; a rod with which one is beaten; a rod of iron, i.e.

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a most severe and rigorous rule by another. (Compare with, say, Revelation 2:27, 19:15 and Isaiah 11:4. Also note, for example, Proverbs 23:13 and 29:15, where sparing the rod is tantamount to allowing evil to perpetuate itself).

rhabdos is from the base of **rhapizo** (itself derived from **rhepo**, meaning 'rap'), which means to smite with a staff, to smack someone on the face with the hand, or to box one's ears! I would be most surprised if lenient readers can find anything likened to their notion of 'love' in these words!

If Paul does not come with a rod, he says he will come in 'love' or **agape**, meaning brotherly affection and good will. This is linked with the 'spirit of meekness', or spirit of

praotes

, meaning gentleness or mildness. Thus, the very word highlights the hardness of its opposite,

rhabdos

. There is another important link here, too, between

praotes

and the word

praus

. The primary word,

praus

, means a mild disposition or a spirit of gentleness. In old Hebrew religious culture when one exhibited

praus

in the face of evil people, he was acknowledging that God purposes to use their evil to purify the Elect.

Paul did not use this word, though. Thus, he indicates that God was **not** behind the evils of the Corinthians for the purpose of purification... it was just plain sin to be dealt with in a hard manner. There are times when the 'evangelical smile' rides in tandem with 'evangelical love', to produce a sickening show of false brotherhood. How refreshing then, to read Paul's words, which are direct and far more realistic than the fawning hypocrisy of 'loving' Believers whose faces barely hide the evil in their hearts! If they really love certain of their brethren - why do they studiously avoid them whenever they can?

Obviously, this text is bound together with the concept of judgement, which is another Christian right. We must, of necessity, judge each other, before we can go to them either with love or with hard chastisement.

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Does coming to others with a rod (hardness) preclude a basic love for them as brethren? That is a silly question, as any parent can answer: a child may do wrong, but its chastisement, no matter how hard, does not mean the parent no longer has a regard for it. Rather, the opposite is true: true chastisement is the product of real love. If we do not care for someone, then we are not bothered what they do - right or wrong.

In several scriptures we are told that God chastises those whom He loves. Look at Paul's attitude toward the Corinthians: In 1:2 he refers to them as the **"church of God which is at Corinth... sanctified in Christ Jesus..."**

. Paul would never have used those words unless he meant them. In verse four, he thanks God for their salvation. Yet, despite his opening remarks of brotherly care, he spends several chapters telling them off! Such is the true pastoral heart. In chapter 16, verse 14, Paul says **"Let all your things be done with charity (love)."**

Again, he would not say that unless he himself meant it and applied it in his own dealings.

So, please brethren - do not be false. It is in our natures and is commanded by God, that we judge each other. At times, as Paul has shown us, we must be hard, when this is required to pull-up another sharply. The aim is to rebuke into repentance, leading to a change of thinking and behaviour. There are times when adopting a hard stance can be inwardly devastating to the one being hard. This is because he or she loves the person being rebuked, but cannot show that love in its full light until the sin has been properly cast off and a Christian spirit again prevails. The 'sweetness and light' approach used by so many brethren is unnatural, unchristian and unbiblical, leading to more sin and a worsening situation. The Biblical teaching is tougher, but we must stick to it. The alternative is to suffer, to be an hypocrite, and to allow sin to flourish!

The application of true discipline can often be emotionally draining, especially to the pastor as he attempts to rectify a sinful situation. But, it is necessary for the good of the whole Church, as well as for the good of the one being rebuked. It is certainly necessary for the pastor, whose integrity would otherwise be compromised.

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