

[2 Corinthians 5:6-17](#)

In my O-Level Physics class there once came an occasion where our teacher set us a problem for homework that none of us could solve. When my parents saw me struggling with it my Dad decided to write a letter to the teacher, asking him why he had set homework that none of the pupils could do.

In response to that letter the teacher phoned my Dad. He explained that all we needed to do to solve the problem was go back to the first principles we had learned in that topic.

When I heard that, I learned an important life lesson. Always go back to the first principles.

There is something of ‘first principles’ in our reading from 2 Corinthians. It’s a strange selection of verses in the Lectionary – but hey, what’s new there? But even despite that and the fact that we’re reading these verses out of context, we can pick up on some first principles. Because like my old Physics teacher, the Apostle Paul also always went back to first principles.

So today we are going to think about some of the First Principles of the Gospel. What are the first principles Paul talks about here, and how do they affect the way we live?

Number one first principle is that ***we live by faith, not sight.***

Paul tells us that in the life to come we shall be at home with the Lord and shall see him, but right now we are away from home and do not see him, so we have to live by faith, trusting in the God whom we do not yet see. But when we do see him, he will call us to account for all that we have done while away from home (verses 6-10).

What does that mean for us? To live by faith means that we trust that even though we don’t yet see God, one day we shall. And in the meantime, we are to live as those who know we shall see God one day. That’s what living by faith is here: trusting that we shall meet God face to face in the life to come, and letting that reality direct the way we live now. The Gospel promise of meeting God face to face *one day* is meant to change us on *this day*.

So for one thing, living by faith means that we consider our attitudes and our actions now. Would we act the way we do if we had to live our every moment before the visible face of God? How does the fact that we shall one day see

him face to face affect how we live today? What would we be happy doing in that knowledge? What would make us ashamed?

For another thing, we know that the Lord has entrusted us with resources, gifts, and talents in this life. So another part of living by faith is to consider how we use these things. From the abundance of creation to our natural talents, how would we use these if we were doing so before the face of God? How would we use our brain, our artistic abilities, our work skills, our homes and gardens, our possessions? The answers to questions like these will show how much we are living by faith – or not, as the case may be.

We often restrict the expression ‘living by faith’ to those Christians who have to trust God to supply their financial needs. I have no quarrel with that: I have had to do that at times. But Paul tells us to expand our vision of living by faith, because he tells us here that all Christians live by faith. How are we going to live now, knowing that we shall one day see God face to face?

Number two first principle is that *Christ’s love compels us*.

Paul talks about the love of Christ being a compelling motive in the Christian life, and he links it to his death on the Cross. If you hadn’t heard the whole reading but were just hearing his letter read out in public for the first time you might have thought that the link from the love of Christ to the Cross was going to be the forgiveness of our sins through the Cross. But it isn’t.

Of course, it’s true that Christ’s love brings us forgiveness through the Cross, but Paul makes a different point here. His punchline comes in verse 15:

¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Christ’s love compels us, because his example shows us that we are to live for Jesus and for others, not primarily for ourselves.

That’s why a church that gets hung up on just wanting the things that the members themselves like is an unhealthy church: it’s not modelled on Christ’s love.

In fact, were I to choose a church to be part of based on my own preferences it almost certainly wouldn’t be the Methodist Church. There are so many things in Methodism that I find tedious, frustrating, or annoying. But God called me to serve here. He loves me in Jesus, and calls me to return that love in the context of Methodism.

You may know the famous comment of Archbishop William Temple, when he said that the church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. It's not a perfect statement, but it does capture some of this idea: Christ's love means we live for him and for others.

Each and every one of us needs to be asking ourselves, how am I imitating the love of Jesus by serving him and serving others?

Number three first principle is *the new creation*.

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!

Following Jesus makes us treat people differently, says Paul. But it's that final verse where I need to give you this week's episode of Bible Trivia.

'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,' said many older translations. Some newer translations say, 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.' That's bit different.

So which is it? Is it that the convert is a new creation? Or is it that conversion promises the general new creation of all things?

If you go back to the Greek you'll see why we have this problem. It's ambiguous. A literal translation would be, 'If anyone is in Christ – new creation!' For us English speakers there are missing words. To translate it into English, we have to add words. Whether we opt for 'the person is a new creation' (favoured by those Christians who emphasise personal conversion) or 'there is a new creation' (favoured by those who care about the environment and social justice) depends largely on our existing theological preferences.

But what if the words 'If anyone is in Christ – new creation!' are deliberately ambiguous and cover both of these possibilities? I think both are true biblically.

When we are united with Christ, God makes us new by his Spirit, and starts a work of holiness and healing in us that will not be complete until glory. He calls us to co-operate with his Holy Spirit in this work.

But our union with Christ also shows God's project to make the whole creation new, just as he makes us new. He is not content to leave the world as it is and calls us to join with his Spirit in the renewal of all things.

So he will send us into the world both to call people to conversion and to make a social difference.

Therefore, if any of us prefers personal piety to social justice, we have sold the Gospel short. And if any of us is willing to campaign for social justice but not seek personal conversion and holiness, then we too have diluted the Gospel.

To sum up, the three Gospel first principles we've looked at today all lead to transformed lives and transformed society. When we live by faith, not by sight, we live as if we were doing so in the presence of God, and that surely changes our actions and our priorities.

Christ's love compels us through the Cross to live for him and for others, rather than for ourselves.

And the new creation is both personal with our conversion and our journey of holiness but also social as we anticipate God making all things new.

Each of us needs to ask: in what way is the Gospel changing me? And in what ways am I serving the kinds of change God longs to see in his world, as a result of the Gospel?