

I'm going to show you four of the most iconic black and white images ever recorded. Each of these has been shared and reprinted more times than you can count.

The Hindenburg Disaster

Prohibition's biggest raid

The construction of the Berlin Wall

Lunch atop the Empire State Building

Iconic, right?

Black and white photography

Except no one is printing posters of that image.

This is one people know.

The city in view, the depth captured, the height appreciated.

In both images, the lines – the raw data of the image – are the same; the contrast is just cranked up to 11.

And this actually teaches us something important: If you miss the shades, you miss the picture.

Things we see as black and white, are not that way at all, and when we see them with the contrast turned up, we can gain a new appreciation for the world and all the depth in it.

This, I think, is what Paul really wanted to do in the letter to the Romans.

Too often, I think, Christians shy away from a book like Romans because it is so heavily invested in theology. Romans is the book where you find ideas like Propitiation and Intercession, and where you encounter ideas like Predestination and Sanctification – but I want to suggest this morning that those are more a function of its *when* than its *what*.

Written shortly before his death, Romans represents Paul's last chance to communicate what God has been teaching him. The executioner is in the next room sharpening his blade, and so Paul picks up his pen and starts to write. He writes to the nearest audience he can reach, the church beyond his cell, the church that is in Rome - and he seeks to tell them everything he has learned in his too short life. But he is not writing aimlessly. There is a purpose to his letter beyond the relationship of a teacher and his students. This is not theology written to make minds wiser, but theology written to take discipleship deeper. It's a purpose that doesn't reveal itself until the letter draws to its conclusion, and the closing chapters read like a pastor's heart. All the big words, all the difficult ideas, all come to serve the church in its relentless pursuit of discipleship.

By cranking the contrast up to 11.

The first three quarters of the letter produce an almost rhythmic refrain: Even though we didn't deserve it, and through no good work of our own, God goes out of his way to love us. God is big, we're small. God is perfect, we're broken. God is forever, we're finite.

Romans is a study in contrasts.

And then we come to the last four chapters and it's as if Paul is saying, as a church, I want you to view every challenge, every idea, every bump in the road through the contrast God's already shown you and ask: is this a bigger contrast than God has already come in getting to me? Because if the answer is no, then chances are pretty good this isn't going to get the better of us.

Seeing ourselves and our faith family in view of the contrast between God and us, lets us put some perspective on our own challenges, it lets us view the people around us more complexly.

And that is precisely what Paul is doing

The problem, it seems, that has been plaguing the Roman Church, is how do we move forward when we don't see the world the same way? How do we go forward, together? The church was divided. There were the Jewish Christians, who continued observing the Law, even as believers, and there were the Gentile Christians, who had put away their pagan pasts.

I don't know if you're aware of this, but sometimes churches fight.

For the church in Rome, it was over whether to worship on Sunday or Saturday. For Jews, it was obvious. Being Jewish meant keeping the Sabbath. It was part of who they were, it was an identity question.

But it went the other way as well.

For some Gentiles who had walked away from Pagan religions, there was still something about walking into a temple and seeing the trappings of the life they'd left behind. It was easier for them to give up eating meat altogether than to tempt themselves with the things that went along with the meat. Like a recovering addict changing his number to avoid a certain set of phone calls.

In both cases, Paul urges the unaffected group to imagine the affected more complexly. ⁶Those who observe [one] day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God"

In doing so, he urges us in the church today to learn how to learn how to distinguish between 4 Ps: People (which breaks down to Personalities and Preferences) and Problems. Because if we miss the shades, we miss the picture.

Personalities are the natural bumps we run into when the church is made up of people of different cultures. They're the cultural artifacts we bring as we approach the gospel, our language and the biases that brings with it. Just as for Jewish Christians, the idea of worshipping on any day other than the Sabbath was unthinkable, our language shapes the way we speak and think about God; our culture shapes how we respond to an idea; and our history informs the way we make decisions. But imagine how you would feel if someone came into church next week and told you that you had chosen all of these things? That the church would stop declining if we would all learn a new language and adopt a new culture. You would feel ashamed and belittled, because your personalities were being treated like preferences.

Or imagine if it were more extreme? Imagine if you were part of a first nations community and your personality was treated like a problem. You were faced with a change or die mandate and everything that defined you was thrown in the trash. Is it any wonder indigenous communities are skeptical of the church's good intentions?

Preferences are different. Preferences are the parts of you that make you unique, even within your own community. They are the music you listen to, the food you eat, and the hobbies do. Like personalities, preferences have a place in the church – but they demand recognition. If you try and treat preferences like they're personalities you end up giving them too much weight. If we act like one type of music is all that belongs in church or one group or activity that is superior to others, we're confusing preferences for personalities. The same is true if we treat each others preferences like they're problems. This one is more subtle, because our Canadian condition of niceness keeps us from ever really confronting ideas we just don't like, so we casually work to freeze them out. We warmly greet those who we judge to look, think, act and feel like us – and so we subconsciously seek to eliminate those preferences that are unlike ours. The result is chronic homogeneity and a church that only has one kind of preference in it is going to die with those tastemakers.

Getting the people shade of this dynamic right is huge for the church today. To be able to distinguish between who people are and what they love is the essence of learning how to communicate Good News of Jesus Christ in a post-Christian world. And we're in good company. If the church in Rome struggled with it, and they had Paul as a pastor, how much worse off are you who are stuck with me? We're not going to get it right every time, but just being aware of the distinction is key.

And once we've grappled with that, it gives us the tools we need to actually address problems that arise.

Beth and I were working, a couple summers ago to fix our patio. The stones in one corner had seized and water was running toward the house. So we picked up the stones, tamped down the dirt, and laid the stones back down, only to find the next day that the patio was unlevel again. So we dug it out, put the stone back down, and next day, same problem. We had to dig down deep enough to find out that the tree in our neighbors yard had snaked a root under the fence and that root was pushing up on our patio. If we had dismissed the upset stone as just the way things were, or seen it as an irreconcilable issue between the patio and us, the problem would have only gotten worse.

This is Paul's final point in this morning's reading.

There will always be problems that the church needs to deal with. They are a function of imperfect beings making up imperfect churches, and the church needs to deal with problems. But we need to make sure that they are actually problems first. People are not problems. Their personalities and their preferences are not problems.

Because the key is this: When all the theology has been laid on the table, the question we keep coming back to is this: are we trying to make the people around us accountable to God or us? Because if it's us, then maybe we're the problem.