

SUMMER SERIES 2019

INSPIRED

August 25th | pages 191 - 221

The Letter; 8: Church Stories; Epilogue

THE LETTER

In *The Letter*, Rachel Held Evans recreates the scene of an early house church. Once again, while perhaps falling under the category of historical fiction, it is a realistic portrayal of how Paul's letters were read in small communities. Either the letter-carrier or the leader of the *ekklesia* (greek for 'gathering') would read the letter to the assembly and would have been wise enough to answer questions and help teach the intention of the letter. This particular letter is what we have in our Bible as Colossians. As RHE mentions, we believe seven of the NT letters are genuine to Paul; the authenticity of Colossians is debated among scholars. Nevertheless, if it wasn't Paul who wrote it, it was someone who was well-versed in Paul's school of thought. Also, 'plagiarism' as we know it today wasn't a problem back then -- if anything, it was common and showed the original author the utmost respect.

The story shows the dangers of being a Christian in these early days. Christianity was far from accepted in the Roman Empire -- it wouldn't become accepted in the empire until 313 CE and the Edict of Milan. So, when Paul (or whoever wrote Colossians) writes in such a way that goes against the empire's norms regarding gender, masters and slaves, and the rule of law, it was both dangerous and liberating for the followers of Jesus.

INSPIRED

8: CHURCH STORIES

Questions to consider:

- If the authors of the New Testament letters didn't consider their works to be scripture at the time of their writing, why do you think the Church came to view them as part of the Bible?
- Why is it helpful for us to know as much as we can about the original context and audiences of these letters?
- There are difficult passages in Paul's letters regarding gender roles and expectations. How can the Church read these letters in the 21st century and still see them to be faithful and helpful texts?
- As RHE writes on p. 206, "No one lives in general." The Christian life affects our actual lives -- "actual marriages, actual communities, actual churches, actual political differences, actual budget meetings, actual cultural changes, actual racial tensions, actual theological disagreements." How can Christians speak faithfully about these kinds of topics even when there are disagreements among us?
- Why can it be unhelpful to use the phrase "the Bible is clear"?
- How was the good news of Jesus and the letters of Paul especially important to women, slaves, and the lowly of society?

EPILOGUE

Questions to consider:

- RHE writes that "we live inside an unfinished story", that we as people of God are still participating in the risen life of Christ Jesus and of one another. How do you understand your place in this grand story that is still unfolding?
- The art of storytelling is alive and well in the Church. How do you feel called to tell the story of the good news of Jesus in your life?
- We've now finished *Inspired*. How has your view and/or understanding of scripture changed? In what ways have you become inspired as a result of engaging the Bible and this book?