

“Paul and the Corinthians”

1 Cor. 1:1-3

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This morning we begin a new series of morning sermons on Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. I have preached through 1 Corinthians once before, though almost none of you was here when I did so. That series was preached in 1985, 17 years ago now, hard as that is for me to believe. I am not the same preacher I was in 1985 and we are not the same congregation and, in any case, the lessons of this great book of the New Testament are timeless. We must return to them from time to time and all the more in a day and age such as our own. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a period in the history of the world more like that of Corinth in the days of Paul than our own historical period, poised as we are at the outset of the third millenium.

Whether we are speaking of the theological, philosophical, and moral opposition to Christianity in the culture at large and especially among the cultured elite, or the inroads of the influences of the surrounding culture in the life and thinking of the church herself, or the fractured condition of the church, Paul’s letter addresses us directly with an almost eerie relevance and contemporaneousness. If we were, somehow, to take a time machine back to first century Corinth and were then to spend some days or weeks acclimating ourselves to that place, time, and culture, I think our experience would be this. Once we got used to the superficial differences, once we accounted for the difference in technology in particular, we would realize that this was a world uncannily like our own. In many ways the culture was the same: the materialism, the worship of sports and entertainment (especially the theater), the overt sensuality of city life – which few besides Christians saw as immoral or shameful –, the welter of religions and philosophies competing for the attention of the people, many of them quite similar to views that have become popular again in our day. What is more, moving among the Christians in the various congregations that made up the church in Corinth, we would have again a powerful sense of *déjà vu*. We would think to ourselves: we’ve seen all this before in our own churches and in the American church, both the good things and the bad.

Corinth was a large city, the largest in southern Greece, with a population of some 100,000 souls when Paul visited there. That was the equivalent of a large city today because cities covered smaller areas and were more compact. It was the big city and we know well in our own day how culture is shaped by an urban environment. In Washington state we know the difference between King County and Moses Lake. Before Paul visited, extensive building projects under the Roman emperors Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius, had given the city a more regal and impressive bearing, a sense of sophistication and importance and greater prestige. People were prosperous, at least many were. Climbing the ladder both economically and socially was the major preoccupation of many people who lived there, including many slaves. Self-promotion was rampant, then as now, especially among politicians. Some of the Christians were prosperous as well, sharing in the booming economy of the first century Greco-Roman world. But, as today, prosperity and vice accelerated side by side. And, of course, not everyone participated in the prosperity to the same extent. The largest part of the Corinthian church, apparently, were working people and the poor. As we might expect, only a few were very wealthy. As a great trading city Corinth welcomed

people from all over the world. It was a diverse population that Paul found there and pluralism was a hallmark of its society, as it is of our own.

Indeed, over the past 20 years or so, a great deal of scholarly labor has been devoted to a greater understanding of the cultural situation of the Corinthian Christians. A new area of NT study, the sociological study of the NT, has concentrated attention on the Corinthian church. In part this is because we have more information about Corinth and the church in Corinth, both in the Bible, two long letters in the NT, and in classical sources, than we do for other places and other churches. One result of all of that research is the confirming of the similarity, at a deep level, between that situation and our own. In fact, one scholar writes of the Corinthian culture as “a postmodern pragmatism of the market with its related devaluation of truth, tradition, rationality, and universals”, in other words, Seattle-Tacoma in 2002. [in Thiselton, *NIGTC*, 33] There is going to be very little difficulty in translating Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians into terms meaningful to us today. We are the Corinthians and they are we!

Think, for example, of the games celebrated every other year in Corinth. They were one of the great festivals of the world of that day and huge crowds would come to Corinth for them. They were very much like, both in public interest and in economic activity, our modern Olympic games, such as recently concluded in Salt Lake City. Indeed, Corinth was one of the major tourist attractions of the Greco-Roman world. Think of Corinth’s main avenues crowded with Japanese with cameras and American men with loud shirts, Bermuda shorts and dark socks talking loudly in the streets. Now you have the picture.

Paul had spent a year and a half in Corinth on his second missionary journey. There he had met Priscilla and Aquila, Jews who had recently arrived from Rome. He preached with power to the Jewish community in the synagogue itself and won some converts, including the synagogue ruler and his family, but, as often was the case, also aroused fierce opposition among other Jews. Therefore, he left the synagogue, and moved his teaching into the home of a God-fearer, a Gentile who had previously been attracted to Judaism and then had fallen under the spell of Paul’s gospel preaching while attending the local synagogue.

As had been the case in other cities, many more Gentiles than Jews responded in faith to Paul’s preaching of Christ and the resurrection. There was opposition, to be sure – most of it instigated by the Jews –; and, to keep Paul at the work there, to keep him from leaving Corinth, the Lord appeared to him in a vision and assured him that there were many more people yet to be saved, many more who would believe his message and that the Lord would protect him from any harm. So Paul stayed and many were converted, and so far as we can tell, there were dramatic and wonderful conversions. Lives changed, entire families were reborn, old ways were left behind and the new way of following Christ embraced no matter that it represented a radical departure from the way of life to which these people had been long accustomed.

It is very interesting that in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 Paul uses his days of evangelism, his days of gospel preaching in Corinth and the extraordinary success that God granted him there, as the proof of his apostolic ministry. He even there compared himself with Moses, the greatest of all men in the Jewish tradition. Moses was a gospel preacher too, Paul said, but few believed what he preached. His was a ministry of condemnation and his preaching an aroma of death because

though he gave out the good news, Israel in his day would not believe it and were condemned for their unbelief. Paul, on the contrary, had been an aroma of life because when he preached the gospel – and he used Corinth as his primary example – people in droves believed and were saved. Those converts, he said, were his letter of recommendation. They were the proof that the Lord was in his ministry and blessing it with the power of the Holy Spirit. He was thankful that his had been a ministry not of condemnation but of salvation. Paul would always remember Corinth as the scene of his greatest triumph as a gospel preacher. He had gone to many places where there had been much less favorable response and much more concerted opposition. But in Corinth the kingdom of God forcefully advanced and forceful men laid hold of it.

But, now, three years had passed since Paul was last in Corinth. And reports had reached Paul of troubles in the church. The happy enthusiasm of early faith had been replaced with features much less pleasant and certainly much less holy. Different preachers and commentators describe the problems in somewhat different terms, but there is general agreement.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests that the great church in Corinth had fallen into spiritual decline for three reasons (each of which, he went on to say, has great contemporary relevance):

1. First, there was the carnality. Antinomianism had crept in. The notion that Christians lived above the rules. From the culture the Christians had imbibed again a spirit of worldliness and the toleration of sensual living. It was reflected in sexual ethics that were more Corinthian than Christian, in an acceptance of the prevailing culture of marriage and divorce, and in other ways as well.
2. Second, there was intellectualism, a pride in knowledge, the *sophia* or wisdom that set some above others. This was a conceit, Paul will say, that owed everything to the surrounding culture and nothing to the gospel and was purchased at the price of forgetting the grand difference that must always exist between the world's wisdom and God's.
3. Third, there was an unbalanced spirituality. A church that had been favored with demonstrations of God's power, with miraculous gifts, had developed an unhealthy interest in such things at the expense of the more important and eternal virtues of faith, humility, and love. There was a spiritual elitism abroad in the church that had gone so far as to make some feel that they lived on a higher plane than Paul himself; that they had even outdistanced their spiritual father.

The problems here did not derive, as they had in the Galatian churches for example, from judaizers who were compromising the gospel. Rather, here the problem seems to have come, as it seems to come in our day, from the pervasive and powerful influences of the pagan culture amid which these people lived. They had become Christians to be sure; they had not, however, successfully shed all the influences of the world around them.

These fundamental defects in the Corinthian Christians' living out their faith produced a number of very unhealthy and unpleasant consequences, not least a fractured fellowship dominated by a party spirit which was in turn fed by elitist attitudes, with Christians looking daggers at one another across the room and the like-minded among them banding together in groups against those fellow Christians who thought differently. It was a mess in more ways than one. No wonder that Paul should have written this letter so sternly, even harshly in a few places. No

wonder that this letter should have been written, as Tertullian says, “as a whole, not with ink, but with gall.” [*De Pudicitia*, xiv] Paul himself admits, in 2 Cor. 7:8, that his first letter had been no fun to write and must have been no fun to read. But, what else could he have done, the situation was so deplorable and so dangerous and so desperately needing to be corrected.

And, ever since, the Corinthian situation addressed by Paul in his great first letter, has been a perpetual reminder to Christians of how easily God’s great gifts can be squandered and defiled and how vigilant we must always be to protect ourselves and our congregation from like failings. And times without number, alas, Christian congregations have proved that having the Corinthians’ example before us and having Paul’s admonition to them in the New Testament is not enough to prevent the same things happening again.

Thomas Boston, the great 18th century Scot pastor, likened his parish at Ettrick, in the early years of his ministry there, to the church in Corinth. She was like that church he said, “in her three grand evils: self-conceit, a divisive temper, and sins of uncleanness.” [*Works*, xii, 459, 203]

But, just as the Corinthian church’s situation, as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians, has been a warning and a caution to Christians through the ages, so it has been a great encouragement, perhaps to pastors especially. In this way it is not unlike Paul’s terrible and wonderful *cri de coeur* in Romans 7:14-25. How many Christians through the ages have found the great Apostle’s anguished confession of his still great sinfulness one of the most comforting and encouraging texts in all of the Bible. For we say to ourselves, if *Paul* was still so great a sinner, even near the end of his Christian life, well, then, there is hope for me as well, for I *know* that I am and remain a very great sinner. If it were so for Paul it must be true that one can be a Christian, a real Christian, a saved man or woman, and still be a very great sinner. If his continuing sinfulness did not disqualify Paul from salvation, well, then, I have hopes it won’t disqualify me either! Is there a serious-minded Christian anywhere in the world who has not taken that comfort from Romans 7!

Well, in the same way, Christians and pastors especially have looked at their churches and their people, so often sunk so deeply in the very sins the Corinthian Christians indulged – bitter divisions over this or that, people regularly failing to live up to their calling as Christians, even sometimes it being hard to tell what difference there is between their lives and the lives of pagans around them, except perhaps that they go to church regularly – and it is easy in such times to despair, to wonder if God has disappeared, if his grace has been withdrawn, if he is no longer doing anything at all in our corner of the world.

But, then, we remember the church in Corinth and all of its ugly sins. That was a church of real Christians, we know because Paul says it was. That was a church founded by no one less than the great Apostle Paul. That was a church highly favored with miraculous demonstrations of the Holy Spirit and gospel power. And, yet, it had the same problems that we find today in our churches and in our hearts. So, we think, with a sigh of relief, that perhaps our sins and our failures do not after all mean that we are not Christians or that the Lord has deserted us. I know that I have turned to the mess that was the Corinthian church more than a few times in my ministry to remind myself that when the Spirit of God is at work it is by no means the case that everything will be as it ought to be, even in the lives of those who are genuinely reborn and who

are sincerely followers of Jesus Christ. We may be a mess in this way or that, but then living churches founded by the Apostles themselves were also.

The Christian church in Corinth is just Abraham stumbling as he did, Samson cavorting as he did, David falling as he did, Solomon growing worldly as he did, Peter betraying the Lord in cowardice as he did, but now not a single individual by himself but a congregation of Christians together. What is true of Christians individually will always be true of congregations of Christians corporately. That is why churches are addressed in the NT as if they were individuals, with a single life, character, history, and personality. And so it was in Corinth.

What we are going to find in 1 Corinthians is not order, not a tidy manual for Christian living. What we are going to find in 1 Corinthians is *life!* Life with all of its punishing and glorious reality. Life with its disappointments and struggles, life with its hopes that are only sometimes realized, life with surprises and mysteries, life that is as often failure as it is success, life as the Bible teaches us to expect life to be – especially life in the kingdom of God. It is this life, this real, rumbling life that Paul will place in this letter under the supreme authority of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is in the midst of life of this kind that he will tell us we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling. It is even with this ambiguous and imperfect life that we are to serve the Lord and bear witness in the world to his saving grace and power.

These Corinthian believers made a mess of things in many ways, but Paul loved them still. They did some extraordinarily foolish things, but Paul told them what they had done wrong and sent them onward to serve the Lord. They had in some respects crippled their witness to non-Christians, but Paul took that too in stride. There were corrections to me made, to be sure, important and very necessary corrections, but at the end of the letter, in chapter 16, Paul is speaking to them about how he wants them to share in his continuing ministry, telling them to go on in Christian faith and work, and sending them the warm greetings of other Christian churches. It was a mess in Corinth, to be sure, but that is what it will always be to some degree or another. We do not march boldly down the narrow way, head held high, arms swinging at our side. We stumble, we often fall, have to be picked up, sometimes have to be carried, and in this way we make it to the end of our journey; broken, sore, but saved nonetheless. And even weaklings such as we are, by the grace and strength of the Lord, can still serve the Lord in valuable and important ways. *His* strength, Paul would say at the end of his last letter to these same Corinthians, is made perfect in our weakness.

As C.S. Lewis brilliantly described this in his work, *Miracles* (155), “A new nature is being not merely made but made out of an old one. We live amid all the anomalies, inconveniences, hopes, and excitements of a house that is being rebuilt.” Many of you have experienced this: living in the house you are remodeling. You know how dirty everything gets, how complicated, how inhospitable your own home becomes. Dust everywhere, cold air rushing in from holes in the wall where windows used to be, bare floors and covered furniture, plastic hanging over doorways, tools everywhere. Well, there is a picture of the Christian life and of God’s renewing work in his children. And that is the picture we have in 1 Corinthians.

As one great preacher said about 1 Corinthians:

“It is not for a pattern of the machinery of a church we ought to go back to this early time, but for a spectacle of fresh and transforming spiritual power. This is what will always attract to the Apostolic Age the longing eyes of Christians; the power of the Spirit was energizing in every member, the tides of fresh emotion swelled in every breast, and all felt that the dayspring of a new revelation had visited them; life, love, light were diffusing themselves everywhere. Even the vices of the young church were the irregularities of abundant life, for the lack of which the lifeless order of many a subsequent generation has been a poor compensation.” [James Stalker, *Life of St. Paul*, 131]

Think about it. The problems you find in Corinth, the problems that Paul will deal with one by one in his letter, are the problems that are typical of times of the Spirit’s powerful working. Were there people who began, in their sinful enthusiasms to follow men instead of Christ himself? Well, so it was at the time of the Reformation and the time of the Great Awakening. Was there the conceit that comes with the sense that one has learned great secrets directly from God or been given powerful experiences of the presence and grace of God? Well, the Great Awakening had no sooner broken out in England than that problem began to surface. Was there a tendency to think that having been so wonderfully saved by the grace of God, it mattered little whether one lived according to the conventions of Christian holiness? There has never been a revival in which that problem did not come along apace. Was there an unhealthy interest in spiritual phenomena, especially of the more dramatic type? Talk to Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield about all the problems an unbridled enthusiasm caused them.

No, we do not turn up 1 Corinthians in order to look down our noses at these long ago brethren. In a strange sort of way we look to them with envy, hoping that we might recover and recapture some of that spiritual power that had transformed their lives, the very spiritual power, the existence and reality of which also expressed itself, as it always does in this sinful world, in characteristic vices.

You know what we sometimes say to ourselves, when we hear someone wealthy complain about the troubles that his money brings him, or someone successful and famous complaining about the problems of celebrity. We say, “I wish I had his problems!” Or, we say, “That is a nice a problem to have.”

Well, in the same way, I would much rather us struggle with the sort of problems the Corinthians were struggling with than to have a neat, tidy, orderly congregation, in which there is so little moving of the Spirit of God, so little stirring of new life, so little struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, that our primary difficulty is keeping everyone awake!

No one was sleeping in the church in Corinth! And if they had sins, which they did, real sins, dangerous sins, terrible sins, sins that had to be rooted out or else, they were at least the sins to which Christians are prone precisely because the grace of God has been so powerfully at work among them, lives have been so profoundly changed, and there has been so much to be excited and enthusiastic about. We’ll never escape sin, not in this world, not in this life. But if we must deal with sin, then let the sins we deal with be the sins of life and not the sins of death.

We turn, then, to 1 Corinthians, both to learn to root out vices that are characteristic of Christian people living in a culture such as ours *and*, still more, to recapture that experience of living faith in Christ, that power of his transforming grace that produced those particular vices, those vices that arise in our time and culture, as they did in Corinth in Paul's day, by a kind of fixed law, like a mirage in the desert – the inevitable deflection of the light of gospel truth in the spiritual atmosphere of our time. We want the gospel and its transforming power – if the price is that we must battle to the death certain sins that inevitably surface when the gospel penetrates a culture like ours, well, so be it!