

46. Jesus in 1 Corinthians

December 7, 2017

"If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it; you'll ruin it." You've all heard this advice. Looking for a church without problems makes about as much sense as shopping for a car that will never need maintenance or repair. Because we all are imperfect human beings even after we were saved by the grace of our perfect God.

Many Christians, especially misinformed ones somehow romanticize the first century churches as the model church that we should imitate. I don't think so, especially in light of knowing this church of Corinth. This church had its share of problems, if not more, like any other churches, certainly not a model to follow.

Wherever and whenever the Gospel has brought forth fruits, satan has tried to destroy it. The church of Corinth with all its affluence, giftedness, and exposure to the direct teachings of the apostle Paul was not immune to worldly corruption. The founder of this church, the aging apostle Paul had to write letters to rebuke them in order to bring them back to the Lord.

A. BACKGROUND OF 1 CORINTHIANS

It is important to see the background of this letter to the Corinth church.

The city of Corinth. What a mess! Fast and excessively showy, shallow and brassy, slick and sassy, sensual and busy Corinth. This sounds much like Las Vegas or Hollywood. The Vanity Fair of ancient Greece. A sailor's favorite port. A prodigal's paradise. A policeman's nightmare. A preacher's graveyard.

A city of about 200,000 free citizens, plus a half million slaves. It represented a lifestyle of loose living. In fact, the immorality of Corinth became so widely known that the Greek verb "korinthiazomai," of which the definition is "Corinthianize," it was coined to describe a person who lived a sexually immoral life.

Due west of Athens, Corinth placed itself like a one-stop location on the narrow canal connecting central and southern Greece. Because of the location, it became a premier center of commerce and trade. Such flourishing trade, along with the protection of Rome's military machine and the attraction of the Isthmian Game – second only to the Olympic Games, made Corinth a prosperous city. Naturally, with prosperity came all the attending pleasures and perversions.

Shrines and temples to the gods were every corner, the most renowned being the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It employed hundreds of cult prostitutes who helped "worshippers" pay tribute to the goddess.

B. THE AUTHOR AND TIMELINE

Into the fast lane of this wicked city came Paul, who lived and worked among them, ultimately establishing a church there during his second missionary journey in A.D. 51. He stayed with Priscilla and Aquila and joined them in their trade of tent-making to support himself while he taught in house churches for 18 months.

There was plenty of religious fervor, but no true faith; there were many temples, but not one church of Jesus Christ. Ultimately the apostle Paul came to Corinth and established a church there, but the new converts may very well have brought their bad

habits with them right into the church. In the wild and crazy setting of Corinth, the hotbed of unbridled immorality, it is no wonder that it wasn't long before deep problems plagued the Corinthian church.

Paul's authorship of this epistle is widely accepted in the scholarly community. About 4 years after Paul left Corinth to go to Ephesus, reports came to him that a rash of spiritual troubles had broken out in the Corinthian church. Although they were greatly gifted, they were also quarrelsome, petty, immoral, selfish, and carnal. In other words, they were immature and unspiritual.

You may be surprised to know that this is not the first letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. The letter we call 1 Corinthians is really the second letter and the second letter the third. The first letter never made it into the canon of Scripture. How do we know? Paul noted in 1 Corinthians that he had written to them earlier in chapter 5.

No ministry ever faced a greater challenge to survive and few churches ever experienced greater conflicts. This 16 chapter letter is comprised mainly of troubleshooting, confronting, exhorting, and correcting. No other NT letter gives the pastor of a church in conflict a broader base of preaching material to lead the flock into new territories of purity, holiness, and unity.

It is not just another material for preaching, but it is a great application material to apply in our twenty first century with the same problem they faced in the first century.

C. SURVEY OF THE BOOK

This Book falls into two main sections:

- 1) **Rebuke for the condition of the divisions and disorders in the church** – *Chapters 1-6*
- 2) **Reply to specific questions** – *Chapters 7-16*

We will see many questions from the congregation of the Corinth church and many answers from the apostle Paul in this Book:

Q1) Do we solve conflicts or do we let them fester? – 1:10-17

Once a conflict starts within a church, it doesn't go away by itself. We cannot just shrug our shoulders and hope that it will go away. This conflict spawns others: "Do we keep grudges and nurse resentments? Do we have a long lasting memory when it comes to offenses?"

If we want to be conflict solvers, we've got to learn from Jesus' life and His teachings about forgiveness and unity. We must deal with conflicts and divisions quickly, because if we ignore them, they will come back to haunt us.

Q2) Do we resist the temptation to boast in or even to worship another human being, or do we yield to it? – Chapter 3

"Don't worship any human," was essentially Paul's message in this chapter. He didn't object to the congregation to follow their pastor, but they shouldn't worship him no matter what. Because we belong to the Lord, not to any human leader. Our God alone is worthy of our worship, no one else.

I see so many Christians practically set their pastor on a pedestal. This is another reason that I don't care for the way Catholic people praise and worship their pope, almost as if he is a deity. But the people around the pope like it, because they, too, get to have more power and wealth.

Q3) Are we absolutely pure in our relationship with the other sex, or are we compromising? – 6:12-20

I like the apostle's simple command in v18: "Flee sexual immorality." You cannot open a newspaper or watch TV news without encountering another political or famous person involved in sexual misdeeds these days.

Avoid even the appearance of evil. Don't even play around with it. You play with fire, you will get burned.

Proverbs 6:28 Can one walk on hot coals, And his feet not be seared?

Karen and I made a decision a long ago, we would not have a meal, including a simple business lunch, with other sex alone unless one of us know the time and the location. It is not because we don't trust each other, rather it is being accountable to each other. If we're committed to purity in our relationship with the other sex, we will not tolerate immorality. We will not set ourselves up for failure or for compromise of our integrity.

Q4) Are we using our spiritual gifts to build up all the members of the Christian community, or are we hoarding our gifts, or using them for our own selfish advantage? – Chapters 12 and 14

Paul clearly teaches us the diversity and unity of spiritual gifts in the church, the body of Christ. At the same time, he reminds us to use our spiritual gifts for the glory of God and the benefit of the body of Christ, not for selfish reasons.

Q5) Are our actions motivated by love or by some other inferior motivation? – Chapter 13

Paul didn't hesitate to give his answer:

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

It is love that unifies the church. It is love that must control all we are and all we do.

Q6) Are we givers or takers? – Chapter 16

How important of our behaviors and attitudes of giving and receiving? The Lord teaches us to be cheerful givers who generously and freely share with others what He has so generously given to us.

D. APPLYING THESE

The tone of the letter is direct, even sarcastic and angry in places. There is a strong exhortation here; at times there is a firm rebuke. Some have maintained that no other letter in the New Testament showed such a wide range of Paul's emotions. Clearly the Corinthians needed a good scolding!

Corinth was a large, international metropolis, filled with people from different backgrounds. Idol worship to gods such as Aphrodite was particularly prominent in the city, though Corinth contained numerous temptations far beyond her temples. In this sense, Corinth was very much like a modern urban area, containing unending opportunities to engage in sinful behavior without any apparent consequences.

Such a community clearly had a negative influence on the Corinthian church. But notice that Paul's instruction to the believers was not to retreat from their city. This was not Paul's vision for the church then or now. Instead, he directed us to live out our commitment to Christ ever more faithfully in the midst of unbelievers. Paul expected that we Christians would shine our light into the dark places of their world by wor-

shiping in a unified community that was accountable to one another. He expected that we would settle our problems internally, that we would encourage one another in the pursuit of purity, and that we would strive together by holding tightly to the hope of our bodily resurrection to come.