

LESSONS FROM CORINTHIANS

Acts 18:9-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-17; 3:1-9; 4:1-2

Several years back a group of us took a trip referred to as the Journeys of Paul. We covered all of the places that were part of Paul's ministry in Greece, plus Ephesus in Asia Minor [Turkey]. It was on that trip we visited the ruins of Corinth and learned about the culture of that city in which Paul ministered for 18 months.

Corinth in Paul's day was a real center of paganism and immorality. It was a sea port, actually between two sea ports, so trade and travel brought all kinds of thoughts and practices and wealth into Corinth. In Paul's day Corinth was a Roman colony, having been rebuilt by Julius Caesar. But its background was Greek. And though a Roman colony, Greeks came back in great numbers. It was populous, wealthy, intellectual, full of proud people, and one of the most important cities in Greece.

Let me give you a flavor of the city. The Greeks believed that because sexual urges were normal, those urges should always be appeased. So prostitution flourished. The temple of Aphrodite located there was staffed by 1000 prostitutes, who left the temple at night and came down from the mountain to work the streets of Corinth. Sex within marriage was for producing an heir. Pleasure was believed to come from one other than the spouse. Homosexuality was very much a part of life there.

In the first century Corinthians were stereotyped as immoral alcoholics. In fact the word "Corinthian" was a synonym for loose living.

What a place to plant a church! That's like planting a church in a place like San Francisco, Vegas, New Orleans rolled into one. When Paul arrived in Corinth, he had already experienced a great deal of disappointment. He was imprisoned at Philippi, where after a promising beginning things went awry by opposition of fanatical Jews. The same thing happened at Thessalonica and Berea. In Athens, he had little success. So it is no wonder that when he came to the proud, intellectual, sensual city of Corinth, he came

...in weakness and fear, and with much trembling [1 Corinthians 2:3].

It appears that Paul was so low that God needed to strengthen him through a vision.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God [Acts 18:9-11].

In this environment Paul begins preaching the Gospel that does not tolerate compromise. He declares a God Who is holy, demands holiness and thus calls for His people to live sexually pure lives.

What a challenge!! But Corinth is a place where the Gospel needs to be declared. This is a place where God can and does work. Paul said that he did not come preaching with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power [2:4]. He preached the cross which was foolishness to those perishing but to those being saved the power of God [1:18].

As believers, it is easy for us to get discouraged in our environments. It is a challenge to live out the faith surrounded by so much that is contrary to what we believe. We are weary of relativism [no absolute truth]. Every time a poll is taken morality and beliefs have slipped more, even among those who claim to be evangelicals. We are tired of the New Tolerance. We have to vote on what marriage means—and we live in a county where the vote on affirming that definition failed. There is a challenge to everything that is sacred and a constant attempt to remove everything having to do with Christ and Christianity from the public square. But rather than being discouraged, we need to recognize that these are the very times in which God can and does work. We are to preach the Gospel in the power of God and be the church—being temples, housing the very presence of God [3:16].

Now this latter point of being the church is the matter that Paul addresses with the Corinthians. There are areas where they are not being the church and their witness is being compromised. You can imagine the struggle of discipling converts who had come out of the Corinthian background and had that

culture stamped all over them. When they came into the church, they brought much of their past with them. Notice who they were:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were [1 Corinthians 6:9-11].

That's what they had been. That was their background. They had come to Christ through the preaching of the Gospel but change was still needed in their lives so they could be change agents in Corinth.

The letter before us [1 Corinthians] that Paul wrote back to the church gives us a picture of the church. We learn about those things that need to change and matters with which they struggle. Paul addresses their divisions, their marriages, their misuse of freedom, their impropriety in worship, their pride, their misuse of spiritual gifts, taking one another to court, etc. It is from both the strengths and weaknesses of the church at Corinth that we can now learn. Over the summer we will be studying this book and applying lessons from the church at Corinth to us.

Before we look at the first lesson, let's see how Paul addresses the Corinthians. In light of what was going on in the church, you might find this terminology odd.

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus... [1 Corinthians 1:2]. How could Paul address this crowd that way? How can they be addressed as sanctified when there were so many sinful aspects in their lives that needed to be resolved? This is a great place for us to understand the work of God—specifically, the work in our lives of “sanctification.”

Sanctification is a term of ownership. It means that we belong to God. We are sanctified through our relationship with God. When a person accepts Jesus as Savior—is forgiven and made a new creation—he belongs to God because he is adopted as a son of God and declared legally righteous.

Sanctification is also a process—a progressive work. This is based on the fact of relationship. One cannot proceed where he has not started. One cannot become more like God until he has been given the nature of God. This is the process by which a life is brought into conformity to the legal declaration of “being righteous.” Salvation gets you into the Potter's shop and progressive sanctification is the process of getting on the Potter's wheel for formation. The assumption of progressive sanctification is that we need to change and be transformed—that there is work yet to be done on our lives.

So, Paul addresses a people [the Corinthians] who belong to God because of the experience of salvation who need to continue to be changed. And the same is true for us. Those of us who have believed on Jesus as our Savior still need change in our lives. The Christian life is a constant experience of progressive sanctification. We need to continue to change and become more and more like Christ until God completes that work in the future. God is molding and shaping us through His word by the Spirit, through discipline, through circumstances in our lives, etc.

We have to understand sanctification to see how Paul can call the Corinthians “those sanctified.” I wanted you to see that as we begin our study of the Book.

Now, let's begin to look at the teaching of 1 Corinthians and see what lessons we may learn. Starting with chapter one, Paul deals with the division that had come in the church around the leaders associated with the church. To clarify, the divisions had not come because of what the leaders did or were doing but because of the way the people viewed the leaders. I think that these verses provide a great lesson for us as we change pastors.

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul [1 Corinthians 1:10-13].

Now the situation at Corinth was this—there were divisions over personalities. One of the personalities was, of course, Paul who started the church and under whose ministry many of the Corinthians had come to know Christ and been discipled. Another was Apollos, who was a Jew from Alexandria. He was apparently an outstanding orator, a great apologist with a dynamic personality. Then, there was Cephas, Simon Peter. There is no way to know if he was ever in Corinth, but some in the church there had obviously been associated with a part of his ministry. It could have been that the Jewish converts gravitated to him and the Gentiles converts gravitated to Paul.

So, this is what happened. Some claimed to be the group of Paul because he had started the church, discipled them, and loved the way he emphasized the grace of God. Others were for Apollos. They loved to hear him speak and raved about how much he knew. Then there was Cephas—an original disciple, the one who was so down to earth. And, of course, he walked on water. Then, to top it off, you had a self-righteous group, who when hearing all of this, said they were the true group that followed Christ. They felt they took the high ground and were more in touch with Jesus.

When it comes to preachers and Christian leaders we all have our favorites. We have those who speak to us deeply or speak our language. They just get through to us better. We like those who preach the way you ought to preach—“now that’s preaching”—whatever that is supposed to mean [meaning that it fits the paradigm that we have from our background and experience]! There are those that we may be emotionally tied to. But here is the problem that Paul was addressing in Corinth. Rather than receiving and appreciating what each personality provided and gave, they pitted one leader against another. There is a problem when we become exclusive and begin to rank leaders as one greater and one lesser. First of all, the pitting of one against the other probably came from personal preferences. Secondly, the pitting of one against the other no doubt was due to differences in tasks and the differences in successes. But both the differences in tasks and the differences in successes were due to the Lord.

The people were creating divisions in the church around these men who weren’t even there. What is it about us that we think we can only show loyalty to one and not another; that we can only appreciate one and not many, that we cannot speak well of one without denigrating another [some belittled Paul and others exalted him], or we feel like we have to pit one leader against another and create a sense of rivalry with each thinking their opinion is right.

This is a good lesson for us to keep in mind as we anticipate in the near future a transition of pastors. What the church does not need is division around one pastor gone and the one coming. If we do what the Corinthians did, it would go something like this:

He is not Dr. Poplin so I am not going.

He preaches too long. Dr. Poplin never preached that long.

He is so much better than Dr. Poplin

He is so much more down to earth than Dr. Poplin.

He is so much more evangelistic.

He relates to people that Dr. Poplin never related to.

You may think that is just the way it is. But Paul begged to differ. He said that that type of thing causes division, is worldly and is a sign of spiritual immaturity. So Paul gave guidance to the church on how to view their leaders and what was to be their appropriate perspective.

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each His task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building [1 Corinthians 3:1-9].

Paul said that each man was only a “servant” of God [3:5]—cf. Hebrews 13:7, 17 where there is to be remembrance, submission and obedience. They both are simply workers in God’s field. One plants, one waters, one pulls weeds, one reaps, etc. But it is God Who brings the growth. Neither is more important. It is a matter of timing as they work the farm of God. They are all co-laborers. To each God has assigned a task. God has given each a gift or gifts for that task. They all are employed by the same Boss. The workers have one purpose. They are different and have different tasks. But, they are to be alike in one thing. They are to be found faithful.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful [1 Corinthians 4:1-2].

No leader is big enough nor powerful enough to change lives other than Jesus. No one else was crucified for you. No one else can forgive sin. Christ is not divided. He just chooses vessels through whom He works. Exalting one over another is to mistake the channel for the source. To claim one man over another is to accept what Christ revealed of Himself through one and reject it through another.

The loyalty that you gave me does not prevent you from giving it to another. You don’t have to denigrate me to appreciate another leader. You don’t have to denigrate another to appreciate something that I may have done. Paul provides a great perspective here.

Each leader is an individual [your children are all different but you don’t make rivals out of them—you’re one family]. Here is the wonderful thing about a new pastor and another spokesman. You are going to hear things from one that you did not hear from another. You are going to be disciplined in new ways. No one gives the total picture of Christ. That is why we have 4 Gospels. You are going to be benefited in different ways. You will be drawn to a new truth and a new commitment through a different personality. Give thanks to God for what is done through the servant. Don’t set up rivalries and take sides in a rivalry that does not exist. There can’t be rivals when you are on the same team. To do so is to misunderstand the work of God. To do that is to create a tear—literally, the word for “division”—which distracts from a great garment.

1. May we heed the lesson.
2. May each one here, regardless of your background and life position right now, know that you can be sanctified. God will take you where you are and make you what He wants you to be.