

THE CORINTHIAN CRISIS

by Ray C. Stedman

Some years ago on a Sunday morning here, I was preaching on a section from the sixth chapter of First Corinthians and commenting on Verse 9 where the apostle says,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. {1 Cor 6:9-11a RSV}

I remember I was so struck by those words, "such were some of you," that I stopped and said to the congregation,

"This was the make-up of the church at Corinth. These people had come out of this sordid background. Many of them, perhaps, still were struggling with much of the aftermath in their lives of these evil things. I am curious as to how many of you here have some of these things in your background."

I then did a rather bold thing. I said,

"If any of you have anything like this in your background I'd like to ask you to stand where you are, quietly, for a moment that we might know how much we're like the church at Corinth."

I did not know it, but a young man was present with us that morning who had never been in church before. He told me afterwards that he had been converted at a recent Billy Graham Crusade, and he came here with fear and trembling, not knowing what he was getting into. He said he heard me make that announcement, and he looked around to see if anyone would stand. At first no one did, but then a little old lady right on the aisle got up. Others then began to stand, and soon two-thirds of the congregation was standing. This young man said he looked around at this crowd and he said to himself, "These are my kind of people!"

I think that story highlights a feeling I often have when reading these Corinthian letters. There is no church in the New Testament that is more like the churches of California than this Corinthian church. Corinth was a city of wealth and culture, seated at the crossroads of the Roman Empire, where all the trade and commerce of the empire passed through. It was a city of beauty, a resort city, located in a very beautiful area, but it was also a city of prostitution and of passion. It was devoted to trade and commerce, but also to the worship of the goddess of sex.

On the little hill that rises behind the ancient city, there was built a temple to Aphrodite, and every evening the priests and priestesses -- male and female prostitutes -- would come down from the temple into the streets to ply their trade. It was known throughout the length and breadth of the ancient world as a city of great and widespread immorality. It was in some ways, therefore, what we could call *the San Francisco of the ancient world*. And, located as it was on the Peloponnesian peninsula, I think there is no other church in the New Testament that could have taken the name to itself, "The Peninsula Bible Church"!

So I would like you to turn to "First Californians" this morning and let me read these opening words of this letter to you:

Paul, called by the will of God, to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, {1 Cor 1:1 RSV}

(If you have read the book of Acts lately you will know that Sosthenes was at one time the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth. He had been converted, evidently, after a difficult time in that city, and now is with Paul in Ephesus.)

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Cor 1:2-3 RSV}

Paul is writing this letter from Ephesus in about 56 or 57 A. D. He had founded the church in Corinth about five years before that, when he had come alone, driven out of Macedonia by the persecution there. He had left Timothy and Luke behind and came to Athens, and then from there to Corinth. After the founding of the church (which took a period of about two years during the apostle's ministry), he left and went on other journeys. Now he is in Ephesus, and word has come to him that there is difficulty in the church at Corinth.

Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians, referred to in the ninth verse of the fifth chapter, which has been lost to us. All we know of it is what the apostle says there, that he wrote the letter to the Corinthians telling them that they should not keep company with those who had fallen into immorality. Subsequently, a group of men had come from Corinth to visit him in Ephesus (their names are given in the final chapter of this letter, Fortunatus, Stephanas, and Achaicus), and they had brought word, evidently, of further troubles there. With them they also brought a letter from this church asking the apostle to answer certain questions that they had. This letter that we now have, First Corinthians, is his answer to that letter, and to the reports that he had received from the Corinthian church.

In some ways, most remarkably, this letter is different from all the other letters the apostle wrote. Most of them began with a rather lengthy doctrinal section in which he is teaching great truth, and close with a practical section in which he applies what he is teaching. But here, right from the very beginning, he plunges into the problems of the church, and intersperses a kind of practicality of doctrine with revelations of truth throughout the letter.

This is certainly the most practical of all Paul's letters. Even in this opening greeting, his concern for the church in its various problems is very clearly reflected. It begins with an emphasis upon his apostleship. "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle." That was necessary because there were certain ones in Corinth who were ready to challenge that fact because he had not been part of the original twelve disciples. His apostleship was called into question, and some were wondering if he were not even a false apostle, so Paul has to defend it in the letter. Therefore, he puts his apostleship first as he writes.

Then, in Verse 2, he refers to the Corinthians and describes them as "sanctified in Christ Jesus." Now, in almost all the other letters, Paul's greeting to people is based not upon sanctification, but justification. But here he refers to this group as having been sanctified. These two words are theological terms:

Justification is the description of the change that God makes within an individual when he comes to Christ. It is what we also call the "born again" experience that we are hearing much of today. It means an inward change of nature, a deep and fundamental difference in outlook and attitude because of a deep change within.

Now, sanctification is the visible result of that in the behavior of individuals. It is all that change working out in terms of practice so that you see that someone is different. We are hearing much about Chuck Colson, Eldridge Cleaver, and even Larry Flynt of "Hustler" magazine, and the claim is made that these men have been justified -- that is, born again -- and, therefore, their behavior is changing; they are being sanctified.

That is what Paul refers to here with the Corinthians because their behavior was what was in question.

At the close of that same verse he stresses the Lordship of Jesus. He sends the letter to all those, "who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," and that would surely include us. Then he adds, "both their Lord and ours." That was because in this Corinthian church there were people who were turning away from that authority of Jesus, and following after men. Divisions had come into the church, and early in the letter the apostle reflects his concern over their departure from the centrality of Christ.

Verses 4 through 9 conclude the introduction, and in the Verses 4 through 8 the apostle starts with the good news for these people. He has both bad news and good news for them in this letter, but as he always does, he starts with the good news, that which is true of them because they are Christians -- regardless of how they are behaving. He lists for us some of the fullness of provision that they enjoyed because they were Christians.

I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you In Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge -- even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you -- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
{1 Cor 1:4-8 RSV}

There are several things that Paul takes note of that were true of the Corinthians, and they form the foundation of his approach to them. He admits freely that these are blessings and possibilities and provisions that God had given them that they fully and freely shared.

First of all, notice that their entrance into the Christian faith was orthodox, i.e., they were saved by grace: "I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus." These people had been heathens, and now they are born again by having received the grace of God.

The interesting thing in this letter is there is no problem or wrestling with the matter of legalism. These people were not all caught up with wrong rituals (you have that in the letter to the Colossians); they were not involved with disputes over circumcision (you get that in Galatians); and there was no resting upon dead works (you get that in Philippians). Here in Corinthians the problem was license. They had accepted the grace of God to such a degree that they did not think it made any difference how they behaved, and that is what was causing the problem.

Now, the apostle admits that they understood the grace of God. There are no questions raised in this letter on the deity of Christ, or the virgin birth, or the substitutionary atonement, or the incarnation of Jesus. They all understand that they were set free from their sins by the gift of God through Jesus Christ. Their entrance, therefore, is clearly based upon God's grace.

Furthermore, Paul says, their equipment, having become Christians, is superb: "in every way you were enriched by him with all speech and all knowledge" (Verse 5); "so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Verse 7). "In every way," he says, "you were enriched."

The word for "enriched" is the word from which we get our word "plutocrat." They were rendered plutocrats, spiritually. They had a wealth of enrichment, and Paul points out that it was in two particular areas, in the word and in knowledge. The word for "speech" here is really the word *logos*, the word of God. This is his first admission to them -- that they were recognized, avid Bible students. They understood the Bible. They did not have the New Testament as we have it -- it was not written yet -- but they had among them New Testament prophets who were preaching and teaching the same truth that we have in the New Testament. Therefore, they had all the truth available to them that is available to us. They were knowledgeable in it, Paul says.

The Corinthians were theologians, very likely, and, as was often true in Greek cities, they loved to get together to discuss philosophies and doctrine, and to probe various problems, and to dialogue about things. They were, therefore, able to answer some of the deep and heavy questions that we still wrestle with today. I am sure they could have told you where Cain got his wife; that is one question we always get. They could have told you what happens to those in other lands who never hear the gospel. They could have told you why God does not kill the devil. I do not think a week goes by that I am not asked that question. They could have told you when the anti-Christ would appear. (Even Hal Lindsey cannot answer that one!) They were Bible students, and Paul recognizes that, and commends them for it. They were theologians; they were trinitarian, supralapsarian trichotomists! (You don't know what that means, but they did.)

Now, more than that, Paul says, they were not lacking in any spiritual gift. In my study of the New

Testament, I have listed at least 21 different spiritual gifts that are referred to, and, according to Paul, there in Corinth every one of them was manifested. They had the gifts of miracles, the gifts of healings, the gifts of teachings, the gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues, the gifts of knowledge, and leadership. There was not a single one of the gifts of the Spirit that was lacking in this church.

Can you imagine what kind of fascinating meetings they must have had when they all got together? No one wanted to miss church in Corinth!

They never knew whether somebody would be healed, or some miracle would be demonstrated, or some remarkable prophetic utterance would come forth, or somebody would speak in a language they had never learned and someone else would interpret. It was an ecstatic time in the church there.

But that is still not all. Not only was their entrance orthodox and their equipment superb, but their expectation was right too. They were waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, and they understood that when he appeared, he would set things right on earth. They were not given to naive and liberal delusions that they would, by their own efforts, handle all the problems of the world, and correct all the evil in life, and bring in the kingdom that way. They were not propounding self-reliant schemes for earning a status and a position of blessing with God. They understood that it was Christ who would sustain them to the end, and that it was he who would present them blameless before the Father. Paul acknowledges that all this is true of them.

But then, in Verse 9, the apostle seems suddenly to change the subject, and he introduces rather abruptly a word of description of the fellowship that they needed among them:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1:9 RSV}

This is the key verse of First Corinthians.

The rest of the letter centers around it. It is a statement that God had called them to a very important relationship, and, by implication, here at the very beginning of this letter we learn that this is the reason for all of the problems in the Corinthian church. They had not understood the implications of their calling, and the relationship they personally and individually had with Jesus Christ himself. Instead, as we see, beginning with the very next verse, the apostle has to deal with divisions, scandals, lawsuits, immorality, drunkenness, quarreling, and with much misunderstanding of the truth about idols and demons and various other things. It is very clear, as you read this, that, despite this fullness of provision which they had received, they were experiencing a great failure in the church. They had all this ability to do all these mighty things in the Spirit, but not much was happening out in the city. Instead of making an impact on Corinth, Corinth was making an impact on the church. All these ugly attitudes and actions and activities that were going on every day and night out in the city were beginning to infiltrate into the church, and instead of the church changing the city, the city was changing the church. That was the problem. Despite all this mighty provision, there was no manifestation of the power of God.

This reminds me of Peter Marshall's very vivid description of contemporary Christians. He says, "Christians are like deep-sea divers encased in suits designed for many fathoms deep, marching bravely forth to pull plugs out of bathtubs!" What was wrong? Well, what was wrong was the Corinthians lack of understanding of what it meant to have Jesus Christ living among them.

I have been traveling widely these last few weeks. I have been up and down the West Coast and back into the Middle West, to Chicago, Dallas, Peoria, and Denver, and up to Washington and down to Southern California, and, in all these places, almost everywhere I have gone, I have found that the major struggle of churches is right at this point. They have lost the sense that Jesus is among them, that they have an individual relationship to the Lord of glory himself. They no longer live their lives in the awareness and the excitement that they are partners with Christ in everything they do. When that begins to fade from the Christian consciousness, all these troubles that the Corinthians were experiencing begin to crowd in, and press in upon us. Therefore, this letter is written to call these people back, as it is written to call us back as well, to an awareness of what it means to have fellowship with Christ.

Fellowship with Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is his task to take the things of Christ and make them known unto us, to make the person of Jesus vivid and real in our daily experience. That is what Paul is talking about here -- Christ made real to the heart, enabling him to satisfy the thirsts of the soul; Christ providing the power that it takes to do and meet the demands of both the law and the love of God. Fellowship with Christ is not only direction in what to do, but it is dynamic -- it is how to do it.

Oftentimes churches fall into the habit of trying to draw direction from the Lord with no awareness of the great provision of the dynamic that comes:

- It is not only guidance he gives us, but resource as well.
- It is not only an understanding of life, but an undergirding, in order that we might perform it.
- It is not only a program that he sets before the church, but the power to carry it out.

Now that is what these Corinthians had lacked.

That is what, oftentimes, we lack today.

I find, on so many sides, a failure to understand what it means when Jesus himself says "when two or three are gathered together in my name" (or two or three hundred, or two or three thousand), "there am I in the midst of you, to provide not only the direction you are to go, but the dynamic by which you are to live," {cf, Matt 18:20}. When any one of us forgets this, we drift into that terrible syndrome of recognizing the Lord on Sunday, and from Monday through Saturday living our life on our own without any recognition of his presence with us. He is no longer Lord of all our life, but only a part of it. If he is not Lord through our life all day long then he is Lord only of the margins, only of the leftovers, only of the weekends. What the church is called to is to an understanding of the presence of Christ in the human heart to supply to it that dynamic, that sense of adventure, that innovative spirit that opens doors in unusual and unanticipated ways that lends adventure and color to life.

Now that was what was missing in Corinth, and as we open this letter and go on into it further, we will see how, in every case, the apostle calls them back to that:

- They were suffering divisions because they had lost sight of the Lordship of Jesus.
- They were immoral because they had forgotten that the members of their bodies were the members of Christ.
- They were in lawsuits with one another because they had failed to see that Jesus was judge of the innermost motives of the heart.
- They were quarreling because they had forgotten that others were members of Christ's body and, therefore, they were members one of another.

All that the apostle does to heal the hurts at Corinth is to call them back to an awareness of fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, this morning we are going to go no further into the letter than that, but we are going to call ourselves back to a sense of the awareness of fellowship with Christ in the celebration of the Lord's Table. Here in this very letter to the Corinthians we read that they were having difficulties at that point. The Lord's Table had been turned into an automatic, mechanical performance in which they had so lost sight of its meaning that they were indulging in selfishness and forgetfulness of one another, and even drunkenness. What the apostle calls them back to, and what we should remind ourselves of this morning, is that there is no sacrament, no ceremony of the Christian life more eloquent to remind us of who he was, and who he is in our midst, than this celebration of the Table of the Lord.

There are two elements of it. There is the bread, and the wine:

The wine is designed to remind us of his death, that which ends something, that which cuts off an old life. Blood poured out spells death. As we take the cup we are reminding ourselves that, when we came to Christ,

our old life ended. It is no longer worthwhile in God's sight; it has no value, it will not help us. We can go back and live that way any time we choose; we are free to do that, but if we do, it will be of no value to us whatsoever. It will only produce heartache, misery, sorrow and stumbling in our midst. Every time we take the cup of the Lord's Supper, we are reminding ourselves of that great fact. We agree with God that that old life will not help us one bit. If we indulge it, it will only cause destruction in our midst.

The bread is there to remind us that we have a new life. We died in Christ, yes, but that does not end us as death usually would. We have a new life in him. We feed upon him. He is our life. We eat Christ when we are in moments of doubt. We eat Christ when we are suffering from temptation and feeling the pressure and the power and the lusts of our life. We eat Christ afresh when we want to manifest love and find no capacity to do so within us. It is that momentary experience of the presence of the Lord that is brought to us by the symbol of bread which we eat again and take into our very lives and make a part of us.

Now as we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we pray that we will do it in a way that will be meaningful for every one of us as we remind ourselves of these two great truths the Word of God seeks to bring home to our hearts. Let your heart and thoughts now center around what God wants you to know in the celebration of his Supper. We do believe his word that he is with us, that as we gather together in this corporate way, our living Lord stands among us, moves and speaks and ministers to us. We have available all the wonder of his risen life as we enter into the awful meaning of his death. We pray, therefore, that all this will come home to us, the oldest and youngest alike, as we meditate together.

Prayer

Lord, may our hearts be opened to the searching of your Spirit, and a healing of your love.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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