

THE CORINTHIAN CRISES

by Doug Goins

In this message we're beginning a study of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. I chose this book of the Bible for us to study because it has three areas of relevance to PBC at this particular time and place. First of all, the book of 1 Corinthians was written specifically to a church in an urban setting. It could have been written to a congregation in New York, Tokyo, Paris, Los Angeles, or Rio de Janeiro. These are all cosmopolitan, multiracial, multicultural places of socio-economic diversity. They are just like where we live, Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area.

My own roots didn't prepare me for living the Christian life in an urban setting. I was born in a small farming community in central Indiana. The church and the school were the two primary institutions there, and teachers and preachers were the most important people in the community (after the high school basketball coach). In that little town, and in most little towns in America in those days, a Christian ethic was assumed and was reinforced to some degree by the whole community. There were the usual behavioral exceptions, but they were considered wrong, and none of them ever enjoyed the approval of the community. Such were the settings in which most of the churches in our country developed from the beginning.

As the people reared in these small towns moved to the cities of America, we had a difficult time adjusting. Urban settings didn't provide the support system of those rural communities. Some Christians suggest the cities are evil because they have been created by man, whereas the countryside is romanticized, because it has been created by God. But New Testament history reveals that the early church carried the gospel first to the great cities of the world. This is where people were first converted and where local churches were first established.

The second area of relevance of 1 Corinthians to our church has to do with the problems the Corinthian church was facing. If you read this book quickly, you could get the mistaken idea that Paul's letters deal with antique issues. But when you look at the underlying theological and ethical issues of church life, they seem a lot more contemporary.

The first issue that Paul deals with in this letter is the issue of disunity in the church. You've got to admit that this is one of our most consistent problems in the church in America today. We all want to be a part of a loving, caring community, yet it's so hard to sustain. This issue is so important that Paul is going to spend the first four chapters in this letter dealing with unity and disunity in the church.

Another issue that they were struggling with at Corinth was sexuality. How are we to be Christian and sexual at the same time? Many of us act as though the sexual revolution were invented in the twentieth century, but believers in this first-century church also had to struggle with how to be faithful to God in a totally permissive society.

A third issue is idolatry. They asked Paul about meat offered to idols. I'm sure we haven't eaten any meat that was offered to idols in the last month or two, but we do continue to have the problem of how we are to be involved in a secular society without compromising ourselves or the gospel that we've been given to share with people. This is really a critical question, because I see many churches adopting secular definitions of success in God's work. While we wouldn't think of eating meat offered to idols or worshiping in a pagan temple, it's easy for us to pattern our church leadership after the position of CEO of a corporation rather than after Jesus Christ.

Another problem we have as Christians in the twentieth-century church is finding our full identity and worth in nothing more or less than Jesus Christ. We also struggle with figuring out what our unique contribution is to be to the church that God has placed us in. The church at Corinth struggled with these same things. No amount of bootstrap, do-it-yourself psychology can possibly help us as much as understanding Paul's emphasis on the sufficiency, adequacy, and supremacy of Jesus Christ in the life of the individual believer. He will also talk at length about the contribution that we can make because we have all been spiritually gifted by our heavenly Father.

The third area of relevance is Paul's style of dealing with the Corinthians' questions and problems, which makes this letter helpful for us today. He would always start with an everyday problem he was presented with, for example, "What do I do if my spouse is not a Christian?" He would usually probe behind that problem to see what the underlying spiritual issues were. Only then would he try to apply a spiritual principle to the experience of the Christian. We may find that approach rather slow and circuitous, but it gives us a better basis for making decisions. While the specific problems that we face are not identical to those the Corinthians faced, the underlying principles will serve us well as we deal with our problems. Paul would have made a great counselor in using this method to help people work through issues they were struggling with.

Let me briefly give you some background for this letter. Paul arrived in Corinth on his second missionary journey through the ancient world in about 50 A.D. He had traveled across Asia and Asia Minor, ending up at Troas on the west coast of Turkey. In a vision, he was called to come to Macedonia (in Europe). There he went to Philippi, then Thessalonica, then Athens, then just a few miles farther to the city of Corinth. He founded the church there, spent a year and a half ministering with those people, and then sailed on to Ephesus.

About five years later word came to Paul of problems in the church in Corinth. Because he was their spiritual father and cared so deeply about them, he felt compelled to write them a letter, which we don't have anymore. That first letter didn't accomplish what Paul desired for these people, and further word came to him that there were still serious problems in the Corinthian congregation. He makes reference to that in 1 Corinthians 1:11. To follow up on that message, the church actually sent a delegation of leaders to meet with Paul, and they brought with them a letter asking a number of specific questions about moral issues, doctrine, and church life.

In response to the meeting, the letter, and the bad news that he received, Paul wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians, which is really his second letter to the church of Corinth (about 57 A.D.). But even in spite of that letter, he received word that there was a faction in the church that refused to acknowledge his authority and basically ignored this letter. So Paul made a hurried visit to Corinth. The results were frustrating for the apostle and for the Christians in the church in Corinth. He then wrote them a third, "strong" letter that Titus delivered to them. That third letter is also lost to us. Waiting for word of how they reacted to this strong letter, Paul met Titus in Troas, and heard great news: The church had submitted to Paul's direction, and had disciplined the leaders of the opposition. In light of that wonderful news, Paul wrote his fourth piece of correspondence to them, which is the letter called 2 Corinthians in the New Testament.

I'm not going to discuss the culture or the economic and political atmosphere in Corinth. There is a rich discussion of these subjects in an introductory paper on 1 Corinthians that Ray Stedman did a few years ago, Discovery Paper 247. I commend it to you for further study.

Saints by calling

Let's read the first three verses of this very practical letter. Even in the greeting, we'll sense that Paul was very concerned for this church. He loved these people. There were problems, which he subtly hints at in these opening verses, and this letter will eventually give some stern criticism. But he begins with a reminder of the relationships he and the Corinthians shared. Relationships were very important to Paul. He reminds them of the relationship they had with him as their spiritual father; the relationships they had with one another, which were God-ordained; and most importantly, their relationship with the sovereign God of the universe and his Son, the Lord Jesus. Listen to these first three verses of salutation:

**Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,
to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ**

Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is how Paul begins most of his New Testament letters. It was the custom in first-century letter-writing to begin with the name of the writer, then give the name of the people who were going to receive the letter, and follow it with a formal greeting to open the letter.

Apostolic authority

Paul clearly names himself as the author of the letter, and the fact that he calls himself an apostle suggests that there was a crisis of authority in Corinth. He mentions his apostolic authority in two different ways: the authority God had called him to, and also the authority he was exercising by the will of God. Paul was not a self-appointed apostle. It was a calling, and God willed him to exercise this spiritual leadership. That was significant in view of the fact that some in Corinth questioned his authority, even though he was their spiritual father, the one who had won them to faith in Jesus. They were saying that he wasn't one of the original twelve, so they weren't sure he was really an apostle. When Paul wrote to churches where his apostolic authority was accepted, he merely identified himself as Paul; there are four letters that begin that way. But wherever there was a controversy and his authority had been questioned, he referred to himself as an apostle. Paul was a wise communicator. He always kept in mind those to whom he was writing when he introduced himself, and what issues there might be between him as the communicator and them as the recipients.

Paul didn't use this term "apostle" lightly. It defined his whole life and ministry. He understood clearly that an apostle was one who was sent by God for a specific purpose. Jesus defined apostleship to his disciples in John 20:21: "...As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." After Paul's conversion in Acts 9, God revealed to Ananias the specific purpose for which he called Paul: to take the gospel of salvation to Gentiles, to kings, and to the children of Israel. Paul's task was evangelistic. He was not called to set up structures or programs, but to carry the transforming message of Jesus to people all around the Roman empire.

At the end of verse 1 there is a mention of Sosthenes, Paul's brother in Christ. He is also mentioned in Acts 18:17. Sosthenes was the ruler of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth. He replaced a man named Crispus, who was saved in Paul's ministry. They dragged Paul before the Roman proconsul in Corinth, but the proconsul was disinterested in the whole thing, and basically threw them out of court. The Jews in the synagogue were so frustrated that they beat Sosthenes, blaming him somehow for their failure to get a hearing before the Romans. Think of the wonderful Christian irony here. Five-and-a-half years later, Sosthenes was Paul's brother and the Corinthians' brother in Christ. He had been saved somewhere in the interim, and now he was with Paul in ministry in Ephesus. And he may have been the person who brought this letter back home to his brothers and sisters in Corinth.

Distinctiveness in lifestyle and relationships

The recipients are addressed in verse 2. There are two subtle hints about these people here. There was a crisis in living out the life that God had ordained for them. And there was a crisis in their relationships with one another.

Look at how Paul addresses them: "...to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus...." They were the church, the called-out ones. They were to be a fellowship of people who were called out of the world to live together, to love each other, and to serve together, with the result that the world would say, "The way you folks treat each other is so attractive!" He also says they were sanctified. That means individually they had been set apart to be used by God. Just as Paul had been called to be an apostle, these folks had a calling as well.

Both of these issues are very important for us collectively and individually. We are called-out ones of God. Paul doesn't say that the church belonged to him, to the Corinthians, or to the elders in Corinth. No, it belonged to God, the one who had brought it into being.

When I was in junior high school, my dad, who was a pastor, was involved with a number of other pastors in a fellowship, and they would have collective meetings of all the churches for Good Friday and other services. I remember one minister who spoke about everything in the first-person singular possessive-"my church," "my board," "my choir," "my youth group." It really struck me that he thought he owned the place. His language gave him away. Paul wasn't guilty of that, and he didn't want the Corinthians to be guilty of it in any sense. They belonged to the Lord.

They were called out of the world for a purpose, to be a different kind of people, living lives that contrasted with the world around them. And as those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus as the church of God here in Palo Alto, we ought to be visibly different from those around us who don't know Jesus. And they're going to want to know why we treat each other the way we do, why our lives are so different and attractive.

The problem in the Corinthian church was that some of its members were involved in sexual immorality, others consistently got drunk, and some were even justifying their sinful behavior as permissible under the gracious, loving, forgiving care of God for them. Instead of taking the love of Christ into Corinth, they had absorbed the Corinthian lifestyle into the church. That's the crisis in Christian living that Paul is hinting at as he addresses these people, reminding them who they were.

The second half of the verse hints at this crisis in relationship. He says that they were "...saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours...." Paul is grateful for the common life that these folks shared as saints together, as it says literally. They were called into this Christian family, invited into this bond of love, by God himself, not by some human initiative. The mark of this fellowship of believers was submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ individually and collectively, not common racial identity, common family values, or political and philosophical compatibility. A common loving submission to the Lord Jesus, Paul says, is what defines authentic Christian community. Everything else is secondary.

By definition the Corinthians were saints, but the problem was that they weren't living like it. Instead of unity in the church, there were divisions, class distinctions, competing theological systems, dueling leadership, battles over who had what spiritual gifts and which ones were most important, and unwillingness to serve one another. And it all resulted from an arrogant refusal to surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Grace and peace-present realities

Even though Paul is going to take the Corinthians to task for their failures in Christian living and Christian fellowship, he now carefully and lovingly reminds them that they were in fact saints who belonged to God and to each other in a far-reaching fellowship. The church in Corinth was part of something worldwide. The greeting in verse 3 speaks of why he was so confident about these people. It is a reminder of the one to whom they belonged and the dynamic that was at work among them: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul takes a common greeting, "grace and peace," which is equivalent to saying hello, and adds to it a powerful Christian distinctive that reminds them of their relationship to the Lord. Paul isn't offering grace and peace to them. He is saying they have them, in reality, in their midst. The grace of God is God's undeserved gift of salvation to us. And Biblical peace is the spiritual and emotional wholeness and health that God brings into our lives through a relationship with his Son. Grace and peace are supernatural blessings from God that only believers can experience and enjoy the benefit of.

This whole salutation in verses 1-3 reminds the Corinthians of the relationships they have with the Lord; with Paul as their loving pastor, church planter, evangelist, and apostle; and with each other. It was normal for Paul to encourage and praise people he worked with, and this letter is no exception. Even though he is going to have to write strong reproof and correction, he begins by affirming the recipients.

Years ago I was living in Los Angeles in a period of rebellion against God. A dear friend from PBC, John Fischer, came and had dinner with me. Part of John's calling from the Lord that evening was to confront me with some issues in my life, but he started out our conversation by reminiscing about the goodness of God in our lives collectively. He gently, subtly reminded me of who I was-a son of God, a recipient of salvation who had experienced the grace of God and had known the peace of God. I remember being very thankful for his

loving, gentle affirmation that began what became a very difficult evening as he had to confront me about things in my life. That's how Paul begins this letter.

What God has done

Paul continues in verses 4-9 with a preamble of hopeful, confident expectation. Paul is very thankful for what God is doing with these people, and by implication they ought to be thankful for who they are and what God has done.

I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Some Bible scholars have questioned Paul's sincerity in this section. They think he is being sarcastic in light of the very difficult things that he is going to have to confront them with in the body of the letter. But Paul's focus in fact is on what God has done in their lives. These brief words about what God had called them to become would be a great source of encouragement as they had to struggle with the burden of their shortcomings.

During my years as a pastor, I've comforted many people who have experienced failure in their marriages. From them, and from my own personal experience of divorce, I've learned that little is more devastating than the failure of a marriage. It's like experiencing the death of a loved one without any of the usual support systems that are there in grief recovery. I'm thankful for the training and skills of Christian counselors who provide insight into some of the psychological aspects of grief that comes from the death of a relationship. My role as a pastor at times has required me to help those in divorce recovery to examine areas of sinful irresponsibility that may have contributed to the failure of the marriage. But my primary role has always been that of an encourager. In the midst of their pain and failure and shame, I am able to assure them that they are not outside God's love and concern, that they have worth because God loves them, that he will be with them. Thinking about God's love and concern always gives us a much better context from which to deal with our failures.

Saved by grace

In verses 4-9 Paul makes three statements about what God gave the Corinthian Christians and has given us as well. Whatever irregularities existed in Corinth, they existed in the context of good work that God had done in their midst. First, in verse 4, he saved them by his grace: "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus...." The good news is that they were the objects of God's love and grace, his unmerited favor. So often in our sinful pride we try to earn God's favor, but it's impossible because we can't be good enough to earn it. Eventually we have to accept the truth of Romans 3:10 that "there is none righteous, not even one...." And behind our efforts to impress God is the feeling that God will not love us as we are. We fall prey to that feeling because we live in a world of people who make us try to earn their love by conforming to their expectations for us. Since we tend to go through life auditioning for love from other people, it seems only natural that we would have to do the same thing with God. But the greatest discovery in life is that nothing in our minds or hearts or actions is hidden from God, and he still loves us. So Paul starts off by reminding them of the saving, transforming grace of God at work in their lives.

Spiritual riches

Second, the Corinthian church possessed God's spiritual resources. Verse 5: "...That in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift...." The relationship with Jesus Christ had brought them spiritual riches and spiritual potential. Paul's reference to riches follows the Biblical tradition of speaking of our

relationship with God in terms of wealth. In Luke 11:16-21, Jesus spoke critically of the farmer who amassed a material fortune but was not "rich toward God."

The themes of spiritual bankruptcy and spiritual wealth are prominent in the Bible, and for good reason. The Corinthian Christians lived in a society that produced great material wealth, but it also created spiritually bankrupt people. And in any society that majors in making money and having fun, there is a steady deterioration in the quality of life. Materialism and hedonism are at the root dehumanizing. A story in the *San Jose Mercury News* awhile ago used those exact words: "...deterioration of our quality of life in the face of an unbridled economy and more hedonistic opportunity than we know what to do with." The worth of people diminishes, the quality of relationships deteriorates, distinctions between right and wrong begin to fade, values get distorted, and eventually social pressure toward evil emerges. That was precisely the pattern of life in first-century Corinth. It's also an accurate description of our life today in Silicon Valley. But Paul's claim here in verses 5 and 6 is that in a world of such spiritual poverty, Jesus Christ has enriched the lives of those to whom Paul is writing. Paul is pointing here to past actions in their lives: both their conversion, when Christ transformed them, and also whatever spiritual growth they subsequently experienced.

My first inclination in studying this was to think that Paul wrote this tongue-in-cheek, again because he has to go on and confront them in verse 10 with terrible problems in the life of the church. But Paul wasn't contrasting what they were with what they ought to be. Rather, he was thinking of the kind of people they were now in contrast to the kind of lives they had lived before Christ came into their hearts. Measured against their pagan neighbors and even against their former selves, it was perfectly clear that Christ had enriched their lives. They had confirmed the gospel in their own experience. The life that hangs onto the saving truth of God for all it's worth is tremendously rich.

Verse 7 begins by affirming the tremendous spiritual potential that God had given the Corinthian Christians. Later in the letter Paul is going to devote three whole chapters to the understanding of spiritual gifts and their place in the life of the church, because the Corinthian Christians lacked proportion and balance in estimating and using these gifts. It was the most exciting, dynamic, gift-filled church you can imagine, but it was a church out of control. But here in this early thanksgiving section, I am convinced that he is rejoicing that they are not lacking in any gift. He is trying to encourage them with the realization that God has held back no resource that would help them to do his work and to be his church in the city of Corinth.

This is an important insight from Scripture that we all need to understand. We need to claim the reality that God has given us all the spiritual resources we need to be who he wants us to be and to minister the way he wants us to minister in our community. These are great untapped resources.

Confirmed to the end

The third thing the Corinthians possessed was an absolute, sovereign guarantee for their future. Look at verses 4, 7b: "I thank my God always concerning you...[because you are] awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul reminds these Christians that they really did expect Jesus to return. It may seem strange to find reference to the second coming at the opening of a letter. That seems like something one would talk about at the end of the letter. But what Paul is doing is setting the sinful struggles that they now face in the context of eternity. (He is going to have a lot more to say about this blessed hope in chapter 15.) One of the implications of Christians' looking for the return of their Savior is that they are going to want to keep their lives above reproach.

Paul says in verse 8 that the end is confirmed: They can be absolutely confident that they're going to be found blameless at the day of Jesus Christ. The phrase "the day of Jesus Christ" is about judgment, or ultimate accountability before God. He is saying, "It's confirmed, you don't have to fear the final judgment, since Jesus himself will keep us strong. He has already secured our acquittal by his death, and he has also confirmed our blamelessness in the final day."

When Azad Marshall came to visit our church last week, I met him at the airport and took him over to the motel at 10:30 at night. We were both tired, and when we walked in, the lady at the desk looked through everything she had and said, "I'm really sorry, there's no reservation here for him. The motel is full." Then I remembered

something. I pulled a card out of my wallet and gave her the confirmation number. So she typed the number into the computer and said, "Oh, yes, there is a room. Here it is, for Mr. Marshall. It's a good thing you had the confirmation number."

For us it's true that we can be certain of the end of the story, not because of our behavior, our belief system, or our faithfulness, but because God himself is faithful. Look at verse 9: "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." As I examine my own heart, it's easy to get bogged down in today's sinful failures so that I lose sight of the ultimate victory I have in Christ. But Paul's great news here is that we can be absolutely confident of our eternal destiny in spite of our faults and failures.

I have a friend I worked with years ago at Mount Hermon. We both loved mystery novels, classic and contemporary. We checked books out of the library and traded them back and forth. But he had a habit that used to drive me crazy. He always read the last chapter of the book first. How can you even enjoy the story when you know how it ends, I wondered. I teased him about it, threatened to report him to the librarian, and tried everything I could think of to get him to stop doing it. Finally I was so frustrated, I said, "Please, tell me why you read the last chapter first." He said, "If I don't like the way a book ends, I don't see any sense wasting my time reading it."

I've thought about that answer in the years since, and I've come to believe that more Christians today need to think like my friend. Knowing how our story ends means we can live in the present with confidence. Paul wanted to assure his Corinthian brothers and sisters in Christ, right from the beginning of the letter, that their future was as secure as the promises of God. We can be guilty of a kind of spiritual hand-wringing, acting as if we're engaged in a lost cause at times. We can act as if some of the spiritual reversals in our lives are permanent. But our hope is based on the activity of God, and that allows us to believe that whatever our circumstances, we truly are born to eternal life. In the hymn *O Worship the King*, it says,

*"Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In Thee do we trust, nor find Thee to fail;
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend."*

Let me ask you about the three crises that Paul subtly hints at in these opening verses. Did you find yourself in any of them? With regard to apostolic or Biblical authority, do you find yourself at times saying, "What right does the Bible have to say that to me?" I have a friend who is a member of a group of guys I study with, who told us, "In the church I grew up in we were taught that the words of Jesus were rock-solid, but if Paul wrote it you weren't real sure." He said he's had to struggle through the issue of apostolic authority. If you fight through that issue, you will end up in a wonderful place. Listen to what Paul writes to the Thessalonian church (2:13): "And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." Paul's point is that if we learn to be receptive toward God's word, it will perform its work in us. That means it will change us, there will be a supernatural dynamic at work.

Do you struggle with the issue of Christian lifestyle? Is it true, if you're honest, that you're more Corinthian than Christian? Do you struggle with your identity as a called-out one, a set-apart one? The good news is that God is faithful to keep changing you in the areas that are so difficult for you to change.

What about the issue of relationships, of fellowship? Are you having difficulty loving specific people in the body of Christ? It is difficult to be saints together. Remember the old couplet:

*"To live above with saints we love,
Oh that will be glory.
But to live below with saints we know,
Well, that's another story."*

Would you like to end up where the apostle Paul was, to be able to say, "I thank my God *always* concerning you"?

Then let's study 1 Corinthians together, and it will help us in all three of these areas. Beyond that, we have the commitment of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nine times in nine verses Jesus is mentioned, either as the Christ, the Savior, Messiah; or as the Lord, the sovereign. And he is totally committed to dealing with these areas of relationship struggles, lifestyle struggles, and struggles with Biblical authority (or any kind of authority). Jesus is committed to working in us to change us from the inside out.

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First Message
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