

A CRISIS OF COMPLACENCY

by Doug Goins

In 1 Corinthians 4:8-21 Paul is dealing with a church that is full of complacent Christians. In Revelation 3:14-22 the glorified Lord Jesus addresses the same issue, speaking through the apostle John to the church in Laodicia, Turkey. He confronts them with their complacency. He says they are neither cold nor hot, they are lukewarm. They live with an illusion: They think they have become wealthy and have need of nothing. They are blind to the spiritual reality that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. Paul has all the same concerns as he addresses this church in Corinth. The dictionary defines the word "complacent" as "the fact or state of being pleased with oneself, or with what one has; self-satisfaction."

I recently read Chuck Swindoll's essay *Prophet Sharing* in which he talked about the need for prophets in the church, people who want to take the high ground, who are excited about what God may be doing. Swindoll, in his typical way, strung together a lot of phrases that were evocative both of the prophetic viewpoint and of the complacent Christian. He placed himself in the camp of complacency. See if you find yourself anywhere here in these images:

"Always evaluating where we've been...always reacting...searching for ways to settle in and find comfort on our sofa-like surroundings...yawning...slumbering in the sleepy, warm twilight of sundown...finding a great deal of security in the mediocrity and predictability of sameness...We are like chatty, laughing tourists taking snapshots of the lowlands through rose-colored filters...enjoying today's lull...we are yesterday-dwellers...avoiding the reality of today..."

The apostle Paul is passionately concerned that his spiritual children in Corinth become realists, that they recognize their complacency and repent of it. In this series of studies on the first four chapters (Discovery Papers 4508-4517), he has been focusing on divisions in the church, on the problems of personal pride and prejudicial relationships within the church. At the heart of the complacency of the Corinthians is their belief that they are a successful, mature, interesting church. I heard of a church somewhere in the U.S. self-named the Fellowship of Excitement. The Corinthians would give themselves that name. They are satisfied with the general quality of their spiritual life together. They have settled for the illusion that they are everything God wants them to be.

In verses 8-21 Paul is going to exercise his role as an apostolic authority, confronting them for the Lord Jesus. But it's going to come from a heart of love, because he is their spiritual father, and he speaks with the passion that a father has for his children. This section provides correction for these believers. I hope it's correction for us, too. We're going to see some important insights into authentic Christian living, into what it really means to follow Jesus.

THE ILLUSION OF HAVING ARRIVED

Beginning with verse 8, Paul is going to describe the Corinthians' smug satisfaction with their condition. His irony and sarcasm are heavy, but it's their view of themselves that he is attacking:

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

The first couple of clauses speak of the illusion that they need nothing more. The word "filled" means satiated or engorged. It has to do with eating a huge meal. They are so full they couldn't eat another bite. The second phrase speaks of material wealth. They have everything they need. The Corinthians believe that they have it all. This describes their spiritual self-appraisal. They have a strong sense of having arrived in their Christian lives. They aren't, in the words of Jesus, hungering and thirsting after righteousness. They aren't even willing to say as Paul says in Philippians 3:12, "Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect...." They aren't willing to share their spiritual father's self-assessment.

I was thinking about how the first half of verse 8 could apply to us. We face the danger of religious arrogance, of believing ourselves to be spiritually filled and rich because we attend a Bible-teaching church, listen to Christian radio, spend money on a lot of resources at Christian book stores, and watch Christian television. Individually we can pride ourselves on knowing a lot about the Bible as fat, well-fed Christians, we can become puffed up with our own knowledge. That will evidence itself in argumentativeness when it comes to Biblical or spiritual issues; that is, the love of theological debate for its own sake. Watch out for those signs of self-satisfied spirituality and impenetrable smugness.

In the next clause in verse 8 Paul says, "...You have become kings without us...." They have the illusion that they have become sufficient in themselves. They no longer need Paul or apostolic influence. They are self-appointed kings, and they're looking down on other people from thrones of authority. They have exalted themselves to this position without any help from anybody. They're independently reigning. That has replaced any sense of community, accountability, or mutual submission. If the Corinthians needed anyone's influence, it was Paul's, but as Paul says, "You left me way behind you and below you."

The danger for us is believing that we don't need other Christians to teach us anything, becoming unwilling to allow spiritual authority to be exercised in our lives. I recently got an e-mail from a young man that included six pages of his theological observations, to which he wanted my reaction. But in the letter he was proud that he had never been to church in his life, everything he knew he had learned directly from the Bible, and he didn't really need anyone to teach him anything. That's the spirit of the church in Corinth that the apostle Paul is asking them to evaluate.

In contrast to this sense of complacency, this illusion of self-sufficiency, I was reminded of an experience that I had ten years ago at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. I was taking a course from Dr. James Torrance, a wonderful, godly gentleman who is a systematic theologian in the Church of Scotland. He was teaching a course on the Trinity. I was so taken with his godliness and warmth and biblical perspective that I told Ray Stedman about him. Ray, then a pastor of our church, had written many books, preached all over the world, and was in his own right a tremendous Bible scholar and theologian. Ray was also teaching a course at Regent at the time. I mentioned to Ray that he would enjoy Dr. Torrance and ought to meet him. The next afternoon Ray joined me in the class and continued on for the rest of the three-week session. He sat under James Torrance, took exhaustive notes, and asked questions. I realized that even though Ray was pushing seventy, he never stopped growing and learning and submitting himself to other people.

POWER IS PERFECTED IN WEAKNESS

Let's move on to verses 9-13, where Paul contrasts the Corinthian illusions with the stark reality of his own lifestyle, which is full of weakness and humiliation. He is going to capitalize on the very things that the Corinthians disdain, because his weaknesses reflect the true nature of Christian discipleship. It's a lifestyle consistent with his own preaching of the cross of Christ. In verse 17 of this passage Paul will refer to "my ways which are in Christ Jesus." That's what he is describing here:

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are

persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

God the Father allowed his beloved Son to be sentenced to a humiliating death. And now he is asking the apostles to follow in his Son's footsteps. To the world, the apostles-actually, all Christians-are worthless. Our ideas contribute nothing to humankind. We are deserving of death.

Paul describes his lifestyle in four ways: the phrase "a spectacle to the world," the phrase "fools for Christ's sake," a description of what it's like to suffer the way that Jesus did, and finally, the phrase "the scum of the world." This really does describe Paul's condition, and it's in direct contrast to how the Corinthians view themselves. They think they have everything in themselves. Paul knows that he has nothing in himself.

Verse 9 says that God chooses to make the apostles a spectacle or an exhibition to the world. When a Roman general won a major victory, he would lead his triumphant troops in a procession back to the city of Rome. Behind them would come in chains the king who had been conquered and his troops. These prisoners were headed for death, and as they marched through Rome the citizenry would mock and jeer at them. Then they would be led into the arena to fight wild animals and die. The apostle Paul says that we are like those men sentenced to death. James Moffett, in his translation of verse 9, says it this way: "God means us apostles to come in at the very end like doomed gladiators in the arena."

God made apostles a spectacle for our benefit. He wanted us to see how they responded to adversity, so we can learn how to fight the difficult battles we're going to face as followers of Christ. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you... 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...." (John 15:18, 20.) The point is that if we choose a life of humble discipleship, of Christ-like servanthood, if we stand for the truth of gospel, it's going to be so intimidating to the world that we're going to be in danger of death, ultimately. People under a death sentence don't get sidetracked by trivialities or secondary priorities. Paul is presenting the apostles as living with a clear view of reality. We're to have the same view: We are engaged in a life-and-death struggle if we take following Jesus Christ seriously.

In verse 10 Paul is saying that by the standards of the world he is indeed foolish, but he has already shown several times in these first four chapters that this is the only route to God's wisdom. Remember what he said in 3:18: "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise." So here he says with heavy irony, "You Corinthians with all your worldly wisdom are acting as if you are very superior. You are not willing to be declared fools by the world for the sake of Jesus Christ."

The Corinthians also have strength and weakness reversed. In fact, in God's economy strength comes out of weakness. Christ did not come as a conquering hero, he came to be crucified as a common criminal. In our suffering Savior we find the model for the Christian life. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul talks about the sufficiency that we find in Christ. He talks about how he has a disability, a limitation of some kind, a "thorn in the flesh" that he desperately wanted the Lord to get rid of. But Jesus told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Paul responds, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (verse 9). Again in 2 Corinthians 13:4, talking about the Lord Jesus, Paul says, "For indeed he was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God...." Jesus himself told us, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Now beginning with verse 11 the irony and sarcasm drop away, and Paul relates what it's really like to live as an apostle. Look again at his description: "...We are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate...." The long journeys that the apostles took were difficult. Travel in the first century was characterized by deprivation of every kind, lack of supplies, dangers from thieves and robbers, and illness. In verse 11 the phrase "roughly treated" refers to the beatings that a slave would get from his master. The consistent travel left the apostles without a place to call

home. The apostle Paul worked hard to the point of physical exhaustion. When he wasn't supported by churches he went to work with his own hands as a tent-maker to support himself physically. Again, that would have been disturbing to the Greek church in Corinth, because Greeks looked down on manual labor. That was for slaves. And yet Paul wasn't ashamed of any sort of treatment he endured or any sort of work that was to be done for his Lord. He tells us that in the face of verbal abuse he wasn't resentful, bitter, or vindictive. I know there had to be times when he must have felt like it.

Listen to the description of his lifestyle in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. This is more specific and detailed: "...Beaten times without number [he lost track of how many], often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches."

Remember, we saw in the last message ([Discovery Paper 4516](#)) that the apostles literally considered themselves galley slaves of Jesus Christ. Their concern was humility and faithfulness. They didn't have time for resentment. They understood that they really were better off than their persecutors, and that their difficulties, losses, and weaknesses gave God the opportunity to demonstrate his power.

Look at the final humiliation of a Christ-like lifestyle at the end of verse 13: "...We have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now." It's clear from the very next verse where he says, "I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you...." that he's still contrasting his lifestyle with this Corinthian complacency. They proudly see themselves as being on top, while the apostles humbly see themselves as being on the bottom. The word "scum" means filth or rubbish. It's what you sweep or scrape off of something that you're cleaning. The word "dregs" means the scrapings-off of a plate after a meal. Paul says we're garbage in the eyes of the world. That term has become common among young people; for instance, when they watch a highly-paid professional athlete make a mistake, they yell, "You're a piece of garbage!" The apostle Paul says that we're willing to live with that kind of evaluation by the world as we witness, teach, and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. He told Timothy, "...Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). The world will attempt to scour off or throw away anyone who boldly proclaims and lives out the word of God.

I've struggled this week with how to apply this. How seriously do I want to take this description of an apostolic lifestyle if I'm going to be a follower of Jesus? Is it only for the apostles, because they were super-saints and they were up to this kind of thing? I don't think so. The words of the apostle Paul must apply to any believer. At least we must be willing to allow the Lord to bring that into our lives. I wouldn't say I'm there yet. If I were facing this kind of lifestyle day in and day out, could I live it out with that kind of consistency?

The comfort and safety we have as Christians in America doesn't represent the experience of Christians in most of the world, particularly many Islamic and communist nations. What is described in this paragraph is literally true and normative for our brothers and sisters in those countries. Sometimes when those Christians come to our country and visit our churches, they're offended by our spiritual complacency, superficiality, and self-indulgent materialism.

I confess that I am much more Corinthian than apostolic in my sensitivities. We need to hear the invitation of the Lord Jesus again from the gospel of Mark: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me [the cross is about dying to our expectations]. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (8:34-37.) It brings us back to what Jim Elliott wrote in his diary: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." What Paul wants for his Corinthian family is for them to become more like the Lord Jesus in their view of reality and in their character.

A FATHER'S WARNING

Now beginning in verse 14 we hear the father's heart in these tender appeals Paul makes. He calls them to surrender to loving spiritual instruction and to adopt a fully Christ-like lifestyle. Verses 14-15:

**I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.
For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers;
for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.**

Paul assures the Corinthians that though his words may seem sarcastic, he is not trying to humiliate or shame them. Eugene Petersen paraphrases that clause, "I'm not trying to make you feel rotten...." Paul is speaking as a spiritual father to his beloved children. He planted the seed of the gospel and laid the foundation for their spiritual growth. He holds a special place in their lives.

The word in verse 14 that is translated "admonish" can also be translated "warn." It's what a father does in hopes that his children will see the error of their ways and change. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* makes this comment about the word "admonish": "The word carries the idea of having a corrective influence on someone while not provoking or embittering." It implies counsel and appeal. His desire isn't to criticize and punish, but to admonish and encourage. In this appeal to follow his corrective instruction he conveys a wonderful confidence that they can change and that they will want to. There are many people who will criticize. That's what "tutors" do. They don't have a personal, relational, familial interest in you. What Paul wants is for the Corinthians to grow up more fully in the image of Jesus Christ, seeing life the way he does.

Some of us need to hear and submit to this convicting word of admonition. This challenge is loving spiritual instruction for us as well as for the Corinthians. We can repent of our complacency and allow our illusions of comfort and mediocrity and predictability to be replaced with clear-eyed reality by the Lord Jesus. Jesus made a promise in Revelation 3:18: "I advise you to buy from me...eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see."

IMITATING CHRIST

The next appeal in verses 16-17 is a call to follow consistent spiritual modeling:

**I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy,
who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways
which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.**

Again, there is gentleness here. He is not laying down apostolic orders. He uses the words "exhort," "remind," and "teach." By the way, exhortation doesn't mean using a raised voice, with a finger wagging in someone's face, saying, "You'd better shape up or else!" It literally means to call to one's side. Exhortation means putting your arm around someone's shoulder, walking along with them saying, "Would you consider this? Can we talk about this?" That's the appeal that Paul is making. He's not boxing these people in. He's giving them choice in the matter. He respects them.

What he's really asking his Corinthian children to do is to imitate not him, but "my way of life in Christ Jesus." He wants them to imitate Christ in him. He says it explicitly in 1 Corinthians 11:1: "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ." In other words, "Do what I do if it matches up with the character and lifestyle of the Lord Jesus." The call to live in imitation of Christ is universal. It's not just for apostles or for the Corinthian Christians; it's for us as well. He says it's what he teaches everywhere in every church. Yes, it was the first-century circle of churches that Paul had an immediate relationship with, but the voice of the apostle, the spiritual father, speaks to us as well. We're included in the "every church" and called to imitate Christ.

Modeling our lives after those who walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ is an important part of the spiritual growth process. Spiritual fathers are very valuable. But there is only one model who will never confuse us, disappoint us, or betray our confidence in him: the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He is the only one who is absolutely, consistently, perfectly "walks his talk."

How do we learn to imitate the Lord Jesus? One way is to read the Scriptures over and over, immersing ourselves in them, because everything in the Scriptures points to him. Another way is to get comfortable talking with him, pouring out our hearts, sharing our struggles and issues, raising our questions. That's how any relationship grows. And finally, we can ask God to give us people in our lives-and we need to make this a high priority-who also want to imitate Jesus Christ. If we spend time with them, we can encourage one another in learning to live like Jesus and respond to him. If we invest ourselves in those things, we'll find that our personal relationship with him is deepened and strengthened. And the good news is, as it says in a number of places in Scripture, that he wants it more than we do. For instance, he says in John's gospel that he and the Father desire to abide with us, to be at home with us. He also says that he wants to abide in us. He wants to fill us up with his very life and express his life out through us. Jesus also says that he would love us to abide in him, to be comfortably at home in him (15:1-11).

RESPONDING TO CORRECTION

In verses 18-21 there is a call to accept the correction of spiritual discipline:

Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

Paul concludes these appeals with healthy confrontation. Again, he is trying to strip away all the illusions. He wants the Corinthians to see reality, and he says he will give complacently arrogant words no attention because they contain no spiritual power. The contrast is between words and deeds. Eugene Petersen paraphrases verse 20 this way: "God's way is not a matter of mere talk, it's an empowered life." That's what Paul is going to be looking for-the power of the Spirit of God at work in the lives of these Corinthian Christians.

The Corinthians do have a choice to make. They know Paul's desires as their spiritual father, his apostolic expectations. But he's going to let them decide. He's going to let them be grown-up children, in a sense.

Paul's concern for the Corinthians is exactly the same concern that he expresses for his children in the faith in the church of Colossae, for whom he prays that power will be evidenced in them. We tend to think of power as something supernatural, tingling up and down the spine, miraculous signs and wonders, things that rattle and hum. But listen to how Paul defines the power of God to the Christians at Colossae: "...We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience...." (1:9-11.) The power of God expresses itself very practically in our lives. It's about bearing fruit in ministry, about being patient in all things-powerfully patient! It's about being steadfast, which means faithful, or hanging in there when it's tough. It means knowing more about the Lord, being fuller of him, more willing to submit to him and follow his will as we understand what that is.

Paul does mention this issue of spiritual discipline, the "rod" that he may have to bring to them. That is basically introducing us to the next two chapters, in which he is going to deal with issues that need severe discipline: sexual immorality in the church and Christians' suing each other in court.

Paul's appeal here is very wise, because there is no real spiritual growth until each of us personally, volitionally responds to the correction of the word of God. The Lord Jesus desires that each one of us be fully alive, vital, and truly effective for him. He wants to destroy our complacency. He wants to change our illusion of having arrived and of needing nothing more. He wants to replace our sense of self-sufficiency with his own sufficiency. The Lord Jesus desires white-hot, passionate intimacy with us, not just lukewarm congeniality, or being on pleasant speaking terms with him. He wants us to passionately be in love with him. The apostle Paul has appealed to us with great sensitivity, clarity, and gentleness. The Lord Jesus is equally gentle in his appeal in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I

will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." Jesus says, "Let's have a meal together. I would love that sort of intimacy with you."

Below is a prayer from the famous devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ* written by Thomas a Kempis in the early part of the fifteenth century. Thomas a Kempis was a German Augustinian monk. The major spiritual contribution of his entire life was copying the Bible in Latin four different times. But he is much more famous for his poetry and hymns and devotional writing, which are all focused on this issue of intimacy with Jesus Christ. *The Imitation of Christ* is like a manual to help us go deep into the heart of God. It's a call to repentance, brokenness, willingness to live out apostolic humiliation and see it as from the Lord. See if at any point you can make this your prayer:

"Thou, O God, Who gives grace to the humble, do something also for the proud man. Make me humble and obedient; take from me the spirit of pride and haughtiness, ambition, and self-flattery, confidence and gaiety. Teach me to think well and to expound all things fairly of my brother, to love his worthiness, to delight in his praises, to excuse his errors, to give thanks for his graces, to rejoice in all the good that he receives, and ever to believe and speak better things of him than of myself.

O teach me to love to be concealed and little esteemed; let me be truly humbled and heartily ashamed of my sin and folly. Teach me to bear reproaches evenly, for I have deserved them; to refuse all honors done unto me, for I have not deserved them; to return all to Thee, for it is Thine alone."

Notes:

1. Barnhart, C.L. & R.K. Barnhart, Eds. *The World Book Dictionary*. Chicago, IL: World Book Inc.
2. Swindoll, Charles. *Come Before Winter*, Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985, p. 178.
3. Moffatt, James, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*. New York: Harper & Brothers (no copyright), p. 48.
4. Peterson, Eugene. *The Message*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993, p. 343.
5. Kittel, Gerhard (Ed.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. 4). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967, p. 1021.
6. Peterson, *ibid*.

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