

THE MESSAGE OF FIRST CORINTHIANS

by Ray C. Stedman

The first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians is a very, very important letter for us because it so thoroughly captures the problems that we face as moderns living in this modern age. The reason is, of course, that Corinth was the most American city in the New Testament -- it was a resort city, the capital of pleasure in the Roman Empire.

If you remember your geography you know it was located on the Peloponnesian peninsula, and the conditions under which the Corinthians lived were very much like the conditions under which we live, or to put that the other way, the conditions under which we live today are Corinthian conditions. Corinth was a beautiful city, a lovely city of palms and beautiful buildings, the center of pleasure for the whole empire, and it was devoted to two things -- the pursuit of pleasure (largely passion), and of wisdom. It was a Greek city, and its inhabitants loved to philosophize, and they were given to what Paul calls, "the wisdom of words."

So the two major forces that were active in this city, creating the atmosphere in which the Corinthian church had to live, were these: intellectualism and sensualism. This was a city devoted to the worship of the goddess sex. That is why I speak of it as so like modern conditions today. In the city of Corinth there was a temple that was dedicated to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, and part of the worship of the Greek goddess was the performance of certain religious ceremonies that involved sexual relationships; therefore, the priestesses of this temple were really prostitutes, and there were some 10,000 of them attached to the temple. The city was openly given over to the practices of licentiousness; it was regarded as a normal, proper part of life and no one ever thought twice about it. If we think we are living under conditions where sensualism is rampant and worship of sex is widespread, these conditions do not yet approach those of the Christians who had to live in Corinth.

Furthermore, they were continually assaulted by the doctrines, dogmas and ideas of men following the great philosophers. This city was the heir of the great thinkers of the Golden Age of Greece -- Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all had their followers within the city of Corinth. And as in every Greek city, they loved to gather in the public plazas and debate these issues endlessly. They were people given over to the love of wisdom.

Now into this city comes the Apostle Paul. You remember the story from the book of Acts; he had come down through Thessalonica and had been driven out of that city by an uprising of the Jews against him, had gone for a brief time to the little city of Berea and then had come down into Athens. There in Athens, as he walked about the city alone, he noted the many temples and was finally taken up to preach to the Athenians on Mars Hill. When he left Athens at last, he came down across the little isthmus into Corinth. There he stayed for a period of about a year and a half to two years, preaching the gospel and making tents for a living.

He had found a couple who had come from Rome, named Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tent makers, and he stayed with them and led them to Christ. He formed a church in their home and gradually the gospel spread throughout the city and many of the Corinthians on hearing it, we are told, believed, and were baptized and became members of this church.

That was the church to which Paul wrote this letter, and as you read it, you see that it was a church in trouble; it was the biggest problem church in the New Testament. But although there were a great many things wrong about it, there were some things that were right, too. As Paul began his letter to them, he recognizes some of these things that are right. First, he calls them "saints," he says,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, {1 Cor 1:2a RSV}

then his eyes lift to the horizon of both geography and time, and he sees even us and he says,

**together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
both their Lord and ours: {1 Cor 1:2b RSV}**

and then his usual greeting,

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

Then the apostle begins to talk about some of the things that made these people Christians -- the great themes of our Christian faith. He mentions the fact that they had received Christ by faith, and, by grace, had entered into a new life, and had been enriched by him. And there was also much for which he could commend this church in the opening verses of this letter; but he soon comes to what is the key to the entire letter. If you never remember anything else of First Corinthians, at least remember this verse, because everything in this letter is built around it:

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

There is the central thing in the Christian life -- we are called to share the life of the Son of God. That is what fellowship is -- it is sharing. Fellowship with anyone is sharing time, and this is what God has called us to. Paul puts that first in this letter to call the attention of these Christians to what was lacking in their experience, and everything in the letter gathers about this verse.

The letter falls into two major divisions; there is first of all a great section dealing with what we might call "the carnalities," that takes you from chapter one through chapter eleven. Then there is a closing section from chapter twelve through chapter sixteen that deals with what Paul himself calls "the spiritualities" -- the carnalities versus the spiritualities. The carnalities included everything that was wrong with this church; the spiritualities were what they needed to correct it. As you read this letter through, you will see that we suffer today from all the carnalities, in principle at least, and that what we desperately need to set our lives right are the spiritualities. Therefore, this letter is especially written to those who live in a sex-saturated, wisdom-loving atmosphere and are trying to live as Christians in the midst of all the pressures that constantly come from these two areas.

In the first section, speaking to the church in trouble, there are three major areas that Paul deals with. There is first of all the problem of divisions; then there was the problem of scandals in the church; and, finally, he took up certain matters they had written to him about -- questions that were troubling them. And all these are brought together under the major heading, "the carnalities," the things that were troubling the church.

The first problem, this matter of divisions, was caused by the fact that the spirit of the city had come into the church. There are those who are telling us that the need in the church today is to capture again the spirit of the age in which we live. There could be absolutely nothing further from the truth than that! The one thing the church must never do is to capture the spirit of the age. The job of the church is to correct the spirit of the age. When a church begins to reflect the spirit of the age in which it lives, it immediately loses its power, and that is what had happened to the church at Corinth.

They were allowing all these divisions over the philosophies of men to come into the church, and they had chosen certain religious leaders around whom they were gathering in little factions, saying that so-and-so was better than so-and-so, and the insights of this man were better than that man. They were forming little sects and cliques and schisms within the church. These divisions were largely built around certain insights they felt each man contributed, and Paul mentions certain names here to indicate what he means; some were following Peter, some Apollos, some were gathering about his name, Paul. And then there was an exclusive little group who said they were the purest of all; they said they were following Christ, and Christ only -- and they were the worst troublemakers of all. But the problem was, that they were each thinking that their leader's special bit of insight represented a superior view. And they were doing exactly what the people out in the city were doing, dividing up over the views of men.

Now Paul answers this with a tremendous word in which he shows that the wisdom of men is of no avail. He sets it aside completely, and he says that in the church these insights of men are always partial and untrustworthy to a great degree, and that the Corinthians will never learn anything until they give themselves to the wisdom of God. "The world," Paul says, "By wisdom does not know God" {cf, 1 Cor 1:21 RSV}, and they will never get to the heart of their problems by trying to pursue the insights of current popularity or secular philosophers.

Now that is still true today. The church will never solve its problems as long as it constantly pursues this writer and that writer, this man and that speaker. thinking that it will gather from the efforts and knowledge of men the insights it needs to understand its problems. The apostle says it is impossible that we can ever arrive at a solution to our needs on this level, because there is something vitally missing. That missing element is the life of the Spirit in man, and without this, he can never solve all the riddles of life. So the apostle answers these schisms and factions and divisions by confronting them with the word of the cross -- the word that presents the cross the Christ as that instrument by which God cuts off all human wisdom, not as being worthless in its own narrow realm, but as being useless in solving the major problems of man.

When we understand this, we realize that we will never begin to learn until we first learn that we do not know anything. When we come to appreciate the word of the cross, we understand that in the cross of Jesus Christ, God took his own Son, now become man like us, identified with us in every way, and nailed him up to die as being useless as far as solving any of the problems of mankind is concerned. That is the word of the cross; that is why it looks so foolish to the natural man; that is why it proceeds on a totally different principle than the wisdom of the world. And when we accept that, the apostle says, we begin to discover that true, secret, hidden wisdom that unfolds little by little the answers to the problems of life. We begin to understand ourselves and to see why this world is what it is, and where it is heading, and why all the confusion and the difficulties and the problems exist, as the deep things of God, the wisdom which God has hidden in Christ, is unfolded to us through the teaching of the Spirit by the word of God. It is a wonderful section.

And Paul says, "I'm not going to waste any time at all arguing with you about Socrates or Plato or Aristotle, or any other wisdom of men: they have their place, but when it comes to solving the deep-seated problems of human nature, there is only one wisdom that can touch it, and that is the word of the cross." This becomes, then, one of the mightiest answers of all time to the intellectualism that constantly hounds the Christian church and attempts to undermine it -- a false intellectualism. I mean, by that, that the word of God never attempts to set aside or call worthless the pursuit of knowledge. God intends men to learn things, he designed us that way, but it must be knowledge based upon a right beginning and we are called back to the principle set forth in the Old Testament, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" {Prov 9:10a RSV}; that is where we begin.

Now, Paul goes on here to show that the true reason for their division was not what they thought it to be -- differences of human points of view -- but rather, it was carnality, the love of the flesh for being puffed up, and for finding itself idolized and followed. This was their problem. Paul says that while that principle is at work, they would remain babes, they would never grow. The word of the cross must come in and cut off the flesh before you will ever begin to grow. As long as this keeps on, you will find yourselves constantly involved in little squabbles and bickerings and divisions, and you can live your whole Christian life on that basis, Paul says.

But one of these days you are going to come to the end, and the testing, the analysis of what your life has been worth, and in that day you will see that if you have been living in the flesh, it is all wood, hay, and stubble. It is burned up, completely worthless, and your life -- except for the fact that you have received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior -- is a wasted enterprise. It is possible, even in the religious realm, to gain the approval of men and to be accepted as quite a figure in the church, and to enjoy the favor of others and the prestige that comes from position, and to come to the end, only to discover that the absolutely relentless judgment of God has not been impressed in the least degree by that which originates from anything else but the work of the Spirit of God in you -- it has to be the Spirit and not the flesh.

Now Paul turns to the matter of the scandals that were occurring in this church. These were, of course, the effects of the divisions. There was first of all an intolerable case of sexual immorality in the church that was being openly regarded with a considerable degree of acceptance and toleration, and he says, "this is absolutely

wrong; you must deal with this." Whenever sin breaks out openly like this, and it is not repented of, then the church must act in discipline, and he scolds these leaders for not moving to bring this before the judging of the church and to set aside this iniquity that was eating away at their ranks.

Here is another similarity to the church today. It is almost frightening to see how certain leaders of the church are now openly advocating sexual immoralities, and certain of the pastors and leaders of youth groups in the church are openly encouraging young people to sleep together, and to live together. Now, at the time this letter was written, the atmosphere was such that sexual immorality was widely accepted within the city as the normal way of life. Within the church, however, it is absolutely set aside as being totally incongruous with the Christian profession, because it was a violation of the humanity of the individuals involved. The love of God burned in zealous judgment against this because it was destroying and would destroy those involved in it. That is why the apostle speaks in such scathing words concerning this matter. Chapters five and six both deal with this matter of immorality, and the apostle points out that the defense of the Christian must not be derived from any moral standards outside himself -- it is not "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" that keeps young people or older people free from sexual problems and pressures, but rather it is the recognition that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God himself dwells in us, and we are never out of his presence. Everywhere we go, he goes with us, and is in us, and, in that sense, everything we are doing is done in the presence of the Son of God himself. That is what keeps the young person free from the pressures that come.

Then, beginning with chapter seven, Paul turns to the questions they had written to him,

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. {1 Cor 7:1a RSV}

And they wrote about four major problems. First, there was a question about marriage; they asked Paul if it was right to be married, in view of the pressures that were around them, if perhaps they should give themselves to the service of God in an ascetic life. Although Paul himself was not married, nevertheless he told them in this section that it is best, it is good for men and women to be married, that marriage is a perfectly proper way of life, and because of the temptation to immorality, he says, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband; that was in view of the Corinthian conditions.

Then he shows them that it is also right to have a single life, if God grants this as a special calling to any individual -- this is a perfectly honorable way of life. Marriage is not a necessity, though it often is an advantage, and yet it can be a problem. Paul deals very thoughtfully, helpfully, and carefully with this whole question of marriage.

Then they wrote to him about three things that were troubling them; largely in the church at Corinth. First, they were worried about offending God, and about offending the conscience of the weaker brother, in the matter of eating meat that was offered to idols. Although we are no longer troubled by the problem of whether we ought to eat meat offered to idols or not, nevertheless in this section, we are confronting in principle this whole thorny issue of Christian taboos -- smoking, drinking, dancing, everything that has ever been brought up as a problem within the church that is not specifically identified as an evil in the Scriptures. What do you do about it?

It is most interesting that Paul was an apostle, with all the authority of an apostle, but he absolutely refused to make up any rules along this line. This is because the weak, immature Christian always wants somebody to put him under law, but if you put a Christian under law, then he is no longer under grace! And Paul knows that Christians must learn to deal with what he calls "the law of liberty." The fact is that all things are right; nothing is wrong in itself: the devil never made any of the capabilities and capacities that are in the human being -- God made them all. And no urge or desire, or tendency is wrong in itself -- we are at liberty in these things.

But with this law, he links two other laws. One he calls the "law of love;" that is the law that says, "I may be free to do it, but if I am really putting a stumbling block in somebody else's path, I won't do it" -- that is the law of love. The limitation is imposed not by my conscience, but by another's conscience. The other is the "law of expediency;" that is, everything is legal, is lawful, but not everything is helpful. There are a lot of things I could do, and many directions I could go, as a Christian, but if I spend all my time doing all the things

I am free to do, I no longer have any time to do the things which I am called to do, and therefore, it is not always helpful. These things can be a waste of time and drag us back, even though they are not wrong in themselves. That is what Hebrews calls the "weights;" as the writer says, "... lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, ..." {Heb 12:1b RSV}.

Then, they wrote also about women -- women were a problem in the church at Corinth, too. (I did not mean anything bad by that!) But they were, because they were involved with a very difficult problem about hats. Now this had peculiar local overtones about it -- if a woman was seen bare-headed in Corinth, she was immediately identified as a prostitute, one of the temple priestess, and that is why Paul writes to these people in Corinth and says, "You ladies, when you come to church, put a hat on; it is a sign that you are a Christian woman subject to your husband."

Now in practice that applied to Corinth; in principle (the principle applies all the time), Christian women are to be in subjection to their husbands -- as you see all through the Scriptures -- in every way, as an indication and a sign that the church is in subjection to its Lord. The Christian woman fulfills her ministry to her Lord in being subject to her husband, and all this is involved in this problem of headship which the apostle defines as equality, cooperation, and yet, submission.

Then the third problem concerned the Lord's table; there were certain ones who were eating this in a mechanical, perfunctory way, not seeing any meaning of having any insight into what they were doing, and so the apostle had to show them that everything the Christian does must be done realistically and with a recognition that it is done as unto the Lord.

Now in chapter twelve through the rest of the book, he is dealing with the great spiritualities, the correction to these carnalities. You do not correct these things by just trying to straighten yourself out. How do you correct them? Well first, by a recognition of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life. That is why chapter twelve begins with that very word.

Now concerning spiritualities [it is translated "spiritual gifts" here, but it is actually one word], **brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed.** {1 Cor 12:1 RSV}

Why not? Well, because this is what makes life work, and he goes on to explain that it is the presence of the Spirit that makes Christ real to us, and the gifts of the Spirit that are designed to make the body function and reach out and perform its work of touching society on every side.

Here again, we have missed so much of the great richness of the provision of Christ for his church. We know so little about the gifts of the Spirit. What is your gift -- do you know? And are you using it? Are you putting it to work? Or do you need Paul's admonition to Timothy, "rekindle the gift of God that is within you" {2 Tim 1:6b RSV}. The body functions by the exercise of its gift, and every Christian has a gift -- at least one -- and there are different gifts; we do not all have the same.

God has sent different gifts within the body, and we all function as these gifts are put to work; therefore, this is a beautiful chapter -- showing us that we must not despise another because of a different gift. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" {1 Cor 12:21a RSV}, nor must we neglect the gift that has been given to us; it is all necessary -- even the head cannot properly operate without the foot. Think of that -- the head is Christ himself, and yet we are all members one of another, and so, as the body of Christ, we fulfill our functions -- both in the church to the body itself and to the world -- through the exercise of spiritual gifts in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the proof that we have learned the secret will be as set forth in chapter thirteen. You know what that is -- love -- the manifestation of love. This is a wonderful chapter, because it sets forth for us the value of love, the portrait of love, and the power of love.

Then in chapter fourteen, Paul takes up another problem that was causing confusion in the church -- the misuse of one of the gifts, the gift of tongues, and the presence of the false gift of tongues that was at work in that church as it is in our society today. In the correction for these abuses, he tries to focus the whole weight of this section on the importance of the gift of prophecy. It is always amazing to me how many read this chapter and entirely miss the apostle's point.

The whole purpose of the chapter is that we start talking about the gift of prophecy and emphasizing it, and urging it upon others, and encouraging those who have it to exercise it. But you hardly ever hear anything about that: it is all tongues, is it not? Yet Paul was trying to play down the gift of tongues, and play up the gift of prophecy. Now, the gift of prophecy is simply the ability to explain and expound the Scriptures, to speak comfort and edification, and encouragement from the Scriptures.

That brings us to chapter fifteen with its great emphasis on the resurrection. What would any of these things be worth if we did not have a living Christ to make them real? The resurrection is the great pivot for the whole of the Christian faith -- everything comes back to that. If Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then, as the apostle says in this chapter, we are hopeless, and not only that, we are the most to be pitied of all people -- we are nuts, we are fools, we ought to be locked up somewhere, if Christ be not raised from the dead.

But what a triumphant paean of proof and praise is in this chapter concerning the resurrection. Paul closes it with what is his whole point. Everything in this whole letter comes right down to this one verse (verse 58):

Therefore, [because of all he has said up to this point] my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. {1 Cor 15:58 RSV}

Chapter sixteen is just a postscript in which he catches up certain little things that the church needed to know, very important to us, but then he comes back to this theme again:

Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong, Let all that you do be done in love. {1 Cor 16:13-14 RSV}

And you have got the equipment to do it with. Now do it.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that we who live also in a sex-saturated society, given over to the love of wisdom and intellectualism, have in Jesus Christ, in the word of the cross, everything that it takes to meet the pressures that come upon us in this day; there is no reason for failure. And so, Lord, we pray that we may learn more about these great themes, and discover the exciting fascination of everyday living on this level and in these terms, thus discovering the adventure that you intended life to be. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: THE MESSAGE OF FIRST CORINTHIANS

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Adventuring through the Bible

Scripture: 1 Corinthians

Message No: 47

Catalog No: 247

Date: January 29, 1967

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