

# BOASTING OR BELIEVING?

By Steve Zeisler

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The Corinthian letters of the apostle Paul form the best testimony for how the church should function in any age. Paul ministered at length to the church in Corinth, and wrote to them often (at least four letters we know of, though only two have survived). He invested much of himself to ensure that the church there should function the way God wanted it to function. One reason for his labor was that the Corinthians resisted his message in great part. They just did not want to be "made right" according to the process taught by Paul but according to their own pace.

That very process, which is preserved in the New Testament letters, is critical to our faith today. As we study this letter we should ask questions about the nature of the church. What does it mean to us to be God's people? It is important to ask questions like this in any day, but it is especially critical to do so in this twentieth century. During the recent visit of the Pope I found it very interesting to listen to the comments of the secular media regarding the impact of his visit on the United States. The vast majority of the commentators regarded the Catholic Church as an essentially human organism. We were told the number of Catholics in the world; that American Catholics were in favor of changing some of the doctrines of the church; that various groups of pickets were following him, etc.; we heard the commentators poll people on whether the Pope should modernize the church. One could not be blamed for assuming that the Catholic Church was a very large human organization that was in the process of deciding whether or not to make changes.

It is clear that the world does not understand that the church of Jesus Christ is not a merely human organization. People are unaware that it is made up of men and women, boys and girls in whom the Spirit of God resides. The world does not know that the church, according to Scripture, is the body of Christ himself. In Jesus of Nazareth, God humbled himself and took on human form. In that person, God reached out to a rebellious humanity. And he now incarnates himself on this earth through thousands of members of that one body which is his church. The church therefore is a far cry from any other human organizations that may or may not change, depending on circumstances and time. It is the primary instrument which God will use to bring hope, encouragement and conviction to our world.

On every side we see people looking for answers: tuning in to religious television extravaganzas, to events like the Harmonic Convergence, to following the Pope of the Catholic Church, in an effort to become acquainted with the God of the universe. Is there any better reason that the church be seen to be all that it should be? Let us hope that as we work through this first Corinthian letter of Paul we will discover afresh how God intends that we as members of the church should function in our day and age.

Even a cursory reading of the Bible reveals that God is committed to incarnation. Hebrews declares that "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..." The truth became incarnate, in other words. The apostle John makes reference to the Logos of God, the Word of God who was God and who was with God who, remarkably, became human and lived among us. Thus, God's primary means of reaching mankind with truth was to place himself into human flesh.

The commitment to incarnation remains. Christians are vessels of clay who contain a magnificent treasure, the Lord Jesus himself. As such we are the hope of the world. Faithfulness to our calling in Christ therefore is a life-and-death issue for those people who are seeking life and reality on this earth. The way they will find life is by observing Christians whose lives testify to the reality of God's love and power. How important it is, especially in our day when faithless Christianity and hollow and empty boasting seem to occupy the headlines daily, that the people of God live up to their calling. Let us seek to learn from the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter how he would have us live.

There are at least two reasons why this letter will help us live as we ought. The first is that the Corinthian Christians lived in an environment that in many ways mirrors our own. I have heard Ray Stedman refer to these letters to the Corinthians as "Paul's letters to the Californians"! There are indeed many similarities between our modern urban settings and the Corinth of the first century. And, second, we could also draw similarities between the Corinthian church and our own church.

Unlike Athens, which had a history of hundreds of years behind it, Corinth did not have a long tradition to build on. The city, which was populated by Roman soldiers and by peoples from all over the Mediterranean, was a fiercely competitive place. Having been razed to the ground, Corinth was rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. None of the many cultures which were prominent in the city had been able to impose itself to the exclusion of the others. The result was that the various groupings within the city were in a constant state of competition with each other. Corinth, we would say today, was a high-energy city, a place where people felt that self-expression was their birthright.

Leon Morris says this of Corinth,

The city to which Paul came preaching the gospel was, therefore, a very cosmopolitan place. It was an important city. It was intellectually alert. It was materially prosperous. It was morally corrupt. There was a pronounced tendency for its inhabitants to indulge their desires of whatever sort.

Another commentator writes,

The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual: The merchant who made his gain by all and every means; the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust; the athlete, steeled to every bodily exercise, and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types. In a word: the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desire.

This, then, was Corinth; a hot-blooded, competitive, self-willed place. Yet we know from the Book of Acts that God had "many people in that city." Despite all the negative and fleshly things that Corinth was noted for, God had indeed many people there. However, the carnal environment ensured that the early years of the Corinthian were turbulent ones. Corinthians were unaccustomed to having anybody--especially their Lord and Creator-- telling them how they should behave. Thus they tended to express their Christianity in a fleshly manner. Reflecting their environment, they were haughty, divided and competitive. They were an embarrassment, in fact, to the gospel.

Much of the activity which went on in the Corinthian church would find a parallel in some Christian circles today. There were sex scandals, lawsuits among Christians, drunkenness, and debates about singleness, divorce and remarriage. People who ought to have known better acted scandalously. They needed correction at almost every level. That is what the apostle Paul undertook to do in this letter in an effort to teach a young and immature body of believers how to live Christianly and thus affect their world for Christ. Let us see how we also, a church located in a modern urban center, might find correction in our Christian walk and thus live as we ought to live.

The opening verse of the letter contains a wonderful nugget of truth which I want to look at before we begin reading from the text. This verse may assist us in getting an even better feel for the church at Corinth.

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,

Acts 18 gives the account of Paul's first visit to Corinth. The apostle arrived in the city following his ministry in Athens where he had preached to the Jews in the synagogue and debated the Greeks on Mars Hill. He was a

little apprehensive. "I came to you in fear and trembling," he wrote later in his second Corinthian letter. The Jews in Corinth were as resistant and feisty as they were in many other cities where Paul taught the gospel, so much so that they threw him out of their midst. But Paul set up house right next door to the synagogue, teaching in the house of Titius Justus, "a worshiper of God," according to Acts 18. Setting up right next door to preach a different message was a typically Corinthian action, one that was right in step with the prevailing air of competitiveness of the city.

In an action which further embarrassed the Jews, the head of the synagogue, Crispus, came to faith in Jesus, together with his family. The outraged Jews dragged the apostle before Gallio, the Roman consul, and tried to have him rule for them by banishing Paul and his Christianity from Corinth. The new leader of the synagogue, and the man who took the case before Gallio, was Sosthenes. To his credit, Gallio refused to have anything to do with what he considered a religious issue between competing Jewish factions. The frustrated Jews took out their ire on their new leader Sosthenes by beating him up in front of the judgment seat of Gallio. The result of all this seems to have been that Sosthenes became the second official of the synagogue at Corinth to come to faith.

In this opening verse therefore the apostle, perhaps with tongue in cheek, makes mention of Sosthenes, who is now traveling with the apostle. This reference to Sosthenes sheds further light on what we might call the aggressiveness that was characteristic of the Corinthian church.

Verse 2:

...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. 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, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul opens his letter with a brief but profound word on what being part of the body of Christ means for the Corinthians. Thus, he begins by reminding these believers of who they are and what they stand for.

Immediately following this introduction, however, Paul will go on to ask some hard questions of his readers, questions like, "If it is true that you are chosen of God, saints by calling, and that God's grace is manifest in you, why aren't you acting accordingly? If all these things are true of you, why are you living like you are?" How unsettling these questions can be! When Admiral Poindexter was questioned before the Iran-Contra hearings, he was asked how a United States naval officer who had taken an oath of loyalty to his country could become involved in the diversion of funds to the Contras in Nicaragua. Former Presidential candidate Gary Hart has been asked how a man running for national office could take a vow before God to be faithful to his wife and then act as he had acted. These are two of the people who have held high positions and have acted in a manner inconsistent with the convictions they once professed, with the result that many have turned away from them. They have seen their public careers take a downward spiral because their behavior was not in accordance with their professed convictions.

How traumatic for a parent to hear his child say, "I'm confused by your behavior. You say you stand for Christian morals and yet your behavior denies it." These are precisely the kinds of questions the apostle will be asking of the Corinthians in this letter. They profess to follow Jesus, but their behavior raises serious questions about their commitment.

The initial verses of 1 Corinthians tell us of spiritual realities that ought to result in godly living. There are three things I would like to highlight in verses 1 through 9, three concepts around which Paul's train of thought will proceed. First, the notion of having been "called." In verse 1 Paul describes himself as having been "called as

an apostle." Referring to the Corinthians in verse 2, he says they have been "sanctified in Christ Jesus"; they are "saints by calling." They have been nominated, set apart, drafted by God. They have not come into the family of God by chance. The word for church, "ekklesia," means "called-out ones." God initiated the action, setting us apart for himself. We are special and different. We cannot compliment ourselves for the relationship we have with him, nor can we drift cavalierly to other commitments. We are who we are because God initiated the action, naming us and investing himself in us to make us a special people.

When our family adopted a kitten recently, I got to thinking about the millions of kittens that are born throughout the world which are abandoned or destroyed. When we chose the kitten we wanted to take home with us, we looked at a selection of them and, for no particular reason, chose one to the exclusion of the others. We took it home and the children began to love it, feed it and play with it. By the choice of another, that particular cat was given honor and fulfillment. Something like that takes place when God names people. He does not have to explain or justify his reasons. But for those of us who have been called, that call is irreversible. We are the called-out ones because God chose us and set us apart. It is because God took the initiative that we are who we are.

The second idea I will highlight which gave the Corinthians evidence of who they were is the word "grace." This word encompasses the idea of resources. Paul makes frequent mention in this letter of the resources, the wealth of power that God has made available to his people. Verse 3: "Grace to you and peace from God..." God's grace is his rich investment of himself in us which he pours out upon us. Peace is a reference to an inner wholeness that ensures we will never again have to still our own hearts before we minister. God has granted us his peace so that we have something to give in return. Grace and peace! What extraordinary blessings God has showered upon us: Peace which stills our hearts, and grace to enable us to do everything he calls upon us to do.

We have further reference to God's grace in verse 4: "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus." Verse 5: "...in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and knowledge." God's supply had been poured out upon the Corinthians and it is poured out upon us as well. Verse 7: "...you are not lacking in any gift." This is a reference to spiritual gifts, which are alluded to in verse 5, the gifts of speech and of knowledge. The community at Corinth had not been denied any of the gifts, Paul is saying. They had everything they needed.

The Corinthian Christians had been called by God, thus their identity was secure. Furthermore, God had granted them every resource they would need to live as believers in their difficult surroundings.

The third idea I will highlight is Paul's reference to the certainty that the process which had been begun in the Corinthian believers would be completed. Verse 6: "...the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you..."; verse 8: "...who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful..." God was at work in their lives--there was evidence of that--and he was faithful to carry out that work until the end. As Christians, we have a sense of utter certainty that we know where we are going. All our questions have been answered; our destiny is assured.

Paul knows this church at Corinth. He writes in glowing terms of their calling and their destiny. Beginning in verse 10, however, the apostle begins asking some hard questions of this body of believers saying, in effect, "If these things are true, why are you living the way you are?" We also will find these questions appropriate to ask of ourselves. If these things that Paul has laid out are true, why are many of us living the way we are?

Verse 10:

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos," and "I am of Cephas," and "I am of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you

were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void.

Divisiveness among Christians is the first concern raised by the apostle. The Corinthians had divided themselves into factions, into fan clubs which looked down on one another. Of course the leaders who were the subjects of these fan clubs' adulation were in no sense competing with each other. They were in full accord one with another. But the Corinthian believers had decided that a certain style, a certain approach to Christianity fit them best. As a result they hung out together and over time had less and less to do with the other fan clubs. Paul admonishes them that if they continued living like this, Jesus himself would be dragged down by their behavior.

Some among them claimed to be "of Paul." In chapter 4, Paul says that he was the "father" of the church in Corinth. He was the originator of the church, in other words, having led most of their original number to Christ. He was the one to whom they owed their life, in a sense. The memory of the apostle's ministry among the people who made up this faction was why they regarded themselves to be "of Paul."

Many in our own day regard Billy Graham as the premier Christian figure in the world, some of them because they came to faith under his ministry. They cannot imagine anyone supplanting him. Ray Stedman is the father of this church. Many, including me, know what it means to be "in Christ" because of his influence in our lives. Now there is nothing inappropriate about that. What is wrong is assuming that those who do not have the same feelings you do about someone are wrong.

A second group in Corinth were fans of Apollos. This man was an Alexandrian Jew (a people who were noted for the brilliance of their intellect), who had come to faith in Christ. He was "mighty in the Scriptures," and "fervent in spirit," according to Acts. He had a charismatic presence about him; he was an orator who had great influence to stimulate people to righteousness. Some in Corinth, as is the case with some in our own day, like nothing better than sitting under the ministry of a gifted orator who can energize and motivate people. Now there is nothing wrong with that, but when people gather around such a person, and look down their noses at others who don't feel the need to do so, then they are denying the reality of Christian unity.

A third group in Corinth were members of the fan club of Peter (Cephas), the representative of the great Jewish root of Christianity. Jewish learning and culture, ancient scholarship and legal continuity were attractive to a faction in Corinth. This group--and they have their counterparts today--preferred the oldest forms of liturgy and knowledge, finding their best expression of faith in these things.

Then there was yet another group who claimed to have no need for leaders at all. They had Jesus, they said, thus making the claim that they were the most independent and spiritual of all the factions.

Here the apostle is underlining the Corinthians' propensity to compete, to divide themselves into groups to the exclusion of all others. Paul is appealing to them to heed what their division was doing to the name of Jesus. "Has Christ been divided?" he asks. Is Christ dissipated, diminished in authority; saying nothing clearly? Have you ever exalted someone, perhaps a leader, a teacher, a public figure, an author, a preacher--even someone on our own staff--and diminished the cause of Christ by so doing? Were you baptized, placed into, the destiny of a mere human leader, or were you baptized into Christ?

Whenever we exalt the vessel, and thereby diminish the treasure inside, we have diminished the ministry of Christ and, supremely, the cross of Christ. That is why Paul declares in verse 17, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void." The cross is the heart of Christianity. We are a rebellious people, deserving of death, antagonists of God, and yet he loves us. He died for us, and then conquered death, that we might have life. If we occupy ourselves with running Christian meetings, building Christian organizations and exalting Christian programs so that people and what they do, not the gospel, are exalted, then we have robbed the cross of its message, set off on a course that is faithless, and endangered the world in which we live.

Is there anything about the way you live the Christian life that calls attention to humans rather than the Lord who is at the heart of your faith? When you hope for revival in your life, when you long to see others come to Christ, do you give first place to the message of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," or do you trust in people, technology or something else to persuade people to come to faith? Revival comes in a community or in a church when, as Paul declares, we refuse to be too clever for our own good, when we step back in humility and say, "I am who I am because of what Jesus did for me. And you may have it too." That is when revival takes place and life begins.

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