

Truth for Today

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For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. David Anderson

The Church and the World - 1 Corinthians 1 and 2

Today we start a new series of talks on 1 Corinthians 1-10 using the title "The church and the world". It's not about how the church fits into the world system, but rather how it's a distinct body of people formed through the Gospel. Chapters 1-10 cover issues that impacted upon the church in Corinth and include the answers to some questions on social problems they'd asked Paul's advice about. So our series sub-title is "Separation and Testimony".

Through the preaching of Paul a large church had been formed at Corinth, see Acts 18:10. These believers lived in a city which was notorious, even amongst the then pagan world, for its immorality and its idolatry. Sadly some members of the church were continuing in these ways, and Greek culture was also impacting upon their conduct. Paul wrote to counteract these worldly influences. By writing this letter, he not only corrected the wrong ideas and practices within the Corinthian church, but he also recorded valuable instructions about the features of a New Testament church. A question we must all ask, as we involve ourselves in this series, either as presenters or listeners, is: Does the church that I attend exhibit any of these requirements that Paul stated were so necessary? Or has it been influenced in some way or other by the society I live in?

Acts 18:6 and 7 tells of the formation of the Christian fellowship at Corinth, as a separate group from the Jewish community who met in the synagogue. Therefore, when Paul writes this first letter he addresses it: "To the church of God which is at Corinth", 1 Corinthians 1:2. He describes them as "sanctified in Christ Jesus", that is, set apart for God in this unique position because they belonged to Christ. They were saints by the call of God which they heard, and responded to, through the Gospel. This fact is true of all believers, for Paul includes "all who in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord" in those he names "saints" in verse 2! The word "church" means "called-out-ones", called **out** of the world, but "**into** the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord", verse 9. When we called upon the Lord for salvation in obedience to the Gospel, we were saved, Romans 10:9-14. At the same time, God called us and joined us together with all other believers to form the church, those who share common life together in His Son.

A friend of mine once said to me that all true Christians would claim to meet in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ when they assemble in church. As Christians we own, and invoke, no other name. We put no other name over us. That being so, every aspect of our lives as Christians, including our church life, ultimately comes under the scope of 1 Corinthians. It's an open letter addressed to: "...all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours", verse 2. What Paul, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, directed the Corinthian church to do is no different to what he taught other churches, and so applies to us. Let's notice this point as he writes this letter:

- "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you **the gospel which I preached** to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that **word which I preached to you** - unless you believed in vain. For **I delivered to you** first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...so we preach and so you believed", 15:1-3 and 11.
- "According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder **I have laid the foundation**," 3:10.
- "For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere **in every church**", 4:17.
- "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...I have **written** to you", 5:4 and 11.
- "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me...so I ordain **in all the churches**", 7:1 and 17.
- "Do I say these things as a mere man? ...Am I not **an apostle**", 9:8 and 1.
- "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just **as I delivered them to you**...For I received from the Lord that which I also **delivered to you**...And the rest **I will set in order** when I come", 11:2, 23 and 34.
- "Or did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached? If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that **the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord**", 14:36-37.
- "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as **I have given orders to the churches** of Galatia, so you must do also", 16:1.

First of all, Paul commends this Christian church for the evidences of spiritual life amongst them, evidences which had validated both the Gospel itself and its effectiveness. In gifts, teaching and preaching they had been enriched with every spiritual blessing, by the grace of God. A true testimony was being rendered to the name of Christ, 1:3-7. They also lived in expectation of the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, His coming again. The Lord would verify that they were His in that day, and present them to Himself to share in His glory. This would ultimately prove the complete faithfulness of God, verses 7-9.

However, their present testimony about Christ to the world was being spoiled by internal factions within the church. The Lord Jesus had prayed for His disciples: *“that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me...that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me”*, John 17:21-23. Paul recognised the great threat to the testimony arising from these schisms. Evidently the Corinthians had formed followings within the church. There was the Paul group, the Peter group, the Apollos group, and, even, the Christ group! Paul couldn't allow such a situation to continue because we're "all one in Christ Jesus" and so he exhorts them: *“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”*, 1 Corinthians 1:10.

Today we live in an era of many denominations and multiple divisions of the professing Christian church. This is an established, so-called acceptable, state of affairs in the twenty-first century. We can all give a sound defence of "our" particular Christian fellowship or group, and the doctrinal basis to prove "we're right". However, we should rather be humbled and concerned about the drastic effects this has had upon the Christian testimony. At least we should be concerned about our local churches, as Paul was: *“For I fear lest...there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults”*, 2 Corinthians 12:20.

In 1 Corinthians 1:13 Paul asks three rhetorical questions: *“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?”* The answer's a resounding "No" to each! But what was the solution to these problems at Corinth, where Greek ideas of man's prominence, importance and wisdom had infiltrated the church? Such a remedy will also apply to the Christian church today and replaces all manmade ideas of unity. Paul says that it's the Gospel itself, verse 17. Primarily it's the preaching of the cross: *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”*, verse 18. The Cross displaces natural man with the new man from God: *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”*, Galatians 2:20.

In 1 Corinthians 1:19-24 Paul explains that God has fully exposed the futility of all men's ideas, "the wisdom of this world". Not only that, but God takes pleasure in saving people who believe the message of Christ having been crucified, *“...that [He] died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures”*, 15:3-4.

In Paul's day there were two great representatives of human wisdom, the Jews and the Greeks. To Jews, with their ethical religion of righteousness by law, the Gospel was a huge stumbling block. They wanted an on-the-throne Messiah, who had great power and glory. To the philosophical Greek, the cross was a scandal, and salvation by means of a man dying in that way was impossible and utter stupidity. By contrast Paul writes: *“but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”*, 1:24-25.

The situation remains unchanged today. We're either perishing in our sins because we don't believe the Gospel message of the Cross, or we're saved, through faith in the crucified Saviour. Other ways, religions, or philosophies, God has ruled inadmissible. It's His way, and none other! Have you accepted God's provision, the Lord Jesus Christ, as your Saviour?

Paul states in verse 26 that, generally, people who are wise in their own estimation, or mighty, or in a high position, don't respond favourably to the message of the Cross. By contrast, God's call, or "the foolishness of God", rather focuses on people who are disregarded by our world system. They are listed in verses 27 and 28: what the world calls the foolish, the weak, the insignificant, the contemptible and the nonentities. Paul explains God's reasons for choosing such people. He calls the foolish and the weak to shame the worldly-wise and the pretensions of the strong, verse 27. He calls the insignificant, the contemptible and the nobodies to reduce to nothing those who at the present time think they're somewhat important, verse 28. He thus ensures *“that no flesh should glory in His presence”*, verse 29.

His overall intention is to exalt only one Man, the Christ: *“that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.’”*, verse 31. God has glorified Christ by raising Him to His own right hand in heaven. There He's known as Christ Jesus. Christians receive everything from God through Him. They partake of His life, His place, His acceptance.

He "...became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption", verse 30. By His incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension and glorification He became these things for Christians:

- **Wisdom:** we were ignorant of God and wise in our own conceit, but now we're renewed in our minds!
- **Righteousness:** we were guilty and condemned, but we're now right with God!
- **Sanctification:** we were contaminated and corrupt, but we're now pure and holy in God's sight!
- **Redemption:** we were in bondage and in slavery to sin, but we're now set free from its power - set free to serve God!

Paul goes on in chapter 2 to explain the manner of his preaching, that was in keeping with the Gospel message of the Cross. He deliberately avoided using persuasive, flowing language, or appearing superior. He wouldn't broaden-out the subject of the Gospel from "Jesus Christ and Him crucified", verse 2. In appearance Paul was physically weak, and in character, he was nervous and unappealing, verse 3. But the style of his speech and the content of his preaching were a demonstration of the Holy Spirit working with power, verse 4. He did this "*that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God*", verse 5.

At this point, I pause to ask myself: how much of my preaching is consistent with the subject of the Cross? Not only in content, but also in the spirit and style of Paul at Corinth? Or is my concern more to please my audience according to their expectations? Is what I say based only upon human wisdom? These are very searching questions that every Gospel preacher must honestly face!

Up to 2:5, Paul has discredited human wisdom eight times. He now focuses on God's wisdom, which is available to "mature" Christians. God's wisdom is entirely different from the wisdom of this present age. Nor does it emanate from its governors, "the powers-that-be, who soon will be only the powers that have been", verse 6 (JB Phillips translation). The apostles and prophets in New Testament times spoke the wisdom of God. Verse 7 informs us that it was "wisdom in a mystery", that is, it's a special secret disclosed only to believers. It's about what God has marked out for us, for our glory! (Paul more fully explains this mystery in Ephesians 3). It had been kept undisclosed from eternity until New Testament times. Through their own folly, it had been hidden from world rulers. If they had known about it, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of glory, verse 8. In their ignorance they didn't recognise Him when He came!

Verse 9 says that God's wisdom is inaccessible to natural man. "*But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.'*" God freely and graciously gives all things to those who respond to His great love shown at the Cross, verse 12, and Romans 8:32.

True science is by research and experiment, mainly by observation – what our eyes see. Human learning comes from what is reported to us - we hear it with our ears. Intuition is knowledge obtained at its highest level – what we conceive in our minds by our intellect. But we can't discover "*the things which God has prepared for those who love Him*" by any of these ways; they can only be known when they are revealed to us by God's Spirit.

In verses 10-16 Paul describes the process by which spiritual things are made good to each believer. The seven steps of this process are: competency, reception, revelation, inspiration, assimilation, discernment and thinking.

1. **Competency:** Just as the thoughts and feelings of a man can only be known by the man himself in his spirit, so only the Holy Spirit is capable of searching and bringing out the deep things of God, verses 10-11.
2. **Reception:** Every believer receives the Holy Spirit so that he has the capacity to know these things, verses 12 and 16.
3. **Revelation:** The Holy Spirit revealed spiritual truths to the New Testament apostles and prophets, the "us" of verse 10. The Holy Spirit was received by these believers for this unique purpose, that they should understand these communications from God, verse 12.
4. **Verbal Inspiration:** The Holy Spirit also gave these apostles and prophets the exact words to speak (and to write down). God's communications were clothed in God-chosen words. Spiritual truths were made known by the Holy Spirit fitting words to them, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual [words]", verses 12 and 13.
5. **Assimilation:** By the Holy Spirit, all believers can take in and understand what the apostles have said and written down in the New Testament, verses 12 and 14.

6. **Discernment:** The spiritual believer has the spiritual eyesight to discern the deep things of God, verses 14 and 15. The natural, sensual man can't see them at all – such things remain folly to him because his soul is dominated by the things of earth. Neither does he possess the Spirit of God, verse 14. (Sadly, the Corinthian believers were babes or carnal, that is dominated by the flesh, and not by the Holy Spirit, see Romans 8:5-7. They weren't mature as Christians and Paul was unable to feed them with the solid food of the deep things of God, 3:1).
7. **Thinking:** **'we have the mind of Christ', verse 16.** This faculty enables each believer to think as Christ thinks and to react correctly to God's word, in contrast to natural man, whose thinking leads him astray.

In closing, let me now summarise 1 Corinthians 1 and 2:

- It's the message of the Cross which is the **true** Gospel
- God calls us by that Gospel to be saints
- We must be consistent with this name "saints" and live separate from the world, but give a testimony of Christ to it
- All believers have been called into the church of God, the fellowship of His Son
- The Holy Spirit enables us to understand the things of God and to become mature Christians
- God is faithful to His word. He will provide the necessary grace for us to live in obedience to it, even where there are difficulties, such as there were in the church in Corinth.

A closing prayer of praise: *"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counsellor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."* Romans 11:33-36.

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