

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (6-9-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

1 Corinthians 1:1-9
Additional Reading: Acts 18:1-17

Introduction

The Apostle Paul first went to the Greek city of Corinth on his second missionary journey, and stayed for eighteen months. There were many converts. In all, he went to Corinth three times, and wrote four letters to them, the second and fourth of which are our 1 and 2 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians was written because Paul heard about problems in the church. There were quarrellings, divisions, lack of discipline, and some who were denying the resurrection. He also wanted to answer the Corinthians' questions about marriage, food offered to idols, public worship and spiritual gifts. The letter was written from Ephesus in 55AD. It is one of the richest letters in the New Testament, full of valuable teaching about the Christian life and conduct.

No other letter gives us such insight into the life of the first century church, with its frank exposure of the theology and moral problems of the times. Yet it is still very relevant today. It contains foundation principles we need to relearn. Above all, it summons us to put God rather than man at the centre of our thinking about the church, the Gospel, Christian service and the Christian life. Many of the Corinthians' problems, and our own problems, are caused by failure at this point – man-centredness rather than God-centredness.

The writer – Paul

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes (probably Paul's amanuensis) (1 Corinthians 1:1). By introducing himself as an apostle, as he does in eight epistles, Paul stresses his authority, and this was especially important in Corinth where his authority was questioned. An apostle was a "sent one", and it was a unique office in the early church. There are no apostles today.

In the highest sense, it was a term only applicable to Paul and the 12 apostles. They had special qualifications, they had special personal authorization from Christ, they received special inspiration. They were Christ's representatives, sent in place of Christ, carrying His authority. They were given unique knowledge and gifts. Their teaching formed the foundation of the church. The twenty-seven books in the New Testament are included in the canon of Scripture because their writers were apostles, or from the apostolic circle (Mark, Luke and the writer to the Hebrews).

We need to take heed of Paul and all the other apostolic writers, for in their writings we hear God's message. It is not for us to pick and choose. When we depart from apostolic doctrine, by adding or subtracting, we are eroding the very foundation of the Church of God, grieving the Holy Spirit who inspired them, dishonouring the Lord Jesus Christ who authorized them, and endangering our own souls by rejecting what is vital for our spiritual well-being.

Listen carefully. Through the apostle Paul, though his words had special relevance to the church at Corinth, God is speaking to us as well. Obedience leads to being conformed to God's will. Disobedience leads to serious loss and poor testimony.

The readers – the Church of God at Corinth

To the church (ἐκκλησία "called out ones) **of God at Corinth** (1 Corinthians 1:2). Note that the church is God's church, not yours or mine or the elders, but God's. He created it and He owns it. "Corinth" is just a name in a book or on a map to us, but in Paul's day "Corinth" would make people sit up and take notice. A church there??!! It was the vanity fair of the ancient world. It was a great cosmopolitan centre. Many races lived there. It was the commercial centre. The Isthonian Games held there were second only to the Olympic Games. Every one, for some reason or other, visited Corinth at some time. It was rich, populous and totally immoral. The label "Corinthian" was synonymous with a drunken and immoral life, and entered the English language in Regency times, when an 1820's Corinthian meant a wealthy young man living recklessly and wildly. In Greek plays, the Corinthian was always played as a drunk. This immorality was linked with religion. Every evening, hundreds of priestesses from the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, descended the hill of acropolis above the town, and sold themselves on the streets of Corinth. They were the entertainers in the city's nightlife.

Corinth stood for wealth, luxury, drunkenness and gross immorality. Therefore the Church of God at Corinth was very important. In the middle of this cesspit, there were God's people. In the most unlikely of places in the world, the Gospel had taken root. There were set-backs (the sins of the city had got into the church) yet some of the mightiest triumphs of the Gospel were here. It was a miracle there was any church there at all. If the Gospel could stand here, it could stand anywhere.

We often speak of the problems of bringing up children in today's world. Just imagine how hard it would have been to live in Corinth! Surrounded by gross evil that was unchecked and rampant. The new Christians had no Christian background of hundreds of years of Christian teaching, and little knowledge and much immaturity.

Then Paul reminds them of their status in this evil city. **Sanctified in Christ Jesus. Called to be holy.** Set apart by God to belong to Christ Jesus, through redemption and union with Christ. Called to be separate from the world, and the old life, and the regime of sin that surrounded them, and belong totally to Christ. Called to be different, and devoted to God. Called to show by living a holy life that they were His and belonged to Him.

We are not to wish we were living in a different place and at a different time. We were saved and placed in this world now, even where evil abounds, to live for God and by His power. We live as a colony of heaven, on earth. We live as aliens among the rest. We have different standards; we judge by different criteria; our allegiance is to another King. Amidst darkness all around, we are to shine our light. We are not to run away or cringe, but live for God just where He has placed us. By living totally different lives, we mark ourselves out as men and women of God.

And be encouraged because we belong to **all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours**. We are part of a worldwide fellowship, we are not alone, but part of a larger company with the same calling. We are concerned for them, and they are concerned for us; we pray for them, and they pray for us. This puts heart into us. We can tread with firm step and lift our heads high.

Reminder of the resources of the church

We have a tremendously high calling. But when God calls, He also equips. The Gospel makes us adequate, able to live the Christian life in the hardest home and in the darkest environment. Full salvation in Christ means not only forgiveness of sins but complete provision to live the Christian life.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:3). Grace is God's unmerited and unrepayable kindness to undeserving sinners. The Christian life, from election in eternity past to glorification in heaven, and all the steps in between, is by grace and not works. It is all God's work and achievement. **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another** (John 1:16).

Peace also, which we can enjoy in the harshest circumstances and hardest times. We are **enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge** (1 Corinthians 1:5). They had been blessed with gifts of mind and mouth. They knew God and His truth, and were given the ability to communicate it. N.B. The key word "enriched" – everyone who is in Christ is richer than he who is without Him. Do we truly believe this? Do you complain about the restrictions, or rejoice about the riches of the Christian life? Ever since the Devil deceived Adam and Eve into supposing God was denying them something good, he has been suggesting that God wants His people to have impoverished lives. That is a lie! No one is impoverished by being a believer. Every believer is immeasurably enriched.

In fact, as we wait for the Second Coming, we come short in no gift. No one Christian is without a gift. All have something according to God's allotment and will. For our own life and functioning of the church, all the gifts we need are here.

All those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have called on His name and continue to call, trusting Him to be to us what His word says He can be to us. Tremendous potential in our lives. To be realized as we eagerly wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain us to the end.

Can we be sure of all these things, or are they just pious hopes? Grace, peace, gifts, the promise of the second coming and certainty of being kept – all in this evil atmosphere of Corinth? The answer is in the faithfulness of God. **God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful** (1 Corinthians 1:9). **He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus** (Philippians 1:6).

Some years ago a national newspaper ran an article "Is there a future for the church?" Of course the right answer depends on what you mean by the "church". If you mean a

particular local church or denomination, there is no guaranteed future. But if you mean the Church of Christ, the people of God, true born again believers, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, the answer is that nothing in the future is so secure.

Lord John Reith, the first director general of the BBC, visited some young avant-garde intellectuals preparing a programme. They told him the general theme was “giving the Christian church a decent burial”. Reith pulled himself up to his full six feet and said to the spokesman, “Young man, the church of Jesus Christ will stand at the grave of the BBC”. And so it will, and at the grave of every other human institution. God is faithful.

Conclusion

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).