

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

I Corinthians 1:1-9

No book in the New Testament exhibits more graphically the magnitude and variety of the problems which Christianity had to face in its effort to subdue the ancient world than the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians.

Three cities were rivals in "the grandeur that was Greece." Athens was the intellectual brain, Sparta was the military body, and Corinth was the commercial arms and limbs. Corinth was geographically between the other two and flourished long after their glories had departed. It outranked as a market any city of ancient times.

Corinth was one of the most populous and wealthy cities of Greece, but its riches produced pride, ostentation and all of the vices generally consequent on plenty. In Corinth men worshiped money, drank deep at the fountain of pleasure, rocked in the chair of luxury, wallowed in the mire of vice and lived for the things which were seen and temporal.

Lasciviousness was not only tolerated but practiced and encouraged by the worship of Venus, the goddess of love, and the notorious prostitution of numerous attendants devoted to her. The worship of Venus or Aphrodite, to whose licentious exercises a thousand priestesses were dedicated, made Corinth a cesspool of impurity and "Corinthian" a synonym for shameful pollution. Sumptuous theaters, palaces and temples, whose exteriors shone like burnished gold, bedecked the city. Sport and business, pleasure and profit, luxury and pride, riches and poverty, debauchery and crime combined to make Corinth the most wicked city since Sodom and Gomorrah.

Corinth was in a very real sense, the meetingplace of the East and West, of their commerce and of their thought. Of the brilliant and beautiful city it has been said, "in her quickly pulsing life, in her luxury and vice, she may be described as the Paris of the ancient world."

To this corrupt city, this center of trade, this resort of pleasure, this seat of political power, Paul came alone about the close of the year 51. His heart was sick over the idolatry at Athens. His spirit was sad over his relative failure in that cultural environment. Paul did not enter Corinth with any blare of trumpets; he was not advertised as a great evangelist or Bible teacher; he simply went in very quietly as an unknown craftsman. He was a tent-maker.

An index of character is the place where one goes when as a stranger he enters a city. The kind of associates one forms upon entering a large city reveals his character and shapes his course. Paul acted very wisely in this respect. He did not go to the temple of Venus, nor to the market place but to the synagogue. There he preached the good tidings to the Jews and proselytes. Six days each week he worked with his hands for sustenance, and every seventh day he preached and tried to win both Jews and Greeks to Christ.

Corinth was not an easy field for missionary service. At that time its population numbered between 600,000 and 700,000. In celebrating the rites of Aphrodite, the Corinthians gave themselves up to the most shameful licentiousness. So notorious was this that, in all parts of the Greek-speaking world, if men or women were found behaving in an unclean way, the worst that anybody could say of them was that they acted like Corinthians. To say that one behaved like a Corinthian meant that he was totally lost to all sense of morality or decency.

Such was the city into which Paul went to preach the gospel of the grace of God, and there that gospel won many to the knowledge of Christ. It was the means by which the Lord delivered people from their lives of wickedness and made saints of them who had been lost to all sense of decency.

In Corinth trade flourished, wealth was multiplied, and men and morals decayed. The trouble was not dogma but deviltry, not dialectics but degradation, not prophecy but prostitution, not differences of opinion but chasms in conduct.

"Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay."

Such conditions disheartened Paul and he was ready to quit Corinth, but God came to his relief. He encouraged him to dismiss his fears and go on preaching. He assured him that many who were in the blindness of heathenism and thralldom of sin would be called out through his preaching. He was to call out the called. For a considerable time after this Paul continued his evangelistic work in Corinth, and many were saved. Some members of that church were free and others were slaves. A few were from the high ranks of society, but the majority were from humble stations. It was the most heterogeneous congregation of all Paul's churches.

Less than three years elapsed after Paul's first visit to Corinth when information reached him in Ephesus about disquieting conditions in the Corinthian congregation. His chief informant was Chloe, a householder in Corinth and a member of the church there. She had written and told him about certain conditions in the church.

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. He was sent by Him and sent to proclaim Him. He had not sought this task, but he was called to it by an express act of the will of God. He was not chosen by man, nor through the casting of lots, but he was set apart for the apostleship by the Lord. The apostleship was not an office which could be assumed at pleasure. For the apostleship an appointment by competent authority was absolutely essential. In calling himself an apostle, Paul claimed divine authority derived immediately from Christ. He was made an apostle of Christ by direct appointment from God, and not by the choice of others.

Paul associated with himself Sosthenes, one of the Christian brotherhood. Concerning him we know nothing further. He appears to have been well known in Corinth. He may have been the ruler of the synagogue mentioned in Acts 18:17, who had become a Christian and perhaps a minister. Paul's apostleship was linked with Sosthenes' brotherhood. One speaks of authority and the other of association. One deals with origins and the other with effects.

This letter was addressed to the church of God. The church was so named because it belonged to God. It was His because it had been purchased with the precious blood of Christ. And just to think that His church was in Corinth, the home of idolatry and immorality. The members of the church were called saints. The effectual call of the Holy Spirit had constituted them saints. They were set apart to God when they became His children by faith in Christ. Have you put your faith in Christ and trusted Him completely? If so, the moment you did so God separated you from a world under judgment and set you apart unto Himself in Christ Jesus, and that instant you became a saint.

In the third verse we have the apostolic salutation or greeting. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Thus we see that the ultimate source of this grace and peace is divine. We are saved by grace, but of course this is not the grace to which he refers here. These people who are sanctified in Christ Jesus are already justified by faith and saved by grace. It is grace to sustain in all the trials of the way, grace to enable us to overcome in every hour of temptation. The grace of yesterday will not suffice for today. Through His grace God provides all we need for our journey through this world.

Grace is the activity of God that produces peace for the child of God. Peace, which is the ending of strife and conflict, comes only through grace. Peace is always the result of grace.

Paul gave thanks for the grace which they had received. His gratitude was certainly exemplary. "I thank my God always on your behalf." His gratitude was unselfish. He said, "On your behalf." It is right to praise God for what He has done for us, but it is a higher and nobler thing to praise Him for what He has done for others. Nobody rightly appreciates a blessing who does not want others to enjoy it also. With Paul thanksgiving was not an occasional sentiment, but rather a settled attitude of heart. "I thank my God always." He was thankful for the possibilities that were theirs.

Paul knew that Christ came to enrich life, and so informed the Corinthians. He said, "In everything ye were enriched in Him." And this statement is just as true for us as it was for them. Paul called them back to Christian joy and obedience by reminding them of their poverty apart from Christ. And we need the same reminder. We are so accustomed to the blessings of life that we often forget the Giver. We take most of the facts of life for granted, though their influence upon us is greater than we can measure. Without Him we would be very poor indeed.

1. Christ has enriched the world's intellectual life.

The range of human thought is immense, but finite. The grandeur of the world's art and literature evidences the high, capacious powers of man. Christ has touched and refined the world's art and literature. Except the Jewish sacred writings, ancient literature was a mass of mingled glory and shame.

To know Christ and to serve Him is certainly an enriching experience. It makes a tremendous difference in the life. It made a great difference in cultured and intellectual men like Augustine. The record is plain enough that the Christian experience turned that brilliant and wayward youth into a great Christian thinker and saint. If we set ourselves the task of compiling a list of men and women, obscure and distinguished, who have been transformed by the Christian experience, we shall find ourselves exulting as we proceed from century to century. So when I make the assertion that Christ has enriched the world's intellectual life, I have behind me the accumulation of centuries of experience. Even in the realm of science Christ has brought enrichment. He has inspired the search for truth, and some of the greatest scientists have been humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Christ has enriched the world's social life.

It is obvious that truths which enrich the world's thought are bound to tell upon its social life. There is always in true and noble thought a living and moving power to leaven character. Wherever the influence of Christ is felt we have a better social order.

Who can measure the influence of Jesus Christ in the social order? Kindness is by no means an exclusively Christian virtue, and yet it has been shown that it flourishes most surely in Christian countries. The whole motion of public service has been wonderfully enlarged through the influence of Jesus Christ.

3. Christ has enriched the world's moral life.

Christ spake with authority. His teachings are not a set of mere precepts and opinions. They are a living rule of life and conduct. His teachings have certainly changed the world's moral life. Think of what they have done toward making human life sacred. Think of what He has done to elevate womanhood. The difference that He has made in the moral life of the world cannot be measured accurately or adequately.

4. Christ has enriched the world's spiritual life.

He emphasized the necessity of the new birth, which experience equips men rightly to live this life and fits them for an eternal home with God. In Him we have a wealth of spirituality which is ever-increasing. It is unaffected by the grave. The gift of Christ to the world is unique because in Him alone have we a true revelation of God and an unconquerable power to live aright.

Christ has touched our lives at so many points that the more we contemplate the difference

He has made, intellectually, socially, morally, and spiritually, the more we must say with Paul: "In everything ye were enriched in Him." Although there can be no doubt that Christ has greatly enriched the life of the world, there is an intimate and personal enrichment which He brings, and it is this which Paul has in mind. There is a new life in Christ which is given to all those who will come to Him in full surrender.

If you will be a loyal disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, He will enrich your life, He will purge it of its pollution, He will conquer your lusts, He will enlighten your mind, He will deepen in you all that is generous and rich and brotherly and true and just. He will make your life worth living. He will touch your sufferings and your labors with the glory of His sympathy, and He will deepen your hopes for yourself and for others with the security of an eternal prospect. At last He will purify and perfect and welcome you.

So, Christian friend, I remind you that it is good to be alive, especially if the joy of Jesus rings in your heart. Every day has its charm, and every night has its call to thanksgiving. All of us need that enrichment of life which Jesus alone can bestow. This enrichment through Christ is for our more efficient and effective service.