

1

Timely reminders

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

We live in a day of muddled thinking and messy living. Ours is a sick age.

Sick people need a doctor, and the church of Jesus Christ is uniquely qualified to serve as a physician to this sick age. She should be diagnosing the problem and proposing treatment. She should be putting her society in touch with the medicine that can heal. Furthermore, the church should be a living demonstration of what good health is.

But what can a physician do when she is suffering from the very illness she is trying to treat? There is no way around it. The church is often a sick physician. She is unable to treat the muddled thinking and messy living all around her because her own thinking is often muddled and her living messy. In order to function as a physician, the church must have both clarity of

mind and purity of life. She must be, in the words of Jesus, both light and salt (Matthew 5:13–16).

Salt and light

The function of salt is twofold: it preserves meat by arresting decay and provides flavour for food. Jesus gave us absolutely no choice about whether we will be salt. He has already made us his salt. The only question is whether we will be pure salt to arrest the contamination of the world around us, or savourless salt. If we are pure salt, we can effectively address the contamination of our world; if we are savourless salt, we have become so contaminated by the world that we are incapable of helping it.

The function of light is to dispel darkness. Jesus also gave us no choice about being light. The only question is whether we are going to shine brilliantly and openly from a lampstand, or flicker dimly under a covering.

Salt and light are powerful metaphors to convey the need for Christ's disciples to have both purity of life and clarity of mind. They let us know his disciples are to be free from both contamination and confusion. The letter we know as the First Epistle to the Corinthians is a clarion call to the Christians in Corinth and to Christians today to come away from contamination and confusion and to function as salt and light.

The situation at Corinth

The Corinthians urgently needed this call. The church, founded by the apostle on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18), was located in one of the great cities of that day. Situated on a narrow strip of land, only four miles across, Corinth was

simultaneously a strategic centre of commerce by land and by sea.

Thriving commerce often translates into thriving debauchery, but Corinth took debauchery and licentiousness to new heights—or new depths! The other pagan cities of the day acknowledged Corinth’s moral corruption by coining the word ‘*corinthiazesthai*’—to live like a Corinthian.¹

Sexual immorality and perversion; covetousness and stealing; drunkenness and gluttony; pride; abusive speech; swindling—a quick journey through Paul’s letter reveals Corinth had it all. Warren Wiersbe writes, ‘If you want to know what Corinth was like, read Romans 1:18–32. Paul wrote the Roman epistle while in Corinth, and he could have looked out the window and seen the very sins that he listed!’²

A casual observer might suggest religion as the answer for Corinth, but religion was plentiful and the tide of iniquity flowed on unabated. In fact, the religions of Corinth were part of the problem. A temple to the goddess of love and fertility, Aphrodite, was there. A thousand priestesses plied the trade of prostitution as part of the religious rites. Long-haired male prostitutes were also a common sight.³

Only the church of Jesus Christ had the medicine this sick society needed, but, sadly, the true physicians were themselves down with the disease. Instead of their influencing Corinth for Christ, Corinth had influenced them, and the sins of society had cropped up in the church. John MacArthur says the Christians of Corinth could not get ‘decorinthianized’, and he proceeds to add these telling words: ‘They wanted to have the blessings of the

new life but hang on to the pleasures of the old.¹⁴ Their salt had indeed lost its savour, and their light had indeed been covered.

Paul's object in writing

So Paul began to write. It was not the first time he had written to this troubled church. He refers to an earlier letter (5:9), one which we do not have. Evidently, this letter was a stinging rebuke to the church for their careless living. It did not succeed in putting an end to their problems, but it did prompt a return letter from the church, in which they posed several questions. 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to their letter. It is another impassioned plea for them to deal decisively with their contamination, and it is the concerned response of Paul's pastor's heart to clear up the questions they had raised in their confused state.

More than that, Paul wanted to bring their contamination and confusion into the light of the gospel, so it would be clear that Christianity works, even in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, pagan society like Corinth. This church was both a marvel and a mess, and Paul's concern was to help them clean up the mess so only the marvel would be left for the godless city of Corinth to see.

We have a tendency to think the opening and closing words of Paul's epistles are nothing more than mere formalities and that we can safely rush right past them. But Paul was not one to waste words, and what he says in the first three verses of this letter really drives right to the heart of the contamination and confusion of the church. These verses contain in germinal form everything the Corinthians needed to get themselves sorted out.

Paul's authority as an apostle

First, Paul reminds them of his authority as an apostle (1:1). This

was his customary way of opening his letters, but that doesn't make his words any less meaningful. Paul knew he could not be of any help to the Corinthians until they recognized his authority and submitted to it. They were in trouble because they had lost sight of this very thing. Somehow they had got the notion that they could 'freelance' in the Christian life, they could make it up as they went along. By reminding them of his apostleship, Paul was pulling them back from this disastrous mentality.

Did Paul really have authority over the Corinthians? Or was this just a figment of his own imagination? All Christians readily acknowledge Paul was an apostle, but very few seem to understand what this entailed. Some Christians don't hesitate to question whether Paul had the right to tell the Corinthians what they should believe and how they should behave. Those who argue in such a way fail to realize the unique place an apostle occupied in the economy of God.

The apostle was not one who just took up religious leadership on a mere whim, but one who had received a special commission from the risen Christ. He was the recipient and bearer of God's revelation to the churches. We might say the apostles were to the early church what the New Testament is to us. Since God had invested such authority in them it was not optional to believe them. To dispute apostolic teaching was the same as disputing with God!

The calling of his readers

Paul was not content simply to remind the Corinthians of his authority. He goes on to remind them of their high calling. He says they are '*the church of God*', '*sanctified in Christ Jesus*' and '*called to be saints*' (1:2).

The word 'church' was originally used for any secular assembly, but Christians took the term and made it distinctively theirs. They used it to designate those called out of the world by God for fellowship with him.

They were also 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' and 'called to be saints'. What riches there are in those two phrases! Something had happened to the Corinthians. They had been acted upon by God himself. He had 'sanctified' them. He had cleansed them from their sins and set them apart for his own use. Furthermore, he had done this through the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no cleansing from sin apart from him.

God had also 'called' them. How Paul loved this word! He himself had been 'called' to be an apostle, and the Corinthians had been 'called'. God had come to them while they were in their sins and had called them to himself.

The result of God's gracious work in their lives was that they were now 'saints'. They were God's holy ones, those he had cleansed and called to himself.

Sainthood isn't something therefore that applies only to a handful of super-Christians. All Christians are saints because they all share the common experience of being sanctified and called by God.

In using these powerful phrases, the apostle was already issuing a strong encouragement to the Corinthians to deal decisively with the sins in their midst. God's grace had made them his holy ones. Those who have such a high calling could not take sin lightly. Their calling demanded the highest moral

character, and Paul's introductory words urge them to live up to that calling.

There is at the same time a vein of comfort in his words. Even though they had allowed sin to contaminate their lives, they were still God's saints. God's work of grace in the lives of his people can never finally be defeated!

In addition to calling them saints, Paul reminds them of the larger family of saints to which they belong. What was his point in this? It was to remind the Corinthians that they were part and parcel of a larger body of believers; they were not mere autonomous islands who could live without regard to the other members of the body of Christ. Paul's words imply that the Corinthians had failed to see that all the followers of Christ had a stake in how they measured up to their Christian calling. These reminders of their high calling constituted a very stern rebuke to the Corinthians for allowing themselves to be swept away by the twin tides of contamination and confusion.

God's care for the church

Finally, Paul's introductory words also reminded the Corinthians of God's ongoing care and concern for them (1:3). We start looking at the mess this church was in and we find ourselves thinking the whole situation was irretrievable. Thank God, all was not lost. The God who had called them to himself in grace and who had given them peace through the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ was calling this grace and peace to their minds and still wishing them grace and peace through his appointed apostle.

Perhaps you are wondering what all this has to do with us. The sad answer is that 'Corinthianism' didn't die with the

Corinthians. It is still alive and well in our churches. Like them we know what it is to throw off God's authority and become contaminated and confused by the world. We also know what it is to be so paralysed by moral laxity and doctrinal uncertainty that we fail to appreciate our privileges or live up to our potential. We also know what it is to be so stricken with the sickness of our world that we are powerless to carry the life-giving medicine of the gospel to others.

No, we don't have an apostle to whom we can write for guidance, but we do have this record of how Paul helped the Corinthians with their contamination and confusion. What does this mean? It means the God of grace and peace is still speaking to us! He doesn't write off his children as soon as we fall into the world's evil ways, or as soon as we uncritically adopt the world's thinking. He continues to be concerned about us and to call us to grace and peace. This very letter is a token of his grace, and obedience to its teachings will bring us to a posture of peace in the midst of a trying world.