



THE CHURCH THE WORLD NEEDS | TO CORINTH, WITH LOVE

September 12, 2021

My name is Jason. Remember me? I've been away for my summer study leave, but it's great to be back. I'm looking forward to spending the fall together with you. Now, I don't know about you, but it seems to me as if we're living through a very strange time. Part of what makes it so unsettling is that it's not altogether clear what exactly has gone wrong. Of course, years from now, people looking back on this moment will focus on COVID-19, but it seems to me that the coronavirus pandemic has simply put additional pressure on the cultural tensions that were already there. This is a moment marked by bitter hostility. It's not as if people simply disagree with one another. It's as if people live in separate universes from one another. Family members, people who were once close friends, now seem incomprehensible to one another. Oftentimes, this has a lot to do with where people are getting their information, but the upshot of it all is that we don't see eye to eye anymore. It's very hard for us to find common ground, and as a result, we don't trust one another. We're not only suffering from political polarization and cultural fragmentation, but also social isolation.

Even before the pandemic, American adults reported that they had fewer close friends compared to generations in the past. We spend less time with other people. We feel isolated and alone. Despite all the grand promises to bring us together, social media has only worsened the situation, leaving us feeling even more disconnected and depressed than we were before. This is a real problem for the church. I would suggest that if you're a Christian—regardless of whether you put yourself in the left, the right or the center of the spectrum—if you're a Christian, your view of the world should be primarily informed first and foremost by the Scriptures. This is how I think about it. As a pastor, as a preacher, I've got one hour of your time each week—maybe a little bit more if I'm lucky— but you can consume political media all day, every day if you want. You can retreat into your own echo chamber. You can retreat into your own cultural, political bubble that just reinforces many of your pre-existing ideas. Here's a thought: For every minute that you spend consuming media, maybe you should spend two minutes reading and studying the Scriptures. Maybe that would have an effect.

I don't want to sound alarmist because in some ways, these issues are nothing new. There's been plenty of times in our country's history where we have undergone periods of social upheaval or cultural disruption. We could think of the 1930s or the 1960s. Further back, there was a time when the term "Civil War" was not used as a metaphor. We're not literally taking up arms against one another today, so how should we assess this moment in time? The political and cultural analyst, Yuval Levin, has made the case that what's different this time around is not the strength of the pressures that we're experiencing, but rather the weakness of our institutions to help us stand up underneath them. That's an interesting insight. What's an institution? It sounds sort of like a fancy word. It might come across as a bit abstract. What do we mean by an institution? Well, Levin defines it as the enduring structures of our common life together. Our institutions could be as basic, as fundamental as the family or

the church or as complex as a university or the national government. The point is that our institutions are meant to form us and to shape us. Levin writes this.

“We aren’t just loose individuals bumping into each other. We fill roles. We occupy places. We play parts defined by larger holes, and that helps us understand our obligations and responsibilities, our privileges and benefits, our purposes and connections. It moves us to ask how we ought to think and behave with reference to a world beyond ourselves. Given my role here, how should I act?”

The issue is that we live in an anti-institutional moment. He goes on to say:

“Our age combines a populism that insists that all of our institutions are rigged against the people with an identity politics that rejects institutional commitments, and a celebrity culture that shapes against all structure and constraint.”

The problem is that by and large, we Americans have lost faith in our institutions—and that includes the church. The Gallup organization over the last 50 years has tracked the total collapse of confidence in our institutions, including the church. Listen to some of these numbers, in 1975, 62% of Americans had great confidence in public schools, but in 2021, that dropped down to 32%. Fifty years ago, 40% of people had confidence in Congress, what do you think it is today? 12%. From 40 to 12. Then here’s the church. In 1975, 68% of Americans had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church or in organized religion. Today, it’s at 37%. It’s dropped from 68% to 37% in 50 years. There are all kinds of reasons for that, which I would like to explore over the coming weeks. There are other people who can focus on those other institutions. I’m focused on the institution of the church. The point is this: *At the very moment, when we need the church the most, the church has never been weaker.* At the very moment when we need the church the most, the church has never been weaker.

Here’s what I’d like to do. I’d like to start a new series focused on the Church the World Needs. Throughout the fall, I’d like us to consider what the church can and should be by studying the opening four chapters of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. We’ll begin by exploring the present, the past and the future state of the church, by focusing on what we can learn from the church in Corinth. We’re going to discuss who they are, the Corinthian Church, what went wrong, and what will put things right again. So if you’d like, you can open up your Bible to 1 Corinthians 1, or you can follow along in the worship program. I’ll be reading chapter one, verses one through nine.

¹Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—⁶even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is God's word. It's trustworthy, and it's true, and it's given to us in love.

The Present State Of The Church—Who They Are

What's the situation? It's a sad state of affairs. The church should be united around the person of Jesus, and yet we see that it's being torn apart by cliques, by division, by ugly infighting. Several Christian leaders and their fawning supporters who enable them are trying to create cults of personality in a bid to attract more followers. The worship services are a mess. There's all kinds of people who are trying to strut their stuff spiritually by showing off their spiritual gifts. They assert that they're self-proclaimed prophets, who are clearly lacking not only in humility, but also in love, despite what they might say about themselves. The church remains divided along socioeconomic lines. The wealthy tend to keep to themselves rather than rubbing shoulders with the poor. Many Christians are abusing their so-called "freedom in Christ" in order to pursue a permissive lifestyle—showing blatant disregard for the clear teaching of Christianity, as well as the tender consciences of others. Some Christians are living lives that are so callous, so reckless, that it makes even their neighbors shudder. It's hard not to reach the conclusion that Christians are no better than everybody else. In fact, they might be a whole lot worse. Now, that sounds very contemporary, doesn't it? Everything I just said sounds like I could be describing the current state of the church in America, and maybe I am. Actually, what I was trying to do was describe to you exactly what was going on in Corinth around the year 50 AD. This is the situation that the Apostle Paul is writing about.

You wouldn't guess it based on these opening lines. No one would fault you if you read these first nine verses, and came to the conclusion that the church in Corinth was the perfect church. Enriched in every way in speech and in knowledge, this church was not lacking in any spiritual gift. But keep reading because soon it becomes clear that this church was an absolute disaster, a complete and utter disaster. Paul will systematically address one issue after another throughout this letter in order to help get this church back on track. In an odd sort of way, this should come as something of encouragement to us because we have major issues to contend with today. Major issues to contend with, and yet, what 1 Corinthians shows us is that the good news is we've been here before. As the Christian church we've been here before, and if God can turn around the church in Corinth in Paul's day, well, maybe he can do it again in ours.

The Past State Of The Church—What Went Wrong?

Let's consider what exactly went wrong in Corinth and what is going to put things right again. In many ways, the cosmopolitan city of Corinth was sort of like an ancient

version of New York City. This was a city dominated by money, sex, and power. Corinth was located on this narrow isthmus that connected Northern Greece and Southern Greece, and as a result, it controlled all the trade routes, by land and by sea in every direction. Corinth boasted not just one, but two harbors, connecting the Ionian and Aegean Sea. As a result, people, money, and ideas flowed into Corinth from literally all over the world. Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics. Every two years, 200,000 people would pack into the stadium in Corinth. That's bigger than any of our football fields as far as I know. Like many commercial cities in the ancient world that were centered on trade and which were built around a natural harbor, Corinth was also famous for its hedonism. The ancient Greeks coined the phrase based on the City of Corinth. If you want it to let loose and live it up, people would say, *well, let's get Corinthian this weekend*. If you wanted to corrupt someone, you would "*Corinthianize*" them. The city was overshadowed by the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It sat on a hill 2,000 feet above the city. It was served by thousands of temple prostitutes, who would ply their trade at night. They dedicated their lives to the glorification of sex. This was the original Sin City. Whatever happened in Corinth, stayed in Corinth. You can think of Paul's letter to the Corinthians as the first letter to Vegas. But this city was not only controlled by money and sex, but also power. It was the seat of political power. It was the capital of the southern province of Acadia. It was larger and more important than Athens. This is the city to which Paul comes around the year 50 AD. After being nearly beaten to death in the north of Greece, and after receiving a somewhat lackluster response to his gospel message in Athens, he comes to Corinth.

In the second chapter of this letter, Paul reveals that when he first came, he came in fear and trembling. This massive city simply overwhelmed Paul. He was tempted to just throw in the towel and give up, but in Acts 18, we read that the Lord Jesus speaks to Paul through a vision and encourages him to stay in the city. Why? Because Jesus knows that he has many people in that city. Paul just hasn't met them yet. So Paul breaks with his traditional habit of going to a city, sharing the message of the gospel, planting a church, and then moving on. He breaks with that tradition and instead puts down roots. He stayed in Corinth longer than he stayed in any other city up until this point. He stayed there for a year and a half. Miraculously, despite the fact that this is a city made up of merchants and traders, sailors and athletes and addicts and prostitutes, huge numbers of people become Christians. They put their trust in Jesus. They become Christians and the church is born in Corinth of all places. Even though Paul was kicked out of the synagogue, which is where he would usually begin in order to start his teaching about Jesus, even though he's kicked out of the synagogue, Crispus the ruler of the synagogue according to Acts 18, becomes a Christian. So does his eventual replacement, Sosthenes, who is the other person who signs his name to this letter.

Take a step back and think about this. If you were a pastor, or a church planter, this response to the gospel is the kind of thing for which you could only dream. This is what you pray about. This is what you dream about. This is what you work so hard to see happen, and it happens. It happens to Paul. Yet the very moment that he leaves, as soon as he leaves Corinth, it all falls apart. It just all ends in one big complete mess. This is one seriously screwed up church.

As soon as Paul's gone, they get obsessed with celebrity preachers. They divide in the factions. They sue one another. They take each other to court. They start sleeping around with prostitutes. Chapter five tells us that a father and a son are sharing the same woman and no one even bats an eye because *hey, we're free in Christ*. Honestly, you can't make this stuff up. Corinth was one seriously screwed up church, but before we dismiss it as a special case, let's turn the spotlight on ourselves. If we were to take any church in America—no matter how glowing the reputation—if we were to lift up the hood and peek inside, what would we find? I don't think we would like what we see. I think we would find that things are far messier than we would care to admit, and that's why we need this letter. We need 1 Corinthians because if God can turn Corinth around, he can turn us around as well.

The Future State Of The Church—What Will Put Things Right

If that's what went wrong, what's going to put things right again? It would be so easy to imagine that first century Christianity enjoyed this pure unperturbed honeymoon period, and that issues didn't arise until later generations. The New Testament and 1 Corinthians flatly contradict that view. From the very beginning, the early Christian movement was in danger of careening off the cliff, but despite all of early Christianity's weaknesses, Christianity carries within it's very heart, a powerful self correcting mechanism—and his name is Jesus. The name of Jesus is never far from Paul's lips, or from his pen. In these few nine verses, Paul mentions the name of Jesus eight times. Jesus is always on Paul's mind. Nothing that Paul did or said could ever be subtracted or be disconnected from Jesus. Jesus was the center of his thoughts. Jesus is what fueled his imagination. Paul knows that if Jesus forms the center of your heart, your thoughts, your imagination, your story, your life, your intentions, well then eventually everything else will get sorted out.

Let me give you one example of this, I'll tell you an interesting story. All of us know that over the last 18 months, there's been a very important conversation going on about the evils of racism, and about the church's complicity in racism, and how we're supposed to fight it. It seems to me that, as Christians, it's very easy for us to fall into two opposite errors. On the one hand, there might be some people who say, *well, you know what, we've dealt with all this before, there's nothing to see here. There's no problem here. This isn't a sin. We don't need to worry about this anymore*. That's clearly wrong. Racism is a persistent sin that continues to affect us personally and corporately, but then there's an opposite air. I've noticed that in some quarters, anti racism has become something of its own religion, which espouses what you could call a secular form of original sin, but there's no opportunity for salvation. Within this new secular religion you're born into racist sin simply because of the color of your skin regardless of what individual decisions or choices or actions you might make. There's no opportunity for redemption. Here's the interesting thing. Emma Green writes for The Atlantic and she recently interviewed Cornel West, the black theologian who has taught at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Union Seminary. Cornel West is someone who identifies as both a Christian and a socialist. He's not a conservative. He's a political activist on the left.

Emma Green asks Cornel West, “What do you think of this new secular form of religion?”

West says, “It seems to me that on the left, especially among many white people, there’s this secular Calvinist moment happening. A dawning realization that we’re stained with sin before we’re born, and we have no power to change our sinfulness. You see this in racism, self help books like “White Fragility.” The trouble is that this notion of sin isn’t accompanied by a framework of salvation or atonement or redemption. It’s Calvinism without the Jesus part.”

“So what do you make of this struggle on the left?”

This is how Cornel West responds: “I think the jump is not from sin to salvation. There is a mediating stage of conversion and transformation. I’m with Augustine here, that we are forever in an endless battle of trying to become better Christians. Even as we convert, sin is still persisting, but we’re making progress because the grace available to us is a gift that empowers us to try to make better choices. If somebody says, ‘You can’t love white folks these days,’ then how are you going to love Arabs? How are you going to love the Palestinians, they have a low priority in a way that is precisely the kind of witness we need. Anytime people tell you not to love others, that is precisely for Christians, a sign of the need to embrace.”

And at one other point in the interview, Emma Green says, “Do you think the left needs God? For example, do the young Democratic Socialists of America need Jesus?”

Cornel West says, “As a Christian, I think everybody could gain much by having a relationship with Jesus.”

That’s right. Left, right, or center, we are all in danger of careening off the cliff. Everybody, every last one of us could gain much from a relationship with Jesus. Every one of us could gain much by centering our lives on Jesus.

That’s what Paul aims to do. Paul reminds us to consider our calling. That’s the other word that he repeats over and over and over again in this passage. First, Paul applies it to himself. He is Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul does not appoint himself as a leader of the church. No, he is called to be among the select few who witnessed the risen Jesus, and who was directly commissioned by Jesus to speak and act on his behalf, as Paul would be inspired by Jesus’ Holy Spirit.

This reminds me of this funny moment that happened to us years ago. When I first enrolled in seminary, my wife, Ashley, and I attended a dinner for new students. We were gathered around the dinner table with all these other new students, and the conversation eventually turned to the Apostle Paul. Now, I know that doesn’t usually happen to you at dinner parties, but that’s what happens to me. We’re at a dinner party, and the conversation turns to the Apostle Paul, and this other couple seated across from us, they start whispering to one another and kind of snickering and

laughing, and at one point, Ashley and I think, let's just ask them. I don't remember if it was me or Ashley, but one of us says, "What's so funny?" I forget which one, but one of them responded with this sort of haughty tone, "Well, we think the Apostle Paul is so overrated," and I'll never forget this because Ashley did not miss a beat. She just immediately responded, kind of deadpan, "Paul did write over a quarter of the New Testament." From the very beginning of the church, people have tried to dismiss the Apostle Paul. They tried to undermine his authority, they say, *well, we don't like what he has to say, so we'll just ignore him. He is a first century witness to Jesus. I'm a 21st century witness to Jesus. He's got his opinions, I've got mine.* No, I'm sorry, it doesn't work that way. You can't just pick and choose the verses in the New Testament that you happen to like. For the very simple reason that God called Paul to be an apostle, and he didn't call you to be an apostle. There are no apostles with a capital A in the church today. If there were, we would have to include their words in the Bible. The authors of the New Testament are like us in that they are human beings, but they are very much unlike us because God called them for this special task and that's why we receive their writings not merely as human words but as they really are, which is God's word to us. Paul not only reminds the Corinthians of his call, but also of their call, and he reminds us of our call by extension. This I find rather amazing. He addresses this letter to the church of God in Corinth. Notice, Paul doesn't refer to this as *my church*, which is the way an awful lot of people talk about their church in America today. Paul might have been the founder and the church planter, but this is not Paul's church. It's not even the Corinthian church. This is the church of God that happens to be in Corinth. It's God's church.

What's even more shocking is despite everything Paul knows about the Corinthians, he greets them as those sanctified in Christ Jesus called to be *saints*. Saints. Now stop. Take a step back and think about that for a minute and recall everything I just told you about what's happening in Corinth, and he calls these people saints. The word saint means holy ones. To be sanctified means to undergo the process of being made holy by God. You would think that Paul would write this letter to Corinth and say, to the sinners, and the screw ups, who always let me down and never get it right. No, he addresses the letter to the saints, to the holy ones, to those who have been devoted to God and set apart for a special purpose. Are you kidding me? Did Paul forget who he was writing to? Did he forget that these were Corinthians? No, because this is what it means to be the church. The word church in Greek "Ecclesia" literally means to be called out, and this is what God does with all of us. He calls us out of our former conditions, so that we might become part of his one single family throughout the world. We join this one family that together call upon the name of the Lord Jesus as our Savior. Regardless of who you are, regardless of what you've done, regardless of the fact that you don't deserve it, he calls you by his grace, all of which underscores the point that holiness is not something that we achieve for ourselves. It's something that we receive, it's all of grace. From top to bottom, and from beginning to end, it's all a gift of grace. It is that same grace that fuels our ongoing transformation so that we become the people that God intends us to be: Saints. Holy ones. In verse four, that's why Paul says, "I give thanks to my God always for you, because of the grace given to you." Notice he doesn't address them in light of who they once were, but who they are, and he calls them sanctified—past tense. Past tense. Now, how can he do that? How can he call people who we clearly know are sinners, saints?

How can he do that? Is he just playing this game of let's pretend? No, because Paul knows that if you place your trust in Jesus, if you call on the name of Jesus, within God's work in you is as good as done. He can call you sanctified, past tense, because nothing will stop God from completing the work that he has begun in you. That's why Paul says in verse eight, "he will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus." That is a stunning statement. Stunning.

One day, Jesus is going to come back and he's going to usher in the new heavens and the new earth, and on that day, the secrets of all of our hearts will be exposed. We would have legitimate reason to fear that on that day we will be found guilty. But Paul says, *it cannot be*. It can not be because all the accusations that could be made against us have been laid upon Jesus, our sacrifice and our advocate. Therefore, we will be found guiltless. On that day, we will know, it will be clear that God justifies the godly. God justifies the ungodly, like you and like me. God is faithful. Even if you are faithless, God remains faithful and he will finish what he started.

Paul almost always begins his letters with the Thanksgiving section like this, in which he describes what he was thankful for within this Christian community to whom he's writing. As is often the case, that little Thanksgiving section telegraphs the issues that he's going to address later in the letter, and that's certainly the case here. He thanks God for the grace that has been given to the church in Corinth. They have been enriched in every way in all speech and knowledge. He can say that this church does not lack in any gift. Yet, that is precisely the source of some of the problems in Corinth. Paul doesn't focus on that. Right now he focuses on the positive, but as time goes on, we'll see that just because we're saved by grace does not mean that we can abuse God's grace and use it as a license to live however we want. To the contrary, Paul will take 16 chapters to describe in great detail how we live into the calling, to which we have been called.

As we consider this letter to Corinth, and as we begin the new ministry year this fall, the question that we need to ask ourselves is, what are we supposed to take away from this letter? What are we supposed to learn? I would offer two things. Paul warns us very clearly here, against naivete and cynicism. On one hand, he's telling us don't be naive. No one ever said that Christians had it all together, or that the church was the perfect institution. It's far from it. Corinth was famous, literally famous, for its litany of sins, and that's true of every church. Every church is a fellowship of sinners before it's a fellowship of saints, so don't be naive about that. You might get hurt. You might feel burned. You might feel let down at a church or it's not meeting your needs, so you go off looking for another one that you think will be a better fit for you, but you're bound to be disappointed because there is no perfect church. Christians don't harbor any utopian illusions. There is no perfection on this side of the new creation. Don't be naive, but don't be cynical, either. It's so easy for us today to give into cynicism and just say, *I guess it's just the way it is, so there's no point. There's no point in trying to improve things or make things better*. We resign ourselves to the state of affairs, and we turn a blind eye to everything that's gone wrong. Perhaps we turn our backs on the church all together, and we just say, *forget it, I'm just going to go out on my own*. But Paul says, *no, don't give into the cynicism, and don't be naive. Instead, we have to be realistic, and yet hopeful*. We've got to do what we can to help

the church become what it's meant to be with a hopeful confidence that isn't grounded in ourselves in our own power, or ingenuity, but rather in Jesus.

Lesslie Newbigin was once asked, "Are you an optimist or a pessimist?"

He said, "Neither, Jesus Christ is raised from the dead."

That's true of all Christians. We're called to be realistic, yet hopeful, because Jesus Christ is raised from the dead. He is our hope; and therefore, we do whatever we can with whatever has been entrusted to us to help make the church what it is meant to be because this is what the world needs. Let us be a church where Jesus is always on our lips, always on our minds, always in our hearts, fueling our inspiration and our imagination, driving all of our actions because a church centered on Jesus—and nothing but Jesus—is the church the world needs.

Let me pray for us.

Father God, we recognize that we are living through a strange time, and the church rather than being part of the solution is often part of the problem. We pray that you might inspire us, and empower us through your Holy Spirit to be your people. We know that we're helpless sinners. Make us saints so that we might do our small part to help rehabilitate the church in our age, so that we might be part of what the world needs. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.