



Class 8 - 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians

New Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church

1 Corinthians: The Foolishness of the Kingdom

There's a lot of discussion at our church about what makes a healthy church. Expository preaching, a right understanding of membership and discipline, correct teaching on the Gospel and conversion, a recognition of proper church leadership structures, and so forth. We talk, in our church about being an example for others, not because our church is perfect or has everything together. On the contrary, we recognize that examples in this world will be imperfect and incomplete, but we also know that in the same way Paul told believers to follow him in as much as he followed Christ, so we can strive after the same in our lives individually and corporately.

If you were going to teach on what a church should look like, what body of believers would you choose as your demonstration church? You'd probably look to a church that seemed to have the basics down, not a church to whom you have to say, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?" (I Cor 3:2-3) And yet this is the same group to whom Paul says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor 1:4-7).

When Paul wrote I Corinthians about what should characterize a Gospel-centered church, he did not address a church that had it all together. Far from it, in fact. But they did have the one thing that would lead them to becoming a healthy church. For all their problems, they had Christ.

Background

One of the great things about the way the New Testament was written is that some of it is intensely personal. We not only understand the great truths of God from beautiful books of

teaching such as Romans, but we get the opportunity to peek over the apostles' shoulders as they deal with real problems that real churches were facing during the New Testament period. First Corinthians is such a letter.

Because a complex story of Paul's interaction with this church surrounds these letters, we're going to spend a bit more time than usual setting the context of this book.

Location

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, situated in Greece on the main route from Rome to the East. It was a center of business, travel and culture and diversity. Any overland traffic going from Athens & northern Greece to the Peloponnesian peninsula would come through Corinth. There was also a major port there, and ships would be dragged on rollers 4 miles overland to take a shortcut from the Ionian Sea in the west to the Aegean in the East. Minus the ships on rollers, Corinth was not unlike New York City, San Francisco, Dubai, London, and Hong Kong today, it was one of the major crossroads in the Mediterranean and therefore a strategic place for the gospel.

One of the functions of it being a crossroads was that Corinth became a major center for the spreading of ideas and philosophies. The real celebrities of Corinth were the orators. They would gather wide followings of people, and they would make large sums of money by charging people to hear them speak. The worldly wisdom of Corinth was to seek fame and fortune through being an impressive speaker. This culture seems to be at the heart of many of the problems of the Corinthian church.

Paul's First Trip

Paul had first preached the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey recorded in Acts 18. During this time, he supported himself as a tentmaker and lived with Aquila and Priscilla who had recently moved to Corinth from Rome. Having arrived in the city after being left for dead by a mob in Philippi, Paul came, as he puts it, "in weakness and in fear, and with much trembling." (1 Cor 2:3)

In his great love for this people, though, the risen Christ appeared to Paul in a dream and encouraged him to carry on his work in the city. "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack you and harm you, because I have many people in this city." Spurred on by the knowledge of God's elect waiting to come to life through

the preaching of the gospel, Paul stayed in Corinth where many came to trust in Christ. After firmly establishing the church there, Paul left in AD 51 for Jerusalem.

Writing of I Corinthians

After his time in Jerusalem, Paul was soon back at work among the Gentiles and from AD 52 to 55 enjoyed an enormously fruitful ministry in Ephesus, in modern day Turkey. Meanwhile, back in Corinth, others came to build on the foundation that Paul had left. These leaders did not appear to be bad leaders, but problems began to arise in Corinth nonetheless. Paul wrote a letter that has since been lost, referred to in I Cor 5:9. But problems continued. It appears that the Corinthians wrote Paul a letter about some of their disagreements (I Cor 5:9), and Paul heard about other problems from some members of Chloe's household (1:11).

In response to these problems, Paul writes around AD 55 to the Corinthians focusing on the character and order of the church of God. How should the church reflect to the watching world the character of God? The church must be gospel-centered. The gospel is to be the organizing principle of the church. He says early in the book (1:22-24),

For Jews demand sign and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Paul spends his time writing to the Corinthians not individually, but corporately, because he believes church is important to the witness of the Gospel. And in I Corinthians, we learn from Paul three foundational aspects. I'm going to take these in turn, and they'll give us a thematic overview of the entire letter. A gospel-centered church is to be, first, united. Second, Holy. And finally, edifying. United, Holy, Edifying. In three words, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians — and a blueprint for every Christian's involvement in the local church today.

A gospel-centered Church is to be United

One of Paul's primary motivations for writing this letter is to counter the partisan spirituality and profound division among the members of the church. A number of ways Paul deals with this in this letter.

We see this initially as Paul addresses rival allegiances given to various teachers (**1:10-12**). These factions seemed to boast of their superior wisdom, and so Paul writes passionately about the difference between God's wisdom and man's wisdom [**Read 1:26 – 29**].

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

So, the unity that the kingdom promotes finds its basis in the cross of Jesus Christ, in the gospel, and not in the eloquence of human words, or the influence of position, or the force of a human personality. "If you attend your church because of the pastor, you are wrongly motivated, and time will reveal that. The pastor will disappoint you. Even if he never disappoints you, he will someday die. Your faith cannot be built upon a person...True faith is built upon God in Jesus Christ...When you are grateful for a sermon, or a prayer, or how a service is led, or the work of a deacon, or work of the nursery staff, or the greetings of others, direct your thanksgiving first to the lovingkindness of God for you." We should only boast in Jesus Christ because He is our redemption and our wisdom. He alone is worthy of our first allegiance and boasting. Any true Gospel preacher will point men and women to Christ alone and not to himself! That's the first key to unity that we see in this letter. A focus on Christ alone as the answer.

Secondly, Paul shows that disunity is a sign of worldliness (3:3), with its quarreling and arguing. The root cause of the church's division was and continues to be worldliness and immaturity: [**Read 3:3-4**].

You are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human

A third key to unity is something we find in Paul's teaching on the Lord's supper — the very place where unity should be most clearly expressed.

Instead, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to remember that they were the **Body of Christ** (12:12-13), built up by the diversity of spiritual gifts within the church (14:12,17,19). While, I'm guessing that most of you are not concerned with divisions between Jews and Gentiles today, what kind of divisions are present in your attitudes and actions towards others? "When churches divide for carnal reasons, they identify themselves with something other than Christ. They become the

church of modern music, or the church of this pastor, or the church of the home-schoolers, or the church of the Democrats, or the church of the blue carpet. As soon as this happens, they are no longer the church of Jesus Christ.” Are there certain people that you hesitate to spend time with or don’t want to spend time with because of their differences with you? The Gospel is made most of when we are united to people unlike ourselves, and which unity can only expressed in relation to the Gospel.

This doesn’t mean that you can’t have friends that are like you or in similar stations of life, the problem is when all the people we spend time with or minister towards are just like us. Churches and for that matter Christians, that will only orient themselves towards one type of person are dividing the body of Christ and misrepresenting what it means to be a Gospel centered church.

A fourth strand of teaching on unity: If we are to promote unity in our church, we must love one another without selfishness. **Love and consideration** for others should govern what we do. **Ch 8** – weak and strong; **ch 9** – Paul’s personal rights conceded for the sake of others who need the gospel; **ch 10** – believer’s freedom not to cause other’s to stumble. This concern for others is crucial in a Christian church.

And that is the context for perhaps the most famous section of the book, chapter 13, were we read of the supremacy of love. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” I’m sure it’s familiar to most of you. Love is all about the quality of our interaction with others. Love is patient, kind, not boasting, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking. And of the wonderful gifts we receive from God – faith, hope and love – the greatest is love (13:13).

If we hold onto the gospel, and unite around that, we will not have lived in vain. That’s the first theme we see running through this book: unity.

A Gospel-Centered Church is to be Holy

Second, a gospel-centered church is to be holy. At the very beginning of the letter, Paul reminded the church of its call to be holy, and that it is Christ who makes us holy (1:8).

Paul reminds us that the sexually immoral and others who are impure will not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9-10). But the church... the church is to be pure remembering that it was saved from such impurity.

One of the significant problems that Paul addressed in the Corinthian church was an act of

blatant immorality to which the church was not responding. The church was associated with a widely rumored instance of incest (5:1-3), a sin shocking even among pagans. The church, astonishingly, was proud because they thought “accepting” the offender showed their “liberty.”

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Notice who Paul berates for this heinous sin. He does not address the sinner, but the church, for doing nothing about this. This case is representative not of a small disease in the Corinthian church, but a case in which the churches own “immune” system in relation to sin has been compromised.

Underscoring this call to holiness, Paul offers in chapter 10 a warning from Israel’s history: that beginning well is no guarantee of perseverance in the faith. Though *ALL* Israel saw the cloud by day, *ALL* passed through the Red Sea, *ALL* ate manna from heaven, and *ALL* “drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (10:4), God was not pleased with most of them (10:5). In view of the fact that “they were overthrown in the wilderness” in verse 6, Paul called the Corinthians and us “that we might not desire evil as they did.” Specifically he mentions idolatry, sexual immorality, tempting Christ, and complaining and concludes with this application:

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (10:11-12)

He finishes with a reminder that when interacting with the world, everything may be permissible but not everything is beneficial. We should seek to live circumspectly, watching our lives carefully, rather than living in a wanton and unholy manner.

Practice Church Discipline with Love

One tool or method that the Lord has given us for maintaining the organization and the holiness of the kingdom is biblical church discipline. So, the apostle warns in 5:6, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” When we encounter public sins of the seriousness referenced here, we are not to think ourselves kind or loving if we fail to act on behalf of that person’s soul. Paul gives us instruction (5:4-5):

1. As an assembly, as a church, address the matter...
2. by putting the “brother” out of the church (5:5, 11, and 13)...
3. as a statement about the spiritual danger they are in with the hopes that they will repent and be saved (5:5b).

Whenever we exercise church discipline we do so to make it clear to someone that they are not living like a Christian, and thus should be concerned for their salvation. We should always exercise discipline with tender love and concern for that person. This is one of the most solemn acts we ever undertake as a local body, but it is central to the preservation of holiness and the glory of God in the church.

We should also keep in mind that church discipline goes beyond the public cases we consider corporately. Every relationship you have within the church has the opportunity to be one that is characterized by loving discipline. As we “faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require” we are exercising discipline amongst each other that encourages holiness.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, now — considering the two things we’ve thought about so far. Unity and holiness. Often in churches today we see our job as balancing between them. We don’t address a particular sin in the congregation for fear of fracturing unity. On the other hand, there are some whose zeal for holiness comes at the expense of unity. But Paul sees holiness and unity going hand in hand. If we begin to tolerate unrepentant sin in the church, problems with unity will follow. The separation the Corinthians were to experience was a separation from the world. Instead, they tolerated sin — thus encouraging internal division and experiencing a separation from each other. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear that even when dealing with issues we might consider to be moral — such as eating meat sacrificed to idols — we must handle these with unity at the forefront of our attention. If you’re intrigued at how these two fit together, I’d encourage you to take time studying this letter through that lens. Holiness and unity. Together. That is our calling as a church.

A Gospel-Centered Church is to be Edifying

And that quite naturally brings us to the third theme through this letter: a gospel-centered church is to be edifying. It’s interesting to see how Paul deals with a host of problems in such a way that the Corinthians might act in ways that edify each other.

One strategy Paul uses is to encourage us to give up our rights. It seems that throughout the letter Paul is addressing selfishness of one sort or the other in the church. That selfishness or self-

centeredness gave rise to the partisan factions we mentioned earlier, disarray in the use of gifts, and failure to consider others in a myriad of ways. To thwart the confusing effects of disorder and to “nip disorder at its root,” Paul directed the members of the Corinthian church to use their liberty in ways that serve and care for others.

For example, consider Paul’s instructions regarding eating food sacrificed to idols that I just mentioned in chapter 8. Paul reasoned that because an idol literally is nothing, and that there is only one true God, and that all things are from Him and for Him (8:4-6), we are free to eat what we will because “food does not commend us (or bring us near) to God” (8:8).

However, there are those who are weaker in conscience, who may be led into sin because they do not understand the freedom available in Christ. Paul says that our exercise of freedom then becomes a “stumbling block to the weak.” In that case, our decision to eat is actually a “sin against our brother, for whom Christ died” and a “sin against Christ” (8:11).

So, we are to forego certain things in order that those observing us, particularly the weaker in knowledge, will not be harmed and order maintained. Paul describes his own ministry as an example of this general principle that we should forego our rights for the sake of weaker Christians (chap 9). Throughout the letter, Paul’s focus is on resolving differences and problems with an eye toward preserving order and loving one another rather than protecting our perceived rights.

In a culture like Corinth, or Knoxville, where everyone is trying to safeguard their own reputation, and get whatever they can for themselves, this laying aside of my rights for the sake of others is such a powerful display of the gospel. For that is exactly what Jesus has done for us. The beauty of the cross is in the humility of the one who voluntarily forsook heaven for our good, though he had every right to leave us in our sins. Mark Dever sums it up well. “From my perspective as a pastor it becomes clear over time which brothers and sisters in a church have an edifying effect on those around them. They do not need to chair a committee. They do not need to teach a Sunday school class. You can simply watch God gradually commit different ministries and opportunities into the hands of certain people because they love him and are willing to quietly give themselves in love for others, without particular concern that they be right or be recognized.” We should all strive to be this type of Christian, not those looking to protect reputation and our “turf” but those who are quietly and lovingly serving one another!

Another strategy Paul uses is to appeal to our role as a church as imaging Christ. You see this especially in the set of problems that Paul deals with in this letter that have to do with the public meetings of the church, including: the role of men and women in the church (11:2 – 16); abuse

of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34); and the exercise of the Spirit's gifts, especially those that seem more spectacular. This church had become so disorderly that their public meetings were said to "do more harm than good" (11:17).

So, the church is instructed to honor the order of headship established by God: God is the head of all, Christ is the head of every man, and man is the head of woman (11:3), even though neither man nor woman is independent of the other in Christ (11:11). At the Lord's supper, divisions are to be put away and we are to wait upon one another so that we might remember the Lord's death in unison (11:17-33).

The last of these problems associated with the public meetings of the church was the use of spiritual gifts. Linked to the desire to be impressive was the Corinthian infatuation with the gift of tongues. This played itself out in two ways, both of which undermined the health and growth of the whole church. It made those who didn't speak in tongues wonder whether there was really a place for them in the congregation at all. And it made those who had the gift of tongues feel super-spiritual and important. How does Paul address this?

Well, you remember the words that Jesus spoke to Paul on the Road to Damascus: "Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me." Paul knew that Jesus so identified with Christians that he would call them "me".

And so Paul uses the image of the Body of Christ to show how ludicrous, and how Christ-dishonoring their infatuation with one gift over another was.

12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

So, to the person who doubts his inclusion in the body, because he doesn't have a gift he covets, Paul says

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

To the "more" spiritual Christian who thought that only he counted in the body because of his impressive gift, Paul goes on to say,

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less

honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty

As a result, Paul's guiding principle for spiritual gifts is one of edification. "since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church." (14:12b)

Do you have a tendency to look down on those who don't have the gifts that you have? They are gifts, not self-developed abilities! They don't originate with you. You didn't make them! Why should you feel proud about them!? They are not given to you for your glory, but for the good of the whole church, and thus the glory of God. Whatever gifts we have we should be humbled, and we should see them as a stewardship to be spent on the good of others.

The point in the use of spiritual gifts, regardless of what those may be, is edification not merely of the individual exercising the gift, but of the whole body. "When was the last time you attended church with the edification of others the primary concern on your heart? Or do you usually anticipate what you personally will find most helpful, like whether a hymn or prayer moves you or whether you get out on time, or whether you speak to the right people afterward? When was the last time you were genuinely concerned about the edification of others around you? Not in the sense of whether they liked this or that hymn, but in the sense of whether they are being built up in the faith? Do you seek out your close friends after the service or do you look around for visitors and unfamiliar faces? Do you pray before and during the service that God would particularly use the time you have together on Sunday as a church family to work in the hearts of both you and others?"

Are these new or challenging thoughts to you? Well you have found yourself in a good place to begin growing in a heart that desires to love and edify others. Let us pray that our church will continue to be a place where edification of others and not self-promotion is sought after by each of us! Because we have been bought by the blood of Christ to become his body.

Conclusion

The Gospel centered church is to be characterized by unity, holiness, and edification. In all of these things, we are not to think like the world. We are to have the gospel as the organizing principle in our lives.

2 Corinthians: The Weakness of the Kingdom

It was 1960 and John F. Kennedy was in a heated battle for the presidency with Richard Nixon. And on the fateful evening of September 26, the two candidates faced one another in a debate, much like the public debates that had been election-season standards for many years, but with one key difference - this debate was on live television, seen by 80 million people. Those who listened on radio? They thought Nixon was the winner. Those who saw it on TV? Kennedy by a long shot. The young Senator appeared tanned, rested, and composed, in contrast to the sweaty and nervous Vice President Nixon. America had entered the television age.

Well, regardless of whether you prefer Nixon or Kennedy, this historical tidbit points us to something that humans in a fallen world have struggled with throughout all time: the tendency to be deceived by appearances. While this temptation may seem particularly potent in our media age, things weren't significantly different in the church in the city of Corinth we have just been considering. We can't escape appearances, but it's what's beneath the surface that matters. And that's the point that Paul makes in 2 Corinthians: God's Kingdom isn't made visible by strength and success; rather, God's Kingdom is the kingdom of the weak. To get into this letter, let me start with some background.

Background – the Story

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul intended to eventually visit Corinth, but he was in no hurry to leave a profitable work in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:9). So, he sent Timothy to bring a report back on how the church responded to his letter. Timothy arrived to chaos and disarray in the church. The letter of 1 Corinthians seemed not to have done the good that Paul intended for it.

Upon hearing of the church's condition, Paul set out for Corinth, a visit that he had warned them in 1 Corinthians 4:21 would be painful if he had to make it. During his stay, some self-appointed leaders of the church who may have called themselves apostles attacked him in deeply insulting ways (2 Cor 2:5-8, 10; 7:12). Paul apparently felt this visit to be a complete fiasco, and he left, hoping that his departure would bring the Corinthians to their senses. This decision left him open to charges of being fickle and uncaring. But Paul wasn't ready to let the gospel witness of this church be smothered. He wrote yet another letter "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears" as he described in 2 Cor 2:4. This letter, which has not survived, was delivered by Titus and it assured the Corinthians of his love for them but also had stern words of rebuke. Despite the turmoil in the church, Paul tasked Titus with receiving a collection from

the Corinthians, for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Paul left Ephesus after a riot and went to Macedonia to wait for Titus. He was afraid that his severe letter had hurt the Corinthians, but Titus brought back a good report and his concern turned to joy.

Let's look at 7:8-9 together: "*For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it – though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting.*"

So, in response to this good news from Titus, Paul penned 2 Corinthians a year or so after he had written 1 Corinthians, probably around AD 56, and in the first nine chapters you can feel his joy at a relationship healed, and his relief that the worst for the Corinthian church seems to be over. The church had repented, and it appears from 2:6 that an opponent of the gospel may have been disciplined by the church. But before sending off the letter, Paul must have received some more disturbing news from Corinth. It seems that once again the so-called "super apostles" were challenging his authority, and ultimately, the gospel. As a result, 2 Corinthians ends with more strong rebukes and warnings for the church. So... with that as background, let me summarize a bit about *why* Paul wrote this letter.

Purpose

Paul writes the second epistle to the Corinthians for public, personal and practical reasons. First, Paul was still *concerned about the public conduct of some of the Corinthian church members*. So, Paul wrote to better explain some key doctrines of the faith and to give instruction and warning to some members of the church. Second, Paul was *personally criticized* and so he wrote to defend his ministry, authority, and personal integrity. Third, Paul had *practical concerns for the church in Jerusalem*. So, he wrote to solicit funds for the relief project going on there.

And Paul addresses all these concerns through his main message about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom, he says, is not about us exerting our own personal strength, but in weakness depending upon the Lord. As Jesus says in 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Those who would be deceived by Paul's opponents because of their apparent strength would miss the true nature of the Kingdom. For the rest of our time, we'll consider what characterizes this Kingdom. And specifically, we'll look at three themes about the true nature of the Kingdom that run through this letter.

[ANY QUESTIONS?]

Kingdom Apostles Display God's Power in Weakness

First: kingdom apostles display God's power in weakness. The Corinthian church needed weak apostles, like Paul - not so-called "super apostles." The defense of Paul's apostleship takes up a large part of the book, including most of the first 6 chapters and chapters 10-12. This is not at all because Paul is some kind of self-promoting egoist. Rather, it is because in being drawn away from Paul, the Corinthians are being drawn toward those who are egotistical, and what is worse, those who do not have the apostolic commission from Jesus that Paul has.

Those who were opposed to Paul seemed to be taking advantage of three aspects of Paul's apostleship that they suggested exposed Paul as untrustworthy.

1. First, Paul had planned to visit the Corinthians again, but in the end decided not to. His critics were claiming that this was because he was **fickle**. We hear echoes of their criticism in 1:17, "*Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, Yes' and 'No, no' at the same time?*" Paul explains that once he had realized that there were real problems with the church in Corinth, a quick friendly visit wouldn't have been appropriate, and a quick stern visit wouldn't have been kind or encouraging; so, he thought it would be better *for the Corinthians* if he not visit until things had been cleared up. He says in 2:1, "*So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.*"
2. Not only was Paul supposedly fickle, but second, his critics accused him of being **harsh**. They pointed to the severe letter that Paul had written about a matter of discipline. The church seems to have misunderstood the letter, thinking that the discipline was to be permanent. But Paul encourages them in 2:7-8 to be reconciled with the brother who had sinned and now repented.
3. Third, the so-called "super-apostles" pointed out that Paul **lacked credentials**. Paul had none of the letters of recommendation from other communities that itinerant preachers in this time would use to prove that they were legit, the real thing. Paul, for his part, insisted that worldly commendation has no place in Christian ministry, in 3:1-2: "*Do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.*" Far better than recommendation letters, the faith of the Corinthian people showed that Paul's ministry was blessed of God.

But most significantly, Paul's major defense of His apostleship comes not through responding to petty accusations, but simply through laying out a positive vision of the ministry of an apos-

tle, which he had carried out faithfully—but of which the self-styled super-apostles had fallen far short. And here we have one of the clearest, most valuable sections of teaching on church leadership in the entire Bible. Paul shows us not just what makes a true apostle, but what sort of ministry our own church should pray and strive for. Here are a few things that Paul teaches us about Christian ministry and how it displays God’s power in our weakness:

1. The glory of the ministry is the glory of the gospel, not the glory of human appreciation

2:14-16

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

In other words, proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ is glorious regardless of whether people reject or embrace it.

2. Power for this ministry doesn’t come from human ability, but from God’s grace

3:4-6

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

3. The focus of the ministry is not the messenger, but the subject of his message: the Lord Jesus Christ

4:5-6

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,”

has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

4. The concern of Kingdom Ministry is the heart, not outward appearances

4:16-18

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

5. The agent of Kingdom Ministry is God. We are only ambassadors; God reconciles sinners to himself, using the message of the Gospel

5:20-21

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6. The result of Kingdom ministry is changed lives

6:14, 7:1

“Do not be un-equally yoked with unbelievers”... “Since we have these promises beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

So, that is what the ministry of a “weak” apostle looks like. It’s not about outward appearances, but spiritual realities - the reality of God glorifying himself by showering grace upon undeserving, weak sinners like us.

And Paul solidifies his case towards the end of the letter, in chapters 10-12. Apparently, Paul’s opponents believed that if a teacher was popular, successful, and lived a life of good fortune, then his message must be true. How can anyone driving a Beemer be wrong? Paul, in contrast,

seemed like a real loser - he was always getting beaten up, put in prison, chased out of cities. You can almost hear the “super-apostles” make fun of him: “What a failure! Who would listen to someone who suffers so much? Maybe he’s cursed!”

For their part, the super-apostles would pile up lists of all the achievements and qualifications that they hoped would impress their audience. Paul engages in the same type of argumentation in these last chapters. He amasses a giant pool of evidence, citing example after example to make his case - except everything he lists is utterly *unimpressive!* From pain to sickness to shipwrecks to persecution to being tormented by demons to the famous “thorn in the flesh” - Paul’s resume is a catalog of weakness. He’s “boasting,” but he’s boasting like a fool from the world’s eyes, because as he says in 11:30, he will only boast in the things that show the glory of Christ and his own weakness.

And this is a good question for us to consider. Do we value the same things the world values? Should we choose a church primarily because we like the way the pastor sounds, his pedigree, his people skills, or do we choose a church based primarily on the message being preached - even if the messenger is unimpressive? Paul is telling us not to put any credence into appearances, but instead to look for the work of the Spirit in changed hearts. Do you see how this informs us in how we can pray for our elders? Let’s pray that they would not put their trust in worldly wisdom, in money or impressive achievements, but that they would consider all of that to be worthless compared with the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. And pray that they instead would teach with the wisdom that comes only from him.

The weakness of the kingdom is demonstrated in the apparent deficiencies of Paul when compared to the super-apostles. But that’s not all - it is also demonstrated by the true citizens of this kingdom. And that brings us to the second theme that we see in this book: the citizens of the kingdom display God’s generosity in weakness.

[ANY QUESTIONS?]

The Citizens of the Kingdom Display God’s Generosity in Weakness

We see this theme in Paul’s instructions about the collection for the church in Jerusalem. The meeting that Paul was earlier unable to make with Titus, he has now made. The account of this meeting (7:5-16) serves as a link for the Corinthians’ restored fellowship with Paul. He’s heard the good report from Titus, and now he’s sending Titus back to collect funds for the believers in Jerusalem, who are in extreme poverty. And this collection’s significance isn’t limited to 1st

century Corinth - it tells us something of what citizens of God's kingdom are like.

Let's look at 8:9 together: *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."*

The exhortation to give is a test of whether the Corinthians have grasped Paul's teaching about the Kingdom of God - a kingdom built on the sacrificial generosity of Jesus. These believers have a responsibility, and a glorious opportunity, to serve their brothers and sisters in need.

We've been saying that a central truth of Christianity is the weakness of those in God's Kingdom, and of course one of the most common weaknesses both in the time of Corinth and today is poverty. So in providing for the Jerusalem Christians who were poor and evidently weak, the Corinthians would be fighting against the ever-present temptation to mainly use your money in ways that will strengthen *you*. Paul calls them to give - and in so doing, to make a *spiritual* investment.

How do you approach giving to other Christians in need? Do we welcome opportunities to sacrifice what we have? What would it look like for us to be characterized by the heart that Paul says the Macedonians exhibited in 8:1-4? "For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (8:2-4). Does this type of attitude characterize us today? Are we the kind of people that give "even beyond our ability?" Or do we give only when comfortable, only to whom we really want to give to? Generosity is a fruit of faith in Christ. Instead of trusting our money for ultimate security - we trust God's sovereign care for his children.

Therefore, this book teaches us that the healthy church is a church that gives to the needs of others for the spread of the gospel and the building up of believers. Those who participate in this grace should do so cheerfully and liberally, because Paul says in 9:7-9, *"God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."* (9:7b-9).

So that's our second theme: the weakness of the kingdom's citizens. But finally, one last theme we see running through this letter — is the result of such weakness in our churches: the churches of the Kingdom display God's grace in weakness.

The Churches of the Kingdom Display God's Grace in Weakness

Throughout this letter, Paul stresses the importance of the church. He teaches that the church is where God dwells, and therefore Christians are called to holiness. 6:16: "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be there God, and they shall be my people.'" The church is where the presence of God rests; and therefore the church displays the glory of God to the whole universe. What does that mean for us a local church - as a congregation of God's people here in Knoxville? Paul identifies a few passions that should characterize us as a church body.

A Passion for Weakness

Not surprisingly, first is that we should have a passion for weakness. One aspect of this letter that you cannot ignore is Paul's passion to exalt God in his ministry. And one of the great ways that he does this is by demonstrating God's strength in accomplishing great things through Paul's weakness. As we've already seen, Paul continually refers to his own sufferings in this letter (1:6-9; 6:3-10; 11:16-29; 12:1-10). With a joy that seems alien to our comfort-seeking ears, he boasts about these weaknesses as they give glory to God. We, too, are described as weak: our bodies are called "jars of clay" in 4:7 because of their frailty - but it is precisely in our brokenness that God reveals his strength. That's why Paul exalts in God even for his limitations.

Look at 12:8-10:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

What about us? When suffering comes along in our lives, do we see it as an opportunity for God's power to be displayed to the world? Or do we indulge in self-pity? We can learn from Paul to thank God for circumstances that humble us, that cause us to depend more on God's grace and less on our own strength. Have you ever thought about how a trial in your life could be used by God to make his glory known to your family, to your friends? Listen to what pastor Paul Tripp says about this passage: "The closer we get to the Lord, the longer we walk with him, and the

more fully we understand his Word, the more we are gripped with our weakness, inability, and sin. Paul said that he would ‘boast all the more gladly about his weakness.’ It was not because he loved being weak, but because it was in weakness that the power of Christ rested on him. Our weakness will not get in the way of what the Lord wants to do with us - our delusions of strength will! The power of God is for the weak! The grace of God is for the unable! The promises of God are for the faint! The wisdom of God is for the foolish!”¹

So that’s the first passion we see that should characterize churches of the kingdom. We embrace weakness, because weakness reveals the sufficiency of Christ. Second, we see a passion for the gospel.

A Passion for the Gospel

Paul’s ministry had been under attack and his authority questioned by the super-apostles. In response, he highlights the true gospel - because by reminding the Corinthians of this central message of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, he would expose his opponents as false teachers who had failed to grasp the reality of God’s grace.

As such, the priority of the gospel should be evident in our church, especially in our preaching. The gospel is what Paul preached - and it is why he preached. Like Paul, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord (4:5a) because we are Christ’s ambassadors. Look at 5:14-15 and 18-21:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

And then down to verse 18,

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That last verse, verse 21, is one of the most compact summaries of the Gospel in the Bible. Before

¹Tripp, Paul. *War of Words*, p. 130

a holy God, every human being stands guilty because of our sin. Our sin deserves punishment. But Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, was sinless. He deserved no judgment. But out of his love, Jesus stepped into our place and took the punishment we earned, dying on a cross. And Jesus rose again, offering the gift of his perfect righteousness to all who would turn from their sinful lifestyle and believe in him.

This message of Christ being a substitute in our place - being sin for us, bearing the punishment of God - was central to the health of the Corinthian church, and it is central to the health of our church. We should pray that this good news would not become old hat, but that the Holy Spirit would ignite our passion for the gospel - because remembering the Gospel will protect us from the sorts of false teaching that had enticed the Corinthians. A church passionate for the gospel is also careful to refute false gospels that do not preach the Biblical Jesus. So in 11:13, Paul declares his intention to “*undermine the claim of those who... are false apostle, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ*” (11:12-13). Such is the passion of a God-driven ministry for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Passion for Repentance

Finally, we see in 2 Corinthians that there should be a passion for repentance in the church. Repentance simply means turning away from sin and turning to God. Paul is overjoyed with the news from Titus that the Corinthians turned away from their prior sin, and he is eager that they continue on in this path of repentance. Let's turn to 7:8-13 and see what he says:

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it – though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. *Therefore we are encouraged.*

The type of church Paul is encouraging is first and foremost concerned with godliness. It's not concerned with prominence or perceived success, it is primarily concerned with seeing the body

of Christ built up and one day presented to God, “spotless and without wrinkle.” And that is why we as those who have tasted God’s grace in saving us from our sins should pray for a passion to continue repenting of our evil ways and to continue relying on the love of Christ in faith.

Conclusion

Well, in conclusion, I wonder if you can see something of yourself in the Corinthians. They certainly weren’t the greatest role models. But isn’t it amazing to think that this church – this ignorant and boastful, immoral, and undiscerning church – this church was God’s chosen plan to glorify himself in the city of Corinth and around the world. These were the people who God had elected and chosen to save as he told Paul in a dream back in Acts 18. And these were the people that Paul poured so much of his heart and soul and sweat and tears into during his short ministry here on earth. If we don’t get anything else from these letters, then let us understand this: The church is never promised to be perfect. If anything, as Paul reminds us, the church is made up of those who are apparently weak and foolish and insignificant in this world. But our weakness is the soil where God’s power makes real fruit grow to his glory – and we follow a Savior who modeled just that. 2 Cor. 13:4: “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.” As those who hope in the resurrection of Jesus, may we trust God as he transforms a selfish, cranky, impatient and *weak* people like us into his glorious and radiant bride. I’ll close with the familiar words of 2 Cor. 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Let’s pray.

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/new-testament-overview/>.

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