

Faraway Familiar City Scenes: Touring the Early Church in 7 Cities Message 6 – Corinth

CORINTH: THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD'S WORST CITY!

Someone has graphically suggested that if you were to start with the Red Light district of Amsterdam – and add the sensuality of Las Vegas (gambling and sex) and then add the affluence and consumerism of New York – you would end with Corinth —you would end up with today's latest hot movie -- *Sex And The City*.

In the Bible - Corinth was a great commercial center – in addition it prized itself as a centre of intellectualism as people followed every latest idea – as a strategic seaport it became very wealthy – but one thing seemed to stand out above all this. Above the city was the Temple of Aphrodite – a centre for cultic and highly sexual worship – when spirituality is used as the excuse for sexuality – the result is beyond any moral analysis or explanation.

William Barclay – says that one thousand sacred prostitutes were attached to the Temple of Aphrodite – and each evening they would come down to the streets of Corinth to ply their trade – so on the Greek stage – people of Corinth were caricatured as people who were immoral, drunkards and shiftless – when you said that someone was *living like a Corinthian* – it was saying they were immoral and lazy.

Against this background of sensuality – immorality – pagan worship and excess – in an amazing way - we find a church.

Paul wrote two letters to this group of Christians – reminding us that the letters in the New Testament are real letters written to real churches in real situations. These are not philosophical essays – written by somebody on a sabbatical - rather they are written into the rough and tumble of life where the church is in the market place.

[Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9]

So imagine we are invited to sit in on a Council meeting of this church in this city. Here's what's on the agenda for the meeting.

Leadership and Personality problems

People are taking sides behind their favourite leaders.

11 *My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.*
12 *What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."*

1 Cor 1:11-12

It would be like saying – who wants to follow Pastor Jo-Ann - or Tom – or Bob – or Jan – or Kutch?

Problems of Spiritual Immaturity.

1 Corinthians 3:1-2

1. *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ.*
2 *I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*

Moral problems in the church

5:1-2

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1. *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife.*

2 *And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?*

Relational Issues

– one Christian is taking another before a heathen court. 6:1

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?

Problems relating to Marriage/Divorce - Chapter 7

Problems of Idol worship – Chapter 8

Problems in worship – nothing to do with drums or Powerpoint

- how women behave and dress in worship
- how people behave at communion.

Remember communion was a meal – and some were being greedy and gluttonous when they came – Paul says –

20 *When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,*

21 *for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.*

22 *Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?*

Worship problems - Chapters 12 and 14.

Doctrinal problems

Chapter 15 – wrong teaching about the resurrection.

12. *But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*

Can you imagine being on the Council at this church?

How would you ever call someone to Christ against the background in this kind of city – with all the temptations of this city trying to seduce them back to an old and immoral lifestyle?

How could you ever hope to win a convert and see them disciplined into someone who follows Jesus? It would seem humanly impossible.

This is the same kind of question that really faces us today when we think of the background of the city in which we live.

We need to realize that in the many decades of Christendom in which many of us grew up -- many of us in my generation came into Christian faith from a background of Christendom – which means – many of us grew up in the church along with our parents – we went to Sunday school - We grew up in stable homes – in a moral environment -- and from there we came to a place of personal faith. Our Christian faith grew up in and grew out of the world of Christendom.

I have taught several times that the day of Christendom is over and what that means for us.

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However, in today's world – and in a city like Vancouver -- we will see this new generation of young Christians coming from a very different background – for many of them - there may be a history of sexual struggles – some will have been in personal relationships that have ended painfully – they may come from homes that have known divorce – or perhaps abusive homes and poor relationships with parents – scars from emotional confusion – various kinds of addictions in the culture in which they live -- all of these things and more will combine to make the people who are lost and come to Christ very different from the lost of past generations.

What kind of church will we have to be in today's city of young prodigals who are seeking God?

Perhaps we find a clue –several clues -- as Paul writes this letter written to a church in a city - as I call it - in the worst city in the world?

IT WILL TAKE A CHURCH THAT BELIEVES IN THE RADICAL POWER OF THE CROSS – NOTHING LESS WILL DO!

2 Cor 5:17 puts it in a nutshell –

If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.

This is the radical revolution of the Gospel – whatever you were before – whatever you were into before – whatever you did before – the Cross intervenes and closes the door behind you. That is a truth which we need to claim and experience again in our Corinth.

1 Cor 6: 9-10

*9. Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders
10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*

I am aware of the sensitivity of some of the words and phrases there – but Paul is making his point for this city.

11 And that is what some of you were.

But – But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

These three powerful words declare the radical intervention of the cross.
Washed – Justified – Sanctified.

Set against the background of a darkening moral culture – the radical power of the cross will have to be nothing less than the power that sets free those who have been enslaved in sinful patterns of life.

It also demonstrates that people's lives are changed – they can be changed by the radical work and word of the cross.

We have to be a church that welcomes people with the embrace that says - Whatever you were – whatever you did – is gone – it is past. You live there no longer. The old has gone – you were a nobody and now you are a somebody – you were lost but now you are found. And when they come

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out of the waters of baptism – they will need to hear us cheer them on with the Cry of the angels – NIKE - NIKE – it means victory.

They will have to be helped as they stand on new ground – to find moral strength that they never knew they had – to find spiritual courage that they never thought was possible – to find spiritual stamina they never knew they had to finish the race.

We will have to know that grace is free but it is not cheap.

Life after life in our city will have to stand and live as a testimony that one by one – lives are changed by the radical power of God which is found in the cross.

In our city – perhaps more than ever before – people will be won to Christ one by one – and more than ever - and every person will represent a cosmic battle won at the cross – they will represent someone who has walked away from the darkness of their past life – and turned to walk in the light.

IT WILL TAKE A CHURCH THAT BELIEVES IN THE RADICAL POWER OF THE SPIRIT- NOTHING LESS WILL DO!

Paul urges his young converts -- Flee from sexual immorality - how can you do that in a city that is a moral sewer – when on your way home from church you run a gauntlet of immoral invitations from the seductive priestesses from the Temple up on the hill. How do you do that in the urban sensuality of Vancouver – in our city of sexual permissiveness?

His answer – then and now –

19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;

20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

We would never have thought of saying – your **body** is the temple of the Holy Spirit – or – honor God with your **body**. But Paul will not allow us or them to drift into the excuse of dualism – separating our physical being from our inner spiritual being – he allows no easy way out – he lays it on the line.

Temple:

Paul has 2 words he can use for temple

HIERON – the whole temple area.

NAOS – the holy of holies – that innermost area – where the High priest went only once per year to meet with God. This is the word used here. Think how daring that imagery is. Your visible and tangible body – not just some invisible spirit – your body that has sexual urges – eyes that see images - -- that body is the innermost area which God regards as his personal Holy of Holies.

God is not interested in your spiritual life – although we think he is – he is interested in every fibre of our lives.

In other words – when you become a Christian – the Holy Spirit is given to you as a gift of God. He lovingly invades all of you – to be the holy impulse to every fabric of who you are. Your life has value – your body has value – don't do with it – don't put into it – don't squander it – with anything that

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dishonor – anything that debases – anything that degrades – anything that demeans this holy residence of God.

The moral challenge for the days in which we live may not be easy – we are told that everyone is sleeping together outside of marriage – the temptation to follow the crowd has always been there -- but may we take courage in knowing WHO we are – and WHOSE we are. Morality is rooted in identity – personal ethics are rooted in integrity.

That can be unpacked so much more. Perhaps at a later time.

If our understanding of the power of the cross is too shallow and needs to be more radical – if our understanding of our Christian identity is too shallow and needs to have greater integrity – then without a doubt our understanding of the church is shallow and needs to have more depth.

How will we live in our city –

IT WILL TAKE A CHURCH THAT BELIEVES IN THE RADICAL STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY (KOINONIA) – NOTHING LESS WILL DO.

Remember we said that the city has a spirit – a spirit that often works against the spirit of God.

So Paul challenges the kind of spirit that is in the city of Corinth - and also in a city like Vancouver.

He challenges the spirit of individualism by calling us to community.

Paul writes – 1 Cor. 12: 12-13

12. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Then he goes on to talk about how we are all parts of the body – we all need each other – we bring our gifted lives together -- not only do the weak need the strong – but the strong need the weak.

Here's something I would love to try -

Imagine this week if you got a piece of a jigsaw puzzle in the mail – and you are told – bring this on Sunday – then out in Pinder Hall a huge picture is slowly built from every small piece – every hole means someone is missing for some reason – perhaps someone goes home still clutching their piece – not sure where it fits – sometimes we bring our gifts to church and we go home still clutching them – not sure where they fit. The picture we are building is not of our building – it is a person – whose name is Jesus.

Can I say to you – we need you – if you slip away or hold onto your life we all suffer – I suffer. We will not become all that God wants us to be without you.

It means that the reality of being part of the church is much more than signing a membership form and showing up when we want to – it means being part of a radical new relationship in which we bear one another's burdens – love one another – pray for one another – teach one another – when necessary admonish one another – I am part of you and you are part of me.

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He challenges the spirit of consumerism by calling us to teamwork

Our first thought is often – what have you got for me. I know we have needs for family – youth – worship. But there is a better question – what have you got for us.

1 Cor 12:4-7.

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.

5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Notice the work of the Trinity – now here is the purpose.

*7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given **for the common good.***

What do you have for the common good of First Baptist Church?

He challenges the spirit of LICENCE by calling us to true freedom in Christ.

Licence is when we say we have the freedom to do whatever we want – the usual reaction to licence is legalism – a stricter demand on externals – things have to look good on the outside.

There is a level beyond licence we have to discover – it is the real sense of our true liberty and freedom in Christ – this is where transformation / metamorphosis takes place in us. We are not transformed by rules --- but by relationships.

2 Cor 3:17-18 –

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

But does this freedom mean we are now free to do whatever we want – no one looking over our shoulders.

He gives us three principles that govern this freedom.

1 Cor 6:12

"Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial.

Not everything is positive or helpful for our lives.

1 Cor 6:12

"Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything.

I can do anything I want – but I must not allow anything to have authority over me – it is speaking to us in the area of addiction – I will not allow anything to have control over my life or my body.

1 Cor 10:23

"Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive.

I am free to do anything I want – but not everything will build me up and move me towards maturity in Christ – either in my body or my spirit.

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So against the spirit of licence – Paul does not swing back to a stricter legalism – rather he calls us on to a higher grasp of true liberty.

Freedom is not the right to do what we want – but the power to do what we ought. The true liberty and freedom of the spirit is a higher law that operates in our heart.

He challenges the spirit of eroticism in the city by calling us to a new law of love (agape).

We use the word erotic to mean something that is sexual. It means more than just sexual – it has the idea of something that is rooted in selfishness – self-centredness. All we are interested in is having our own needs met.

He calls us from selfish eroticism to a life of self-giving and sacrificial AGAPE; it is no accident that it is to this erotic city that Paul writes –

- 4. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
- 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.
- 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
- 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
- 8 Love never fails.

Every life here this morning in this city is loved by God – you have been won at the cross – every life here is special to the Holy Spirit – he has gifted you in a unique way for the church – so that you can bring all you are to build up the church in unity and maturity.

To say I have become a Christian needs to be understood as the most radical thing in the world that we can say and be. Old things have passed away – everything has become new.

To say I have the Holy Spirit in me means that he moves into the deepest and the most intimate part of who I am – and he moves in every part of my being – including my skin.

People who belong to that kind of church – even in the worst city in the world – will be encouraged and strengthened to stay in the race all the way to the finishing line.

People in that kind of church don't just show up on Sunday mornings to see what is happening -- they know that they ARE the church – all the time - utterly committed to the radical nature of the cross – utterly committed to the radical nature of the church.

And so when they leave the protection of where they meet and walk into the dark streets of Corinth or Vancouver – they are kept safe by the prayer of Jesus who prays – my prayer is not that you would take them out of the world – but that you would protect them from the evil one – and even more - they are kept safe by the work of the cross – by the power of the Spirit at work in them – they are kept safe by the radical nature of their fellowship. They are not walking alone – they walk hand in hand – heart to heart in the church.