

*An Overview of 1 Corinthians: Confronting Conflict with the Cross (Part II)**1 Corinthians**Jimmy Snowden**Introduction*

God forced Himself into my own spiritual body-bubble during the summer of 2007. He completely hit me over the head with the truth of 1 Corinthians. I was on the phone with my good friend from seminary. He began to talk about his recent study through 1 Corinthians. After detailing how messed up the church in Corinth was he asked me, “Jimmy, if you were to move to Corinth and you happened to stumble upon First Baptist Church of Corinth as you went church shopping,¹ would ever consider a second visit?” I answered with honesty and affirmed to him that I would have never considered a second visit. I told him that I would start my own church before committing myself to the church in Corinth. In the course of our conversation he began to talk about Paul and how Paul knew he was walking headlong onto a battlefield as he ministered to the Corinthian church. Paul knew how backwards and deviant the Corinthian church was and he was committed to serve them whatever it might cost him. He reminded me that Paul extended unconditional love to the Corinthians in spite of their many problems. The Lord used this conversation, almost more than any other, to challenge and shape my understanding of the Gospel, the church, and my place in both the Gospel and the church.

Corruption in Corinth

Now you have to remember how messed up the church in Corinth was. Let me remind you of their many grievous failures. The church in Corinth did not simply have one or two problems that needed to be dealt with. The whole letter of 1 Corinthians reads as if it were Paul’s shopping list for the Corinthian church; from Chapter 1 all the way to the end of the letter, Paul addresses issue after issue after issue. The letter of 1 Corinthians attests to the depth to which the Corinthian church had fallen. Although it would be impossible to detail all of the problems that plagued the Corinthian church in detail in one sermon, it is possible to break Corinth’s waywardness up into three categories; 1. relational/social meltdown, 2. gross immorality, and 3. doctrinal error. I am not going to go through each of these major areas in detail but I do want to at least outline the depth of their impurity.

1. The church in Corinth suffered a massive relational/social meltdown. Although relational/social meltdown may seem like the least of their problems, the opposite is true. Jesus Himself established love for God and love for one’s neighbor (to seek the good of your neighbor) to be the two greatest commandments. Consider how deep the roots of relational conflict went in the church: they divided over leaders (1 Corinthians 1-4); they were suing each other (1 Corinthians 6); they were more concerned about staking a claim on their own Gospel-given rights than they were about the souls of their brethren (1 Corinthians 8-10); the rich in the church gluttoned on their plenty while the poor went hungry (1 Corinthians 11); they were trying to outperform each other with the use of their spiritual gifts—misusing the gifts by using them as a tool to establish superiority as opposed to using them as a tool to build up the brethren in love (1 Corinthians 12-14). The evidence is staggering; they were a wreck relationally, they were at each other’s throats.

¹ Would probably be more fitting to refer to it as First Pentecostal Church of Corinth in light of the great excesses they had in regard to use of the spiritual gifts (Chapters 12-14).

2. The church sat silent while many (or at least some) of her members were indulging in gross immorality. Paul lambastes the church for tolerating the open sin of a man who was sleeping with his step mother (Chapter 5), and many (or at least some) were engaging in prostitution (Chapters 6 and 10). There seems to be a connection between the Corinthians prostitution problem and their pagan temple problem. Paul seems to be encouraging the Saints to not frequent the temples of the idols in Chapter's 8 and 10 not only because of the danger of falling into idolatry it posed to those who had recently come out of paganism, but also because of all the sexual immorality that went on in the idol temples in Corinth.

3. The church in Corinth was off the map in regard to certain core truths of the Gospel. The church was teaching that there was no such thing as eternal life; they rejected the final resurrection of the dead. Paul communicates to them that their rejection of the final resurrection implies a rejection of the resurrection of Christ and also cuts at the heart of what is promised in the Gospel, namely eternal life. There is no questioning the fact that the Corinthians were doctrinally immature (they had no sense of the holiness of God, which is why they were so loosey goosey on sin, many still held to the notion that idols were rival gods to the Almighty God of the Bible, and there are many other examples which could be pointed to).

It is not uncommon for a church to struggle in one or two of these areas at the same time. There is no such thing as a church which does not struggle with sin.² But look at the conglomeration of the issues which were plaguing the church in Corinth at the same time. They could be rightly spoken of as a spiritual disaster. They were like a medical patient with bronchitis, a broken arm, water on the brain, and an ingrown toenail all at the same time. In our modern day terminology we may refer to such a person as a 'medical train wreck.' In the same way, The Corinthian's were a 'spiritual train wreck.' The church in Corinth was not simply off in one or two or three areas; they were failing in almost every major area in which a church can fail.

What Kept Paul Anchored to the Corinthian Church?

So... with a full-orbed understanding of the many deficiencies of the church in Corinth, let me ask you; If you were to visit the Corinthian church, would you even consider a second visit? Or let me ask it in a way that hits a bit closer to home: **If all of the corruption which plagued the Corinthian church (including all of the relational/social, moral, and doctrinal problems) were to find its way into Sovereign Grace Fellowship (or into your own respective church), would you stay or would you look for another church?**

What about Paul? How did he respond to the waywardness of the Corinthians? Did he flee from them? Did he consider them beyond hope, beyond grace, beyond fixing? Did Paul refuse to fellowship with the Corinthians? Did they come to a point where Paul no longer wanted to be associated with them? No!

What, then, we must ask, anchored Paul to the Corinthians? Three things: 1. first, he planted the church and as an apostle had a responsibility to step in when corrections were

² If John, in 1 John 1:8-10, was not afraid to point out the radical immaturity of the one who claims to be without sin, how much more immature would it be for a Christian to boast in the perfection of his/her church—a church, by the way, is a group of blood-bought, sinning saints. If anything, sin is concentrated in community. When the people of God stick to themselves, the works of the flesh are done in isolation; when the people of God congregate, the mass gathering of blood-bought sinners provides the potential for a greater showing of the flesh. When one dog barks in isolation, the neighbors have reason for slight irritation; when all the dogs in the neighborhood get together there is greater potential for musical mayhem. This, of course, does not mean that the community of the saints breeds the works of the flesh, but it does mean that a church which boasts of having licked sin as a community is either brand spanking new, self-deceived, or purposefully deceitful.

needed, 2. he was concerned about the advancement of the Gospel in Corinth, and 3. his love for the people of God. *This is what kept Paul anchored to the Corinthian church—his commitment to the advancement of the Gospel and his commitment to the people of God.*

Just look at how he spoke to them; he called them “saints” in 1:1, praised God for them in 1:4-8, called them his ‘brothers’ all throughout the entire letter, referred to them collectively as “God’s sanctuary” (or temple) in 3:16-17, called them his ‘dear children’ in 4:14, referred to himself as their father in Christ Jesus in 4:15, identified them as those who have been ‘sanctified’ and ‘justified in the name of Christ Jesus’ in 6:11, referred to them as God’s blood-bought possession in 6:19-20, and then finally he referred to them as the ‘body of Christ’ in 12:27.

The most significant passage in 1 Corinthians in this respect is 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. Consider what Paul says to them.

Don’t you know that you are God’s sanctuary (or temple) and that the Spirit of God lives in you? If anyone ruins God’s sanctuary (or temple), God will ruin him; for God’s sanctuary is holy, and that is what you are.

Paul is here speaking about the church of Corinth in general. They are, as a corporate body, God’s holy temple. Paul comes right out and asserts that if anyone messes with God’s kids, God will mess with them (If anyone ruins God’s sanctuary, God will ruin him). Paul did not see the messed up folk at Corinth as mere messed up folk, he saw them as God’s holy, blood-bought messed up folk. If you mess with God’s messed up folk, God will mess with you. Why? Because His folk, as backwards and crooked as they may be, are His holy habitation. To mess with God’s individual or corporate folk would be akin to starting God’s Old Testament temple on fire. How can I make such a drastic statement? Because both the Old Testament temple and the New Covenant people of God are/were His dwelling place. His New Covenant people are his new place of dwelling. God no longer resides in the temple; He resides in His people.

Why was Paul so anchored to the Corinthian church when they were such a mess? The answer to this question is entirely theological. It has everything to do with what Paul knew to be true about them in light of the Gospel. Paul was committed to them because he knew that although they had become warped beyond recognition, they were nonetheless the very people of God, God’s blood-bought possession, the body of Christ, God’s holy sanctuary.

Paul didn’t anchor himself to the Corinthians because they were the best and the brightest. We know this wasn’t the case because he himself said that they were ‘the foolish’ and ‘weak things of the world’ (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Paul didn’t anchor himself to the Corinthians because they had all their i’s dotted and t’s crossed. The letter of 1 Corinthians should be proof enough that Paul knew their faults all too well. Paul didn’t anchor himself to the Corinthians because they were the easiest people to get along with. Once again, the letter of 1 Corinthians should be proof enough that the Corinthians were the farthest thing from peaceable (consider the list of their many relational/social problems above). Paul did not anchor himself to them because they had picture perfect doctrine (just look at 1 Corinthians 15). Paul didn’t anchor himself to the Corinthians because they were just like him—compatibility was not the glue which held them together. Once more, 1 Corinthians should be proof enough that Paul contested the Corinthian church on almost every front.

Paul anchored himself to the Corinthians because they were anchored to Christ. It is like two boats anchored to the same rock. Paul did not look at them in worldly terms. Paul looked at them, evaluated them, through the eyes of the cross. He was able to see past their warts because he was able to see them through the eyes of Christ—through the eyes of the cross.

What Anchors You to SGF (or your own local church)?

So now comes the moment of truth: what anchors you to SGF (or your own local church)? Think of all the different things that keep people anchored to their church. We live in a day of church shoppers. When believers move to a new area the first thing they do is look for a church. This surely is a good thing to do. And it is wise to not merely commit to the first church that you visit. After all, there are many churches out there that profess the name of Christ and yet are, in the words of C.H. Spurgeon, “no more Christian... than chalk is cheese.”³ However, for the most part what do we look for when we church shop? Have you ever heard of anyone who has went out church shopping for the most run down church in the area? What do we look for when we church shop? It is actually quite scary! We look for compatibility—we look for a church filled with people who are just like us. Well, some people look for diversity, but they would never be content attending a diverse church which did not celebrate its own diversity. Do you really want a church full of people just like yourself? But this is our general litmus test when we look for churches.

Before joining, committing ourselves to, anchoring ourselves to a church **I** want to make sure that the pastors preach on those things that are most important and relevant to **me**, that the music director sings **my** music, that the church can accommodate all **my** children, that the church is filled with people **my** age, and that they share with **me** all of **my** unique doctrinal emphases. It is all about **me**! We choose churches based off of selfish ambition! Even if the church is more passionate about their Calvinism, Dispensationalism, or Amillennialism than they are about the real person of Jesus Christ, we will sacrifice some of the Jesus stuff so long as it is for a good doctrinal cause. And much like insurance companies, we would never want to join a church that has preexisting conditions. And why? Because we have this completely unbiblical idea that church life is supposed to be a cakewalk. We presuppose that God wants us to fellowship with those who are most like us so that we might be able to avoid as many conflicts as possible. This is what anchors us to an assembly.

As I said in the introductory paper to the *Renewal Project*, most Christians shop for a church in the same way that they shop for a pair of pants. They go to the dressing room with 6 pairs of pants in hand. Absolutely every single one of the pants would work if the person had no other choice. However, since the consumer has an almost endless selection of pants to choose from, she can be picky. She rejects this pair of pants because although they fit fine in the waist they are a bit tight in the legs; she rejects that pair of pants because although they fit fine in the legs, the waist is just a smidge to wide; she rejects another pair because although the legs and waist fit fine, the color of the thread down the inseam of the pants isn't her color; she rejects yet another pair of pants because although the style was nice, the waist and the legs fit fine, there were flaps on the back pocket. Because the consumer has an endless selection, she can afford to be picky. So it is with church. There are churches out there for every age, shape, size, color, and culture. This is fine to a point, but it has created a certain me-centered individualism in Christianity. We feel that God wants me to find the church that fits my unique figure, every little curve and line. And guess what; since there is an endless selection of churches, we feel the liberty to be as picky when it comes to church shopping as we are when pants shopping.

What is at the heart of all of this? Self-centeredness. **I want** a church that fits all **my** unique curves, that preaches the doctrine that **I** like, that plays the music **I** like, that associates

³C.H. Spurgeon, *The Down-grade Controversy* (BiblioBazaar, 2008), 34.

with the culture in the way that **I** do, that has droves of people who are in **my** same age range, etc.

So let me ask again; what anchors you to the body of Christ? I can assure you, as I have heard so many say, whatever gets you in the door will keep you in the door. What does that mean? It means that whatever criteria you used to pick a church will be the same criteria that you use to determine when to leave a church. Christ is the only anchor that will hold you to the people of God through thick and thin. I am not saying that there is never a time to leave a church. Sometimes leaving has to happen. But I would suggest that our leaving (I am here speaking of leaving over irreconcilable disagreements) is more often than not selfish at root.

How to Stay Anchored to the Body of Christ in the Midst of Conflict

In 1 Corinthians we get a view of how Paul sought to deal with the issue of division. For example, as can be seen in Chapters 1-4, Paul rebukes the church for dividing over different leaders. Look at 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 with me.

For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by members of Chloe's household, that there are quarrels among you. What I am saying is this: each of you says, 'I'm with Paul,' or 'I'm with Apollos,' or 'I'm with Cephas,' or 'I'm with Christ.' Is Christ divided?

The church was dividing, splintering over leaders. Some had an allegiance to Paul and just simply could not get along with those who had an allegiance to Apollos, etc. It is quite clear from Chapters 1-4 that this was causing quite the stir in Corinth. How did Paul seek to fix this problem? In today's church we would convene a committee to establish four different church plants. The way we deal with conflict is by avoiding it. We splinter and splinter and splinter. If the followers of Paul cannot get along with the followers of Apollos, we separate them. If you separate the two boys who don't get along you can at least have the appearance of solving the problem. Never mind the fact that no one learns to commit to, love, or serve those across the aisle. Today we would split the Corinthian church into four separate churches: First Baptist Church of Paul, First Baptist Church of Apollos, First Baptist Church of Peter, and First Baptist Church of Christ. We create four piles: a green pile, a red pile, a blue pile, and a yellow pile. The way to solve conflict in community is not by rallying around our common ground in Christ, but by splintering.

How did Paul deal with these divisions in Corinth? Paul's solution would not fly in today's church; it would be far too insensitive. You can find Paul's solution in 3:1-4.

¹ Brothers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. ² I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were not yet able to receive it. In fact, you are still not able, ³ because you are still fleshly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and living like ordinary people? ⁴ For whenever someone says, "I'm with Paul," and another, "I'm with Apollos," are you not [typical] men?

Paul's admonition was, 'Grow up! Stop acting like selfish brats!' He suggests that their divisions are the result of an embarrassing level of immaturity. But how do you grow up? How do you move from fleshly to spiritual; how do you move from 'living like ordinary people' to living like Christ? This is his goal in 1 Corinthians. The transformation from 'ordinary' to Christlike has everything to do with the Gospel.

As I have said and will say ten trillion times again before I die, orthopraxy (right living) flows out of orthodoxy (right believing). Paul knew that the Corinthian believers would never selflessly anchor themselves to each other unless the Gospel was central. It really can be boiled down to two main principles.

Look at Your Brothers and Sisters in Christ Through the Eyes of Christ

What will keep us anchored to each other, the people of God, in the face of massive conflict? First, we must look at each other through the eyes of Christ, as Paul did with the Corinthians. Paul knew that as backwards as the believers in Corinth were, they were still his fellow brethren, Christ's blood-bought possession, Christ's body, Christ's holy temple, etc. Paul was able to be anchored to them in the midst of their differences and failures because he did not look at them through the eyes of the flesh but through the eyes of Christ, through the eyes of the cross.

Treat Each Other as You Have Been Treated in Christ

Second, we must treat each other as Christ has treated us. *And how has Christ treated us? He has selflessly and sacrificially served and loved us with humility.* Because of our Christian culture we have been conditioned to think that Christianity is all about me. This is a lie straight out of the pit of hell. Christianity is not all about me and it is not all about you; it is all about Christ and the advancement of His Gospel. The idea of selfless and sacrificial service and love is foreign to our Christian culture. This is exactly what Paul calls for in Philippians 2:3-8.

Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. ⁴ Everyone should look out not [only] for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

⁵ Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. ⁷ Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, ⁸ He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.

Paul calls the Philippians to humbly and selflessly serve each other sacrificially. He then sets Christ up as the greatest example of humble, sacrificial, and selfless service. How has Christ treated you? Well, when I was a young boy my brothers and I used to get in trouble when we would leave messes around the house. My mom would come into the living room; "Who made the mess?" My brothers and I would all say in unison; "Not me!" She would then threaten that we would all have to clean it up if someone didn't fess up. After each of us declared our innocence again, she would say, "Fine! If no one is going to fess up, you are all cleaning it up! Get Busy!" We would all then once again say in unison, "But I didn't make the mess! I'm not cleaning a mess that I didn't make."

When Jesus came to serve me by dying for me, when he bore my sin on the cross, He didn't cry out and complain, "But this isn't my mess. I am not going to take the responsibility of the guilt of this sin. Jimmy committed this sin, not Me! He can bear the penalty of His own sin!" No, Jesus took my sin and guilt. This is what the Gospel is all about. He stood as my substitute. He served me sacrificially, selflessly, and humbly. In response, He calls me to do the same unto my brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul lays forth Christ as our supreme example in 1 Corinthians 11:1 as well.

Be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ.

Jesus sacrificially set aside His rights for our good. Or as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:9;

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: although He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich.

Conclusion

So what keeps you anchored to the people of God? The only thing that will keep you biblically anchored to the people of God is the Gospel. We must look at each other through the eyes of Christ and serve each other as Christ has served us. This, of course, is much easier said than done. But by God's grace and through His Spirit, we can live as Jesus lived.