

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-3

INTRODUCTION

Today Corinth is a relatively small town with little significance other than historical but in the New Testament times during the times of the Apostles it was a thriving prosperous and key city. Greece is divided geographically into two small parts. The southern part is attached to the northern part by a very narrow four-mile wide piece of land. On the western side was the Gulf of Corinth and on the eastern side was the Saronic Gulf.

In the middle of the piece of land to the south is the city of Corinth. In bible times all northern and southern overland traffic including that to and from Athens had to pass through Corinth. Corinth also became a major port and therefore economically Corinth was a thriving city.

Corinth was also a very immoral city so much so that there was a saying in Greek that if you lived an immoral life you behaved 'like a Corinthian.' The name of the city became synonymous with moral depravity just like the name Soho today. In this letter to the church at Corinth Paul lists some of the city's characteristic sins – fornication, idolatry adultery, homosexuality, stealing, covetousness, drunkenness, abusive language and swindling (6:9-10). Some of the Corinthian believers had been guilty of practising those sins before they were converted to Christ (6:11). Others in the church however were still living immorally, some were involved in sins worse than those already mentioned, sins that even pagan Gentiles did not commit such as incest (5:1).

1. THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

Paul first came to Corinth on his second missionary journey. He had been preaching and working in Greek cities for some time. He had been to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and now Corinth (Acts 16:11-18:1) Upon arriving at Corinth he met Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who had been driven out of Rome and who were like himself tentmakers.

He stayed with them for a while and began to preach regularly in the synagogue every Sabbath and when Silas and Timothy joined him from Macedonia his preaching intensified. He faced much opposition to the gospel but he also saw many Corinthians including a number of Jews come to faith in Christ. Even Crispus the leader of the synagogue along with his household trusted in the Lord Jesus (Acts 18:18). Paul continued to minister in Corinth for a year and a half (Acts 18:11), Jewish opposition became so strong that he was brought before a Roman tribunal. Since the charges were purely religious Gallio the proconsul refused to hear the case. After staying a little longer Paul left Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila and went to Ephesus (Acts 18:12-22).

As I said the church at Corinth was full of problems many of a serious nature. Their main problem however was their inability to detach themselves from the wicked and evil ways of the society in which they lived. They did not understand and probably did not want to understand the principle 'not to love the world nor the things in the world' (1 John 2:15).

Paul had written to the church before, a letter that we do not possess but in it he had warned them not to associate with immoral people (5:9). Some of the Christians thought that Paul meant not to associate with the unbelieving immoral people but actually he was talking about those who professed faith who refused to give up or perhaps had fallen back into the debased lifestyle of Corinth (5:9-11).

Like believers in every generation, the Corinthian Christians had great trouble in not copying the unbelieving and corrupt society around them. It seems that many of the Christians at Corinth wanted to be in the church but in the world at the same time, they wanted the blessing of being in

Christ and the pleasures of being in the world. They wanted what they thought was the best of both worlds but Paul clearly writes this letter to warn them that this is impossible.

You are either in Christ and in the church or in the world you cannot have both and both don't mix. Yet the amazing thing about this book is that God had planted his church in such a hostile, pagan and immoral place. He had granted them all the spiritual resources necessary (1:5-7) to live holy and godly lives in such a city. Paul knew this church had great potential to make a real impact in such an immoral city.

He had every confidence in the gospel and Paul longed that the church might start to fulfil its potential and use its spiritual resources to make an impact for God in this wicked city. It is for this reason that Paul writes to the church to try and resolve the many difficulties and problems that were making the church ineffective.

Every church is a miracle of God and a mark of God's grace. God establishes his church in cities and towns and villages for a purpose. He equips his people with all the spiritual resources needed to live for him in this wicked and godless world. The church must always use its spiritual resources to resist the temptation to live like the ungodly world in which we are placed and to live holy and godly lives.

We are placed in Leyburn and in the Dales not to be like the people in the Dales but to be unlike them, we are called to be holy and godly and not worldly. Every church and every Christian must battle against the pull of this wicked world. It is attractive, its pull is very strong but God has planted us in the Dales to live for Him to be godly and to be like Christ and he has given us all the resources that we need.

So let's ask God to help us by his Spirit to resist the pull of the world and to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now let's look at this church at Corinth a little more closely.

2. THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

Paul introduces himself to his readers and lays down his credentials to speak on the various issues that are raised in this letter. He is God's apostle called by God for this task. He has not chosen to be an apostle God has chosen him and he is being obedient to the will of God for his life. He also introduces us to Sosthenes who is probably Paul's scribe who is writing the actual words dictated by Paul. This is probably the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18.

He was a leader of the synagogue at Corinth probably replacing Crispus. On one occasion Sosthenes was beaten probably by the Jews for his unsuccessful involvement in bringing Paul before the civil court at Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). However now Paul calls him "our brother" indicating that some time after this incident in Acts 18 he became a follower of Jesus and companion of Paul's.

After his brief introduction Paul reminds the church of their calling.

a) Called to be the church of God in a specific place - If Paul is called to be an apostle the church is called to be the church of God in Corinth. Now the church was first and foremost called by God to be the church of God. The church is not a man made institution but it is a God ordained body of believing people. The church does not belong to any person or group of people but to God alone. Wensleydale Evangelical church is not 'my' church or 'your' church or even 'our' church it is God's church. But God places his church in specific places. He has placed this church we are looking at in Corinth. He has placed us in Wensleydale. The people were to serve God in Corinth and we are to serve God in Wensleydale. This also teaches us that the church is people and not the building.

We so often use the word 'church' to talk about the building "look at that church over there." But the Bible never refers to churches as buildings, in fact the early church met in homes they had no buildings. So we must understand that when we talk about church we are talking about God's saved people who meet in any location.

I sometime wonder if our notice board outside should say 'Wensleydale Evangelical church meets here' in order to show clearly the distinction between the building and the believing people who meet in this building. So we are called to be the church of God and the question it raises is this; do our lives reflect that truth? We are called to be God's church in Wensleydale does our commitment to this area show that fact?

I have met many believing people who have no commitment to any specific place. They float about all over the place attending one church and then another but God calls people to be his church in specific locations. I don't mind Christians going to other churches as long as those same Christians are first and foremost committed to their own local evangelical church. Why is it that we have so many Christian people who are not in membership in any local church?

The key reason I think is that they are not committed to the principle of local churches. They want to be free to float about to go and hear this preacher or that preacher but God calls His people to be His church in a certain locality.

b) Called to be Holy - So the church is called to be God's church in Corinth. But the church is called to be sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy. The word holy in Greek means to be 'set apart' so the Corinthian believers were holy 'set apart' in God's eyes regardless of their sinful behaviour and distorted doctrine. They were holy because they had been 'sanctified' the word means 'set apart from sin' they have been made holy.

They are not holy because they are living holy lives sadly the church were living unholy lives but they were Holy because God set them apart in Christ Jesus. Jesus gave himself on the cross for these people and saved them from sin and gave to them His own righteousness. Therefore Jesus Christ set them apart for himself he forgave them their sin and he granted to them his Holy Spirit.

So every one of us if we are believers in the Lord Jesus is holy people, we are as holy as the apostle Paul because you have been sanctified in Christ Jesus. So in the sense that the word Holiness is being used here i.e. as one's position before God every believer is as holy as they can be, holy not because they live holy lives but because they have been made holy and called to be holy in Christ Jesus.

Therefore holiness is a position from which we ought to live holy lives. God has made us holy in Christ Jesus he has called us to holiness therefore the implication of such a calling is that we ought to live holy lives. We need to emphasise this and make it absolutely clear that living holy lives comes as a result of being made holy in Christ Jesus. Living holy lives does not and cannot make one holy.

So what this means in practise is that as Christians our daily sins do not affect our position in Christ Jesus. We are still holy set apart by Christ Jesus. Let me illustrate it like this. There is nothing that any of our children can do that will change their position in our family. They are our children no matter what happens. However what they do can affect their relationship with us and vice visa. They will always be our children but how they live etc. will affect our relationship with them.

If a child decides to stop speaking to his Father his decision does not affect his position in the family; he is still related to his Father but it obviously affects his relationship. So it is with God. He

sees us as holy because we are called to be holy and sanctified in Christ Jesus. That is a fact and nothing can change that fact. We are brought into a relationship with him as a result so that He is our Father.

But if we constantly continue in sin then although we are holy in Christ Jesus the relationship we have with our Father will be affected. We will not experience all the blessings that being made holy bring to us because we will miss out on real and meaningful communion with a Holy God. We might even experience the disciplining hand of our Father but none of that affects the fact that we are made holy in Christ Jesus but it does affect our relationship with the one who has called us to be holy and has made us holy in Christ Jesus.

Of course this great truth does not give us a license to sin. It ought to be a motivation to live a Holy life. We have a Father who has made us holy. We have a Saviour who has died for us and has borne our sin and dies in our place. We have been granted Christ's righteousness therefore we ought to have a desire within us to live worthy of our calling.

One of the greatest motivations for Christians to live holy lives is to remind ourselves constantly about our position before God. Look at what he has done for us in Christ. That I would suggest to you should be our greatest deterrent to sin. It ought to be our greatest motivation and reason for seeking under God and by his grace to live worthy of our calling.

Finally Paul seeks to increase the Corinthians sense of responsibility by reminding them that they are linked in spiritual life to all other believers. The Corinthians were not the only ones who were called to be holy. Everyone no matter where they live who have called upon the name of the Lord for salvation share the same Saviour that the Corinthians have; they too have been called to be holy and have been sanctified through Jesus Christ. Paul wants the Corinthians to see that they are part and parcel of a larger body of believers. They are not a mere autonomous people who can live without regard to the other members of the body of Christ.

They have a responsibility to live holy lives not just because they are holy but because they belong to a much larger body and what they do and how they live affect God's church elsewhere. Now this is a truth that needs to be rediscovered again in our own individualistic world. How we live as Christian people not only affects this church but also God's church everywhere.

How many times have you heard people say I knew someone who was a Christian and you should have seen how they lived? That person's experience of another Christian affects their perception of you. It can equally be true of churches. We have lots of true Christians who are refusing to be members of a local church because of some previous bad experience.

That by the way is no excuse for their failure to be in membership but it highlights the fact that all Christians are called to be holy and must seek under God to live holy lives because our lives have a much wider effect.

This can also be the case in local churches. We think our behaviour affects no one but ourselves. But our behaviour affects every person in this church. If you are careless about the things of God; this will affect others in the church. If you never or rarely turn up at the key meetings of the church then that will soon be noticed by others and before we know it they too will be missing from those meetings.

You see none of us are an island to ourselves we all belong to one another and our behaviour affects one another not just in this local church but in all the family of God. We are responsible to others and we need to see this for our society tells us we are responsible only to ourselves. That is not true when it comes to the church. We are not at church today I trust simply for ourselves.

We are here I trust because we have a responsibility to be here for the benefit of the wider church. Every time we are missing from those key meetings of the church we are robbing our brothers and sisters of our fellowship. So I trust we can see that we are all responsible to one another, therefore we must seek to live holy lives because we are holy and are united to all others who have been called to be holy in Christ Jesus.

Therefore: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v 3).

Amen

