

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

5. LIVING TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 5:1 – 6:20; 8:1-13; 10:23 – 11:1

The church in Corinth is facing some problems – that’s what this letter from Paul is really all about. It’s a new church – a new religion, really – that Paul planted about five years before: a little group of newly converted believers who have never done anything like this before. They are encountering a whole new way of living, a completely different set of values and attitudes, a different way of behaving. Different from what? Well, the church is situated in a cosmopolitan seaport which is a centre for the worship of Aphrodite. It’s a seething morass of sexual immorality, self-centred attitudes and blatantly pagan idolatry. Suddenly, these new Christians are expected to live lives that are holy, moral, ethically upright. They are supposed to be setting an example to those around, demonstrating what a difference Jesus has made in their lives, remaining distinctive in an increasingly alien culture.

Complicating this, though, is the idea that following Jesus sets you free from humanly contrived rules and regulations. For those from a traditionally Jewish background who have come to accept Jesus as Messiah, there’s the new concept of being liberated from a way of thinking that sees adherence to the Law of Moses as the only way to get closer to God. They are suddenly released from the daily struggle to do all the right things in the right order, from an expectation that they will keep to a set list of very demanding regulations.

So the church in Corinth is filling up with people who are “*not yet nice*”, to use Eugene Peterson’s phrase – people who are very heavily influenced by the mores of the city in which they live and who are, at the same time, being taught that they are freed from the constraints of the Law. Some of them are exercising their freedom by saying that it doesn’t matter too much how they behave, God’s grace will mean instant forgiveness. But when people come together in any community, they cannot really get on together without some kind of ethical and moral structure within which to locate their behaviour. The lack of that in Corinth means that the church is in a mess, and Paul addresses that in the chapter we’ve just read, as well as in chapters 6, 8 and 10, which we’ll also refer to this morning.

First of all, let’s just see what exactly was going on in this church. To start with, there was sexual immorality of a kind which, Paul says, was even deplored by the pagans (5:1). Not only was this a clearly sinful act, but the members of the church took a kind of misplaced pride in it – “Look at us. Look at how free we are now! Look at what the grace of God can overcome!” They were also clearly at each other’s throats within the congregation, as they were taking each other to court rather than seeking to work things out within their own fellowship (6:1-8). There is a list in 6:9,10 of other things that seem to have been part of the life of the church there, as Paul says, “*Do not be deceived*”. Some of the people were sleeping with prostitutes (6:15ff), and we know from contemporary accounts that this wasn’t just men with female prostitutes, but also women with male prostitutes. And in 8:1-13 and 10:25-31, Paul writes about the issue of eating meat sold in the market after it had been offered to idols in the pagan temples. That in itself wasn’t a sin, but it was causing other difficulties because some of the congregation were acting in a way that was thoughtlessly insensitive to other Christians.

Now, we could spend a lot of time this morning dealing in graphic detail with all those different sins. But I don’t believe Paul writes about them here because they are somehow special sins: they are just examples of what’s going on amongst the believers. I’m sure there was more happening than he mentions here. And for those who like to latch on to certain of the sexual sins he mentions here, don’t overlook the fact that he also includes those who are “*greedy, drunkards and slanderers*”, who are explicitly excluded from God’s kingdom. Paul mentions these sins because they are current issues in the church and because they are things that are obviously happening quite openly, without, it appears, the church getting to grips with how the offenders should be dealt with.

Of more relevance to us, perhaps, is what Paul says about the broader issues that are raised here. So, in the limited time we have this morning, let's consider three things which come out of these chapters which will always be worth thinking about, whatever the situation, wherever the church is to be found.

1. THE INFLUENCE OF A FEW (5:6-11)

Paul uses the image of yeast, which is a common image in the Bible for the influence which evil can have on a group of people. Apart from, I think, one occasion, yeast is always used to refer to a bad influence. It doesn't take a lot for the whole church to become affected, he says, so don't let any immorality get hold of you, because it will quickly work through the whole lot of you. In the case he quotes here, one person is having an affair (for want of a better expression) with his stepmother. That in itself is bad enough, but when it is overlooked by the rest because they assume it's all covered by the grace of God, then wrong attitudes are clearly creeping into their thinking and who knows where it might lead.

The only way to deal with it, says Paul, is to get rid of the yeast, to throw out the person who is causing the trouble. That may seem harsh and judgemental, but unless such action is taken, the situation will get worse. We might use the image today of cutting out a cancerous growth or a source of infection for the good of the whole body. The church of Jesus Christ does have standards, it does have certain boundaries which must not be overstepped and you cannot claim to be a Christian if you overstep those boundaries and assume it makes no difference. Claiming to be a follower of Jesus Christ, but not submitting to the standards of morality and ethical behaviour that that entails is just hypocrisy. Now, of course, we all make mistakes, we all fall prey to temptation, but to parade that sin openly and with no recognition of the need for repentance is to drag the name of Jesus in the dirt and to bring shame on the church. Anyone who does not see that and does not respond to warnings needs to be put out.

So Paul tells the Corinthian Christians not to associate with such people. And in case they think that this is a call to some kind of asceticism and withdrawal from the world – which is full of such people – he tells them that he is here referring only to the church. They are to give a wide berth to those within the church who are openly or unrepentantly behaving in this way. And the reason for that is so that they do not themselves end up condoning such behaviour and eventually getting involved themselves. *VII* makes it clear he is talking about Christians who continue to behave like this – and notice again the other things that are in that list, just so you don't get too complacent about it all.

2. PERSONAL FREEDOM vs. COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY (6:12; 8:9-13;10:23)

In *6:12* and *10:23* Paul quotes a little phrase that many scholars believe is what some of the Corinthians Christians were using as their kind of ethical mantra – “*Everything is permissible for me*”. They had been saved. They rejoiced in the grace of God. They held on to the promise that God would forgive their sins. So they could basically do what they wanted. They no longer needed to keep to the old Jewish laws. They had no need to observe the secular laws of the city state of Corinth because they were now under the grace of Jesus Christ. They had their rights and nothing was going to stand in the way of their enjoying them.

There's a lot of that kind of talk about today. In a society which seems to elevate the rights of the individual above everything else, the church has fallen under its influence too. We may not be quite as far down the road as prisoners who win the right to have pornography provided for them or under-age girls who have the right to abortions without any contact with their parents, but we are still pretty keen on getting our own way because we feel we have a right to it.

The trouble is, says Paul, that fails to take into account two very important things. **Firstly**, as he says in both those verses (*6:12*, *10:23*), it might be permissible, but it's not necessarily beneficial – physically, emotionally, spiritually. The example he uses in *6:13ff* is again that of sexual immorality, specifically in

this case with prostitutes. It is spiritual suicide, he says. You cannot engage in that kind of behaviour without it having a profound effect on you. That's why God proscribed it in the first place. He also mentions food in *v13*. Of course, there is no specific commandment about how much you can eat, but he has already mentioned greed as a sin. And we certainly know now – even if Paul didn't have all the science at his fingertips when he was writing – that too much food can have all kinds of different effects on the body, the mind and, indeed, the spirit.

Secondly, Paul tells the Corinthians at some length – and this is implicit in much of what he writes throughout the letter – that what they do as individuals can have a powerful effect on others. All the stuff about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols and the things about people with “*weak consciences*” is to do with that. Now we haven't got time to go into all this this morning unfortunately, but let me try and summarise by saying that there were those who had come into the church from a background where pagan sacrifice was very much part of their life. They wanted a complete break from that and weren't prepared to have anything to do with the trappings of their former lifestyle, so they wouldn't eat anything that was tainted by association with idolatry. Other people, who hadn't been affected in that way were quite happy to eat food that came from the pagan temple. After all, they reasoned, it was only meat. The gods to whom it had been offered weren't real. Everything is created by God so we can thank him for it and get on and enjoy it.

I suppose we might put it into our own situation by comparing it with the attitudes that people have to alcohol. Some people have a weakness in that area. Some people come into the church from a background in alcoholism and are trying very hard to keep away from strong drink. Others may have no problem with a small amount of the stuff and happily accept it as part of God's provision for us – after all, there's plenty of positive references to wine in the Bible. If the latter group insensitively parade their liking for wine before those who really do struggle to cope, then we're in the kind of situation Paul is writing of here. Don't insist on your rights – even if there's nothing inherently wrong with what you're doing – at the expense of others who do have genuine problems. We're all in this together, so let's help and encourage each other, not put others under intolerable pressure.

3. **REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE** (6:11,19,20; 10:31)

Woven into all this advice is Paul's exhortation to the members of the church in Corinth to remember who they are – or, indeed, what they are. They are people whose lives have been transformed by Jesus. They are actually the “*temple of the Holy Spirit*”, the place in which God resides, where his presence should be obvious. They are to be living their lives to the glory of God. And they can't really say they're doing any of those things if there is no difference between their lives, their behaviour, their attitude and those of the people around them. If they are applauding the same immoral behaviour that is endemic in the community around them, if they are insisting on their own individual rights and rushing off to the courts to defend them, if they are as greedy, duplicitous and thieving as the next person, how is God being glorified?

As God's people today, as his church here in Lichfield, we are people whose lives are being changed by God (as our church mission statement says), we are called to be different, distinctive. And, as we've said so many times before, that means attractively distinctive, not just weird. We are not to be different just for the sake of it, but different in order to display the glory of God. “*Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God,*” he writes. In fact, the few sentences after those words in chapter 10 really sum up all that we've been saying this morning (10:31-11:1). When it comes to living together as God's people, remember that it's not all about you, about your kicks, your rights, your own good – it's about ensuring that other people can enjoy the benefits of God's grace without your spoiling it through the way you live your life. Model the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Follow the way he has set out. Allow God's Holy Spirit, who lives within you, to influence and motivate you day by day to live as those who honour God with their bodies and who want only what is best for others and for his Kingdom.

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The church in Corinth is filling up with people who are very heavily influenced by the attitudes of the city in which they live and who are, at the same time, being taught that they are freed from the constraints of the Law. Some of them are exercising their freedom by saying that it doesn't matter too much how they behave, God's grace will mean instant forgiveness. But when people come together in any community, they cannot really get on together without some kind of ethical and moral structure within which to locate their behaviour.

In Corinth, there was sexual immorality of a kind which, Paul says, was even deplored by the pagans (5:1). (Not only was this a clearly sinful act, but the members of the church took a kind of misplaced pride in it – "Look at what the grace of God can overcome!") They were taking each other to court rather than seeking to work things out within their own fellowship (6:1-8). There is a list in 6:9,10 of other things that seem to have been part of the life of the church. Some of the people were sleeping with prostitutes (6:15ff). And in 8:1-13 and 10:25-31, Paul writes about the issue of eating meat sold in the market after it had been offered to idols in the pagan temples.

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In 6:12 and 10:23 Paul quotes a phrase that some of the Corinthians Christians were using as an excuse for their behaviour – "*Everything is permissible for me*". They had been saved so they felt they could do what they wanted. The trouble is, says Paul, that fails to take into account two very important things. **Firstly**, as he says in both those verses (6:12, 10:23), it might be permissible, but it's not necessarily beneficial – physically, emotionally, spiritually. **Secondly**, Paul tells them that what they do as individuals can have a powerful effect on others. Don't insist on your rights – even if there's nothing inherently wrong with what you're doing – at the expense of others who do have genuine problems.

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Questions for discussion

1. In what way does Jesus set us free from the constraints of the law?
2. Why do we tend to emphasise what is wrong with sexual sin and ignore such things as greed?
3. At what stage should we actually ask someone to leave the church? Who takes the responsibility for this? And what does Paul mean by what he says in 5:5?
4. Why do you think there is such an emphasis on individual rights today? Isn't it good that Christians should speak out for the protection of people's rights? How far should we insist on our rights?
5. In what ways should we be distinctive? How can we guard against simply appearing to be weird?
6. How can we do everything "*for the glory of God*"?