

Corinthian Love Redefined

Series: The Life of the Apostle Paul

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Setting the Stage: A Wild City

Written around 54 AD, we join Paul's address, well underway, to a church he is clearly passionate about. Paul has spent a considerable amount of time with these believers (18 months in one stay; Acts 18:1-18), and has a vested interest in their spiritual development (1 Cor. 2:1-5, 2 Cor. 1:16-19). In short, he loves them, and we see his apostolic and pastoral ministry in full force as he attempts to guide them through the issues of their day.

The issues of the Corinthian Christians were not unlike our own today:

- **Sexual promiscuity** was an expected social virtue. Because Corinth was a capital seaport, it became synonymous with activity that sailors on leave would inspire. This, combined with Corinth's shrine to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, complete with her 1,000 priestly prostitutes, made for a city steeped in sexual immortality.
- **Economic status (selfishness)** was of high importance, and a lust for capitalism and materialism was the cultural norm. Having just undergone major renovations by Julius Caesar a decade earlier, Corinth's central marketplace that was larger than any in Rome. Caesar renamed the city *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*, or "Corinth, the Praise of Julius."
- Most notably of all, notions of liberty and freedom were ubiquitous with Corinthian living, both outside of and within the new Christian churches. This was due in part to the large number of Roman slaves who'd found their freedom in the city, and to the wide range of religious and spiritual expressions generated from Greco-Roman idol worship. Ultimately, this led to **factionalism** within the church as Christians adopted the motif of freedom to mean freedom in any manner of spiritual living.

In all, to "*live like a Corinthian*" was a phrase used to denote wild and lascivious behavior. *It was Vegas, baby*. This, some theologians believe, is precisely what drew Paul to this Gentile city in need of the Gospel in the first place.

Paul's Mission: Loving Pastoral Correction

1 & 2 Corinthians represent deeply pastoral letters to Christians that Paul loved very much. As a result, rather than speak in generalizations, Paul digs into the *nitty-gritty* of their daily living. While most of us want to be left alone, sometimes it takes an older Christians getting *all-up-in-our-face* to bring about needed change. This is precisely what Paul was endeavoring to do.

I want to cover *four* highlights of Paul's pastoral address to the Corinthian Christians:

(1) Unity: Right off the bat, Paul pleads with the believers to stop their quarreling.

1 Corinthians 1:10-11 (NRSV)

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

In other words, it's dad walking into the room and saying, "Hey, kids! Cut it out!" You may have had to do this as a parent over the Thanksgiving break. Or maybe you wanted to do this when crazy Uncle Bob got into it with Aunt Meg's husband about the election.

Application: We live in a day where our news media intentionally creates arguments to draw us into caring about things that erode our emotional lives.

"I didn't realize how much I just wanted to argue about everything with everybody until I stopped watching Fox News." —Wayne Mattingly, Elder

Our challenge is to allow scripture and the policies of Jesus to dictate our behavior toward others, not our party affiliations. We are Christians first.

1 Corinthians 1:17 (NRSV)

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

What is this "power" of the cross that he's worried about being emptied? I contend that it is *self-sacrifice*. This is the message he's trying to convey throughout his letters, that the thing we have in common is the cross of Christ, and its power is revealed in that God laid down his life for others. It is our decision to emulate this same self-sacrifice that makes the world stop and marvel at us.

Main Point: *If all they see is arguing and complaining, they will not "wonder" at us, they will simply see us a more of the same. But if they see sacrificial love, then they will note that we are*

truly God's alternative community in the earth, his new version of humanity. This is our great calling! It could not be higher, nor is it anything less.

(2) Generosity: If there was ever to be an indictment against a Christian's selfish nature, Paul identified it in his critique of their taking of the Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:20-22 (NRSV)

20 When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. 21 For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. 22 What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

You can't get much worse than getting drunk during communion. (We try and help you out by only serving grape juice). But if we're so consumed with ourselves that we do not take others' needs into our estimation, then we are not truly Christlike.

Generosity is toxic to selfishness. This is why our upcoming *Christmas Giveaway* is so important. It is not merely a "nice thing to do for others," but it is actually a highly supernatural act of worship, one that helps us become more Christlike.

But Paul doesn't stop there. It's not just generosity with physical means that's important, but that we take all others' "weaknesses" as our concern. He was dealing with mature Christians who were eating food sacrificed to idols; this was the equivalent of street food. These Christians realized that this food was dedicated to false gods and that the dedication was, therefore, irrelevant (1 Cor. 8:1-6) and caused the Christian no harm. But younger Christians hadn't arrived at this conclusion and were stumbling over such behavior.

1 Corinthians 8:10-13 (NRSV)

10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge [that eating food sacrificed to idols is fine], eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Main Point: *True generosity is the willingness to give up in our strength (freedom) what will harm others in their weakness. This means that we must be careful in the way that we live, especially in a world so fluent in moral "freedoms." We ought to be scripturally considerate of others in what pictures we post, what words we use, and what things we endorse. Christian care*

requires that we ask questions of everything we do. The more we lead, the more we self-scrutinize.

(3) Sexual Purity: We often believe that the sexual revolution of the 1960s was the first of its kind, but we would be wrong. Paul was dealing with sexually explicit behavior on a grand scale and was no stranger to wanting to bring spiritual life into destructive worldly conduct that had seeped into the church. In fact, some of the most problematic texts in Paul's letters to the Corinthians are *because* of immoral, pagan influence of a sexual nature.

a) For example, when Paul discusses "head coverings" in chapter 11, using the Greek word *katalyptein*, many scholars now believe it should be translated as "binding of the hair" (vv. 5-7). (Without context, we could now create strange twentieth-century doctrines about braids). But when we consider that one of the telltale marks to advertise that you were a prostitute for Aphrodite was "binding of the hair," we understand that Paul was actually calling male and female Christians out from a former way of life!

But Paul appeals to the preeminent example of sexual purity, that of single-partner, heterosexual marriage, as his basis for teaching to the entire church (7:1-40):

1 Corinthians 7:2-4 (NRSV)

2 But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

The significance of Paul's teaching must not be lost here. Not only is he appealing to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus as his basis for arguing single-partner, heterosexual marriage, but he is asserting that it is only in this context that God intends sexual activity. *The weight of this is enormous in today's America.*

Application: In western Christian culture, it has become increasingly popular to include gay marriage into the Christian canon of accepted moral virtues in order to show acceptance to the greater LGBTQ community. Just recently, a high-profile blogger and her husband, a pastor, were asked if they thought homosexual marriage was "holy," to which they replied that they did. They cited three books in favor of their position, recent scholarship, and twelve months of prayer as the basis for their decision. And just two weekends ago, women from our church attended a popular woman's conference where one of the main speakers announced on Facebook that she had divorced her husband and was moving in with her lesbian girlfriend.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus, if we are to be Christians, we must be people who are bound to the three-legged propositions of (1) *the scriptures*, (2) *the tradition of the church*, and (3) *personal*

experience; one alone is not meant to overthrow the other two, but they are to be esteemed in concert with one another.

A pastoral answer: In answering whether or not God thinks gay marriage is holy, I believe, firstly, that a seasoned pastor would have labored much more solemnly with the question, and considered the scriptural precedent of the Bible, the long history of the church, and the position of the rest of the worldwide bride of Christ before giving any answer.

Secondly, while there may be some who argue that whenever homosexuality is mentioned in scripture it is used to describe sinful acts done against others (*arsenokoites*), there remains no evidence of a single scripture to the affirmative. *In other words, nowhere are we instructed to affirmatively pursue homosexual marriage as something that pleases God as Paul does here. Not once.*

Instead, we have spiritual doctors running around trying to practice medicine without ever having undergone training.

"If we do go beyond the actual words of Scripture, as we all do at times to develop and express our theology (our set of ideas about God), let us recognize when, how, and why we are doing this, and be careful not to put our doctrinal formulations—as helpful as they may be—on the level of Scripture."

Dr. Scot McKnight

It is the position of New Life that homosexuality is a sin. But I'd like to submit that there is a far more high-profile sin which we should be going after:

(4) Love: In what may be the second most quoted passage of scripture, read in nearly every north American wedding inside or outside of a church, Paul seems to hang his entire argument for the behavior of the Corinthian church on chapter 13. He summarizes:

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (NRSV)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Doctrinally, the Christian church at large is right to and must identify homosexual activity and marriage as a sin, but what we must *never* do is treat anyone in the LGBTQ any less loving than we would treat ourselves. Where *we* have sinned is our gross mistreatment and abuse of other image bearers, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Where we've gone wrong: In our attempt to correct the sinful behavior of the church we have tried to make something else that is sinful not a sin.

In other words:

- We are trying to balance out the hate others have experienced in the church by stripping homosexual sin from the pages of the bible.
- We're hoping to correct our own unloving behavior by rescinding a scriptural mandate for single-partner, heterosexual marriage as being too inclusive.
- We have tried to use the bible's stance on homosexuality as a moral scapegoat for our own sin.

When we get love wrong and strip it from its biblical roots, we get everything else wrong as a result.

The cultural problem, ironically, is not homosexual sin, it is the sin of Christians not sacrificially loving others. Just this week, I had a life-long family friend, someone I've always known as a lesbian, confide in me that she was not gay until the church accused her of being so, publicly called her out in front of the whole congregation, and escorted her off the property. She's been living with that bitterness as a lesbian woman for forty years.

Conclusion:

If there is one thing I leave you with this morning, it's that we *must* get this love thing right.

1 Corinthians 14:1b (NLT)

“Let love be your highest goal!”

The world is not waiting for us to change our doctrine on sin, they are waiting for us to get our view of love right.

Why did Paul write “The Love Chapter” to the Corinthians? Because if those who most notoriously had love all backward could get it right, there would be no greater people to express God's redeeming love to the world.

In all of Paul's efforts, I believe he didn't want the city renamed as *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*, “Corinth, the Praise of Julius,” but rather *Colonia Laus Lesu Corinthiensis*, “Corinth, the Praise of Jesus.”

How do we make northern New York the “Praise of Jesus?” By loving people so extravagantly that they have no alternative but to turn from sin and run to Jesus. Why? Because they've seen him modeled so perfectly in his followers. You and me.

