

The Wreckage and the Fire PT 2

4. The Mission of the Cross Against the Culture

Acts 18:9 records a remarkable moment. “Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you... for I **HAVE MANY PEOPLE IN THIS CITY.**’”

That statement is astonishing. God looked at a corrupt city filled with idolatry and immorality and said, “I have many people in this city.”

Many of those people had not yet heard the Gospel. Many were still trapped in sin. Many were still living in darkness.

- God already saw them as future sons and daughters.
- God always sees the harvest before the harvest appears.
- He sees redeemed lives before redemption happens.
- He sees transformed hearts before transformation begins.

That promise sustained Paul in Corinth.

Acts 18:11 says he remained there a year and six months teaching the Word of God. And that teaching produced a church.

A church that would later struggle with division, immorality, pride, lawsuits, confusion about marriage, chaos in worship, abuse of spiritual gifts, and misunderstanding about resurrection.

- Yet through all those struggles, the Spirit of God never abandoned the church.
- Because God's strategy has never been to wait for perfect people.
- His strategy has always been to redeem imperfect people and then transform them over time.

Conclusion

The church at Corinth forces us to confront an important truth.

- The church has never been flawless, but it has always been fought for by God.
- The early church was powerful and imperfect at the same time.
- And that reality should reshape how we view the church today.

The church is not a museum for saints - It is a hospital for sinners. It is not a gathering of perfected people - It is a community of people being perfected.

Over the coming weeks we are going to walk through the letters Paul wrote to Corinth.

- We will explore their struggles.
- We will examine their questions.
- We will confront their compromises.

But we will also witness something remarkable. Through every correction, every rebuke, and every challenge, the Spirit of God continues to work.

Because God does not abandon His church when it becomes messy. God sees the redeemed before they are redeemed!

He steps into the mess and begins the work of transformation.

The Wreckage and the Fire – Corinthians Series

Sermon 2: The Fracture Beneath the Fire

1 Corinthians 1:7–13 - “So that you **COME SHORT IN NO GIFT**, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ...Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our

Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and **THAT THERE BE NO DIVISIONS AMONG YOU...**”

Introduction

Is it possible for SPIRITUAL POWER and SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY occupy the same room?

One of the most uncomfortable truths in the entire New Testament appears in the opening chapter of First Corinthians. It is a truth that disrupts many of our assumptions about spirituality.

It is the reality that supernatural activity and spiritual immaturity can coexist in the same church at the same time. We tend to believe that if the Holy Spirit is moving powerfully, then the people must automatically be spiritually mature. But Corinth destroys that equation.

Paul opens this letter with a stunning statement about this church.

1 Corinthians 1:7 - “You come short in no gift.”

The Greek phrase is:

mēdeni charismati hysteronomenous.

It means *they were* **LACKING IN ABSOLUTELY NO MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT.**

- This was not a spiritually dry church.
- This was not a powerless church.
- This was not a church struggling to experience the supernatural.
- This church was overflowing with spiritual gifts.

Tongues were operating. Prophecy was flowing. Words of knowledge were active. Revelation was happening. The Holy Spirit was moving among them.

And yet within the same congregation Paul would soon expose **division, immorality, arrogance, lawsuits, abuse of spiritual gifts, doctrinal confusion, and deep immaturity.**

Which forces us to confront a theological tension many believers do not know what to do with.

The PRESENCE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS does not automatically mean the PRESENCE OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY.

- The gifts of the Spirit reveal God's grace. But the fruit of the Spirit reveals God's character.
- The gifts demonstrate the Spirit working **through** us. The fruit reveals the Spirit working **within** us.

Corinth had fire. But beneath that fire there were fractures. And Paul begins this letter by exposing the first fracture - Division.

The Fire That Filled the Church

Before Paul corrects the church, he first acknowledges something important. The Spirit of God was genuinely at work in Corinth.

The Structure of Paul's Opening (1:1–9)

- Verses 1–9: Dense theological greeting — establishes identity before addressing failure
- Called saints, enriched in every way, not lacking any gift — spoken before a single rebuke
- This is Hebraic covenant structure: speak the name over the person before you call them to walk in it
 - God called Abraham 'father of many' while he was still childless
 - Paul calls Corinth 'saints' while they are still carnal

1 Corinthians 1:7 - “You come short in no gift.”

Paul does not flatter churches. He corrects them. So when he says this church lacked no spiritual gift, he means it. This congregation was extraordinarily active in the supernatural.

In fact, by the time we reach chapter 12, Paul will spend an entire section explaining how spiritual gifts were functioning among them.

But here is the tension...While the gifts were active, the character of the church had not caught up with the grace God had given them.

This is why later Paul will say something shocking:

1 Corinthians 3:1 - "I could not speak to you as spiritual people but as carnal...as infants in Christ."

- Think about that. A church rich in spiritual gifts. But still spiritually immature.

This is one of the most important theological lessons the Corinthian letters teach.

SPIRITUAL POWER is not the same thing as SPIRITUAL FORMATION.

- A person can operate in a gift and still lack maturity.
- A person can prophesy and still struggle with pride.

- A person can speak in tongues and still struggle with jealousy.
- A person can be used by God and still need transformation.

The gift is God's grace flowing through a vessel. Character is what the vessel is made of. Corinth had extraordinary gifts. But their character had not yet been shaped to carry the weight of those gifts.

And **WHENEVER GRACE OUTFRONS CHARACTER, FRACTURES BEGIN TO APPEAR.**

Which leads us to the first fracture Paul exposes.

1. The Fracture in the Fire of Cult Personalities

1 Corinthians 1:10 - *"Now I urge you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be **NO DIVISIONS** among you, but that you be **PERFECTLY UNITED** in the same mind and the same judgment."*

- **Perfectly united — katartizo (Greek) — to mend torn fishing nets. Surgical, deliberate restoration.**

- Paul is not speaking theoretically — the schismata (tears) are already there
- Chloe's people have reported the divisions directly to Paul
- **Divisions** - Paul uses the Greek word **schisma** - It literally means **a tear in fabric.**

Paul is saying the church in Corinth had begun to rip apart. But what caused the tear?

1 Corinthians 1:12 reveals the problem: **Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.”**

“I am of Paul.” “I am of Apollos.” “I am of Cephas.” “I am of Christ.”

The believers had begun aligning themselves around personalities. Each group began forming its own identity, not around Christ, but personalities. And slowly the church began to fracture.

The Four Factions (v. 12)

- **I am of Paul:** The founder faction — represents apostolic authority and Jewish Christianity
- **I am of Apollos:** The intellectual faction — Alexandrian eloquence, rhetorical polish, philosophical sophistication
- **I am of Cephas:** The Jerusalem faction — Jewish law-observance and traditional authority
- **I am of Christ:** The **MOST SELF-RIGHTEOUS FACTION** — using Christ's name as a tribal banner to distinguish themselves
 - Sounds spiritual – it is actually the most divisive.

Using Jesus as a weapon of separation.

The Anatomy of Church Division

- **DIVISION never begins as a THEOLOGICAL DISPUTE** — it begins as a **LOYALTY DISPUTE**
 - **The Corinthians were not fighting about doctrine yet — they were fighting about which preacher they preferred**

- **The men they divided over (Paul, Apollos, Peter) would have been horrified to know their names were tribal flags**
- Rabbi Abraham Heschel on Israel's prophetic failure:
 - What broke the prophetic heart was not that Israel worshipped other gods — **it was that they treated the living God as one option among several**
 - This is precisely the Corinthian sin: **Christ was not DENIED — He was RANKED**

1 Corinthians 1:13 - “Is Christ divided?”

- The implication is clear.
- **Christ cannot be divided - BUT THE CHURCH CAN BE.**
 - The answer is obviously no — but their behavior was answering yes
 - They were treating Paul's ministry as a competing franchise

Division does not always start with heresy. It usually starts with preference dressed up in spiritual language.

Before we stand in judgment over Corinth, we need to sit with that. Because this is not a first-century problem. This is the problem of every generation that has confused the servant with the Master.

2. Forging the Fraction in the Fire

Paul's Response Redefines the Entire Mission - 1 Cor 1:14-17

Paul Refuses to Defend Himself

- He does not adjudicate between the factions or **champion himself**
 - He redirects every eye back to the cross
- Almost relieved he baptized so few — his name cannot be cleanly attached to a faction

He is deliberately de-centering himself — The antidote to personality cult is apostolic humility

Verse 17 — The Central Statement

"Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, LEST THE CROSS OF CHRIST BE EMPTIED OF ITS POWER." —

1 Corinthians 1:17

- **Emptied of its power — kenoo (Greek) — to drain, make void, hollow out**

When you package the cross in human performance, you drain it of the very thing that makes it work

- The cross does not need decoration or intellectual sophistication — it needs proclamation
- Direct assault on Corinthian values: the city worshipped rhetorical performance
- Paul says: the gospel does not run on rhetoric. It runs on resurrection power.
- **The moment you make the preacher the point, you have emptied the sermon of everything that matters**

What the Cross Demands of a Church

- The cross is the most leveling force in human history
- No aristocracy at the foot of the cross — no Paul faction, no Apollos faction in the shadow of crucifixion
- You cannot organize a status hierarchy around a man who was stripped naked and executed as a common criminal
- The cross obliterates every human distinction: Jew and Greek, slave and free, Paul and Apollos — all of it collapses at Calvary
- This is why Paul will spend chs. 1–2 **pressing the theology of the cross as corrective to every Corinthian division**
 - God chose the foolish things to shame the wise
 - The weak things to shame the strong
 - The despised things to nullify what is — why? So no human being may boast before God (1:29)

Tertullian (2nd c. North African church father): The cross is the hinge on which all Christian ethics turns. To depart

from the ethic of the cross is not merely to sin — it is to reconstruct a pre-Christian worldview inside a Christian building

Exact diagnosis of Corinth: A Christian name with a pagan operating system.

You can have a cross on your steeple and a pagan value system in your pews. THE BUILDING DOES NOT SANCTIFY THE CULTURE INSIDE IT.

CONCLUSION | THE CHALLENGE

- Corinth was not a failure — it was a process
- God did not abandon it because it was messy — He wrote it two letters. He sent Timothy. He paid multiple visits. He wrestled, rebuked, wept, and refused to let go.

The lie the modern church has believed: the early church was a gold standard of purity we have fallen short of

- Corinth dismantles that lie with every chapter

The early church was powerful and imperfect simultaneously — and God worked in it anyway

- Because the fire was never dependent on the perfection of the vessel — only on the faithfulness of the God who lit it
- Every church has its own version of the Corinthian problem
- The question is not whether you have divisions, immaturity, and carnality mixed with genuine moves of the Spirit
- The question is: will you let the apostolic voice of Scripture speak into those places?

PAUL DID NOT COME TO CORINTH TO VALIDATE THE CHURCH. HE CAME TO MATURE IT.