

That Messed Up Church
1 Corinthians 1 – 1-7-24 CCC

State of the City – Amp it up

GCF match – 175,000 becomes 1.4 Million – Grab a Bible or read the screen

Read the text All of 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 – Logan?

Stories of Church Messes

Let's be honest. Churches are messy. The church as a whole is messy. Even CCC is messy.

I think I was most significantly shocked by this the first time it hit home. I was a student with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at a leadership camp in Michigan when an announcement came through. The president of our organization was stepping down because he had an affair. Now, I knew these things happen in theory. But when it is "YOUR GUY" – the president, the paragon of virtue, you just expect more.

Here are some other things I have experienced in my years of church life:

- A District Superintendent was caught pilfering money from the district budget into his own personal account.
- A Young lady – becomes pregnant in college – and be rejected by church leaders when they need the help of the church the most.
- A man, married to an alcoholic woman who was violent when she was drunk – both toward him and the kids. He tried to save the marriage, but was also embarrassed to tell the church that he was a victim of a violent woman. When he got divorced, he was told that he could not receive communion any more because he didn't have the right reasons for divorce.
- A Public figure on the world stage – is discovered to have had secret sexual lives. Prostitutes, massage parlors that he co-owned, even child abuse.
- A church divides over speaking in tongues – and kids in the youth group are banned from socializing with their friends who went to the 'other church'
- I could tell a lot of stories because – to be quite frank – a pastor sees the underbelly of the church and the sordid details of people's lives more than anyone.

One time, I went to court to testify about the character of a person who was dramatically transformed by Jesus – and the young lady who was the lawyer cross examining me said "Is it true, Reverend Ashton, that you are trained as a pastor to see the very best in people and are rarely exposed to the more difficult problems in life?" I had to laugh.

I don't need to go on, do I? Church hurt is real. And as long as the church welcomes people who are a mess – even collects people who are a mess, then the church will be a mess. If you ever find a perfect church – don't go! You'll mess it up. Messes in churches are as common as sick people in hospitals. Now, you hope that the church is a place of healing and transformation... just like a hospital is a place of

healing. But there are a bunch of people who are in process at church – and a lot of wounding takes place as a result. Because we expect a certain level of righteousness – especially of our leaders.

Interestingly, the Bible has a lot to say about churches that are messy. I would contend that the messiest of all is the Church at Corinth – in Greece. And there is a letter written to this church that shows just how messy it is.

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

Stop here. I love that in the ancient world, they began their letters with who it is from! Isn't this smart? Because we always turn to the last page when we start to see who it is from... but back then, they just started with it. Here are our two characters.

Paul- Maybe the second most influential name in Christianity. He was an early convert, a genius, a missionary, and a church planter. 13 of the books of the Bible were penned by Paul – mostly letters to people he knew or churches he planted. These letters are called Epistles. Yes, virginia, an Epistle is a letter, not a female Apostle.

Paul – had spent 1.5 years there along with a fabulous cast of friends – Erastus, Priscilla, Aquilla, Titius Justus, Crispus – a breakfast cereal lover and others. Homework: Read Acts 18

Sosthenes is much lesser known. Only two references in the Bible and while they are probably the same person, it is possible they are not. In Acts 18, there is a public trial of Paul in Ephesus. And when the proconsul refuses to take the case, the crowd goes crazy and beats the Synagogue leader – who brought the case against Paul – named “Sosthenes”. So he would have been a persecutor at this time.

But by the time Paul writes the letter, Sosthenes is Paul's travelling companion. A total turnaround and a testimony to the ways in which God transforms rebels into the redeemed.

Paul and Sosthenes are in Ephesus, writing to their old pals in Corinth.

²To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

So this is to the church. The word church in the Greek, *ecclesia*, simply means “assembly” to the assembly of God in Corinth.

Geography – MAP – key to getting into Achaia

- Two ports
- Cargo sent across land – What do sailors do? Gamble and prostitute
- Freshly named as the new capitol of Achaia – power and population moving from Athens here
- Paul saw this as strategic

And then he gives them a shout-out, an identity statement that is powerful. *Sanctified and called to be HOLY!* Sometimes we just read by these greetings, but let me encourage you to slowly check out what he is saying: to those sanctified in Christ Jesus... what does that mean – to be sanctified is to be transformed for the good, to be cleaned up, to be made new. Oh, when fresh laundry comes out of the dryer it is sanctified. When my awesome white and orange car comes out of the car wash, it is

sanctified. When people are sanctified, they are made pure in Christ Jesus. And that is you, church. This is who you are!

But there is more. You are sanctified and called to be his holy people. Don't miss that. You are set apart from the rest of humanity to do holy things, special things, God honoring things. You are the people who get to do the cool stuff – the eternal stuff. You are the good China, for special occasions. You are the game ball – not for practice, but for the games. To be Holy is to be set apart special. How does it make you feel that to God, you are the clean and holy ones? Tell the person next to you that they are clean and Holy.

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, he has two key blessings for them. Grace. God's undeserved favor. Last week, I did a funeral for Sam "The Hugger" McKinley. You may have known him. He waited for me every week with his walker, donned "The Mercedes". On the way IN to church he would hug me and say "I love my pastor." Count on it. 100%. Even if the elders were mad or the budget was bad or I got flaming emails, I still could count on Sam to love me. Even if my own mother rejected me, Sam still loved me. Well, I did not do anything to deserve that love. No special treatment, no coffees, no 1-1 discipleship. He gave me love I never earned. He loved me because of HIS love, not because of my deservedness. He was a reflection of God's grace to me. Undeserved favor. That is Grace – and he extends it to you. "I love my Terri. I love my Jacob. I love my Sam." Grace to you.

Grace and Peace to you. While Grace is the Greek expression of greeting, Peace – or Shalom – is the Jewish term of greeting. It is a wish for the wholeness, fullness and peace of God to fill you. Shalom to you. So Paul, right away defines them as shiny and set apart and wishes them grace and peace. Oh, I could go on, but I must press through.

Now, Paul is about to identify about thirty messes in five categories of church hurt in this book. From disunity to sexual immorality to lawsuits to food to the worship gathering to bad doctrine. Serious church hurt. And he wants to set people up for healing in his greeting.

So, let me ask: What do we do about church hurt? Let me give a brief overview now, and we will unpack issue by issue as the next 16 weeks unfold.

- 1) **Define church hurt as immoral.** At its best, churches breed healing, forgiveness, encouragement, humility, prayer, wisdom, good choices and care for the most vulnerable. This is normative in churches and the experience of thousands at CCC. But when the church is NOT at its best, it can be hurtful – or even abusive. Here is the hardest part. Human beings – especially in positions of authority – sin against you and it has leverage because of the connection with God. It also paints God in a bad light when he is misrepresented. It can cause discouragement, disillusionment, anger, confusion and bitterness toward God. It can cause identity issues, self-loathing, and legalism. And when that is the case – and it is real – we need to identify it and call it out as wrong. It does not help to sweep it under the rug and let it fester there. It must be brought into the light and called what it is.
- 2) **Separate church hurt from God's love** – It is really important to ask – does this action correlate with God's character or fly in the face of God's character? God shows up in scripture as loving, just, kind to the hurting, love, peace, joy, kindness, gentle and did I say love? Look at the life of

Jesus in the scriptures... or even as he is portrayed in the Chosen – and ask if the hurt done to you is consistent or contrary to that. You need to know that Jesus' harshest words were reserved for abusers of kids and unhealthy religious leaders.

- a. Further, Jesus identified with the abused, hurting and marginalized. This is the upside down gospel of the kingdom
- 3) **Recover your identity** – This is the point of 1 Corinthians 1 – to deeply root the identity of the Corinthians in the gospel as a set up for the rest of the book to apply the gospel to their situations.
- a. Seek support outside of the church – this might be in a counselors office, in a recovery group or in another church. If your church culture is toxic or abusive, your smartest move may be to leave that church and restart in a healthy place

⁴ I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— ⁶ God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord

Paul is both giving thanks and establishing identity. Did you notice? – Now for the next couple of minutes, I want you to hear these things for YOU. Not in theory, but internalize them as if Paul, or Jesus himself was reminding you of YOUR identity!

- **V. 4 You are a people of grace.** – In other words, you have won the spiritual lottery. You didn't earn it, but you have all of the love and power of God, plus eternal life gifted to you. Don't forget that you are RICH in all of the best ways!
- **V. 5 You have been enriched** – Because of Jesus' power, your life is changed. You are different, better more like him. You have the power to say no to addiction. No to unfaithfulness. No to dishonesty. Yes to humility. Yes to life. Yes to spiritual power. You are not the same old person, you have the holy spirit in you.
- **V. 7 You have spiritual gifts – all you need.** Did you know that God gives you a spiritual superpower when he makes you and calls it out when he redeems you? Some of you have supernatural levels of discernment. Some have supernatural powers to host people. Some have supernatural powers to heal. Some have supernatural powers to teach. To lead, to shepherd. I am not just talking about a developed skill, but the ability from God to make things happen that don't make sense. Then he puts you in a room with a thousand others who have different gifts and says – Superfriends, have a ball making a difference for the kingdom!
- **V. 8-9 God has you on the long path – firm, blameless til the day of Jesus, faithful and living in you** – God has you in the palm of his hand. The road may be bumpy, but he is not letting go. He loves you more than you can imagine and he is in this for the long run – like the everlasting life eternity long run.

- 4) **Reclaim your spiritual practices** – Sometimes, spiritual practices get mixed up in the abuse – like maybe someone berated you with Bible verses. Or maybe they betrayed your trust under the guise of ‘praying for you’. The frustration of spiritual abuse is that it can taint the very practices designed to bring healing. But once you recover your identity in JESUS and not in any human or church, you can reclaim your practices. Don’t feel guilty if you have unpleasant feelings around church attendance, Bible Study, prayer – if you have been abused spiritually, somebody stole the joy of lifegiving practices from you. Don’t empower THEM to continue abuse by eliminating the practice. Reclaim these under the banner of God’s love for your edification, growth and even just pleasure.
- 5) Above all, remember, **God is against “church hurt.”** He sees what happens in the dark places of people’s hearts and relationships and it grieves him. But God desires to meet you in the deepest, most sensitive places and bring healing. He will never force or control or manipulate. He will restore goodness in your life.

As we come to a close today, I’d like to end with a prayer for those who have experienced hurt in the church. So please stand. But before we go there, I just want to apologize. I know some people have been hurt by me. Some at CCC. Some are here because you came from a toxic environment. Some were hurt by a pastor – maybe that pastor was your Dad even.

So, I’d like to apologize for myself, on behalf of our church, and on behalf of the church everywhere. Maybe these are words you need to hear... My heart breaks for you. And I just want to say from the bottom of my heart I am sorry. I am sorry for hurtful words. I am sorry for exclusionary practices. I am sorry for racism and injustice perpetrated toward you. I am so sorry if you were excluded from influence because you are a woman. I am sorry for manipulation of the Bible or Prayer or Preaching. I am sorry for physical and sexual abuse. With all of the heaviness and sincerity of heart, I apologize for the wrongs done against you. I am deeply saddened for how this has affected your relationship with God and your view of him and how this has cut you off from life. I hope you can forgive me, forgive the church, and run to the healing arms of God’s love.

Prayer