

Mount Pisgah A.M.E Church

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Bible Study, Wednesday, September 16, 2015

Survey of the Bible

Lesson 48: 1 Corinthians

The Book of 1 Corinthians

While the book of Acts is largely a historical chronicle, and the letter to the Romans is a theological treatise with applications, this first letter to the Corinthian church is more of a letter to address specific issues and problems in the church. Building on the understanding of the implications of the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians attempts to apply principles to deal with the issues of a church struggling to define itself in the midst of an immoral and pagan society (a society out of which most of its members have been “called out” of). The author addresses specific issues in church life such as factions, lawsuits, immorality, questionable practices, and behavior and attitudes in worship, and shares words of counsel to answer questions that have been raised.

Author

Paul is acknowledged as the author both in the letter itself, by early church fathers, and by almost all scholars. One of the first Bishops of Rome (i.e., Popes) Clement referred to the letter in 95 AD in a continuing effort to address division and factions in the church at Corinth.

The Times and background of 1 Corinthians

Corinth was a key city in Ancient Greece. It was situated on a narrow region (isthmus) that connected two land masses of Greek territory, and between the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea. Corinth was destroyed in 146 BC, as the Romans were conquering Greek territory, however the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar rebuilt the city in 46 BC and it grew and prospered. Because it sat between the two seas, many travelers towed their vessels and cut through Corinth to go from one sea to the other, rather than taking the dangerous sea voyage around. Thus it became a very important and wealthy trade city.

With prosperity came many cultures and different forms of worship. The city was filled with shrines and temples, the most prominent being the Temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love), at which worshippers made free use of almost 1,000 shrine prostitutes. Corinth became an entertainment center, and also a center for vice and corruption. Corinth became so notorious for its evils that the term *Korinthiazoma* (“to act like a Corinthian”) became a synonym for hedonism and prostitution.

Paul visited Corinth during his 2nd Missionary journey. After being diverted around Asia (Ephesus, etc.) by the Holy Spirit, Paul instead ended up in Macedonia and Greece. He visited Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, and was chased out of each by upset traditionalists who rejected his message. When he first arrived, he worked as a tentmaker with Aquila and Priscilla while he “reasoned with the Jews” in the synagogue. Soon Silas and Timothy joined him there and he was able to focus on ministry full time. He was kicked out of the temple (Acts 18:6) he established a house church next door that became the Corinthian Church. Paul stayed there for 18 months during 51 and 52 AD. When he departed, Apollos came to minister there (Acts 18:24-28).

While preaching and teaching in Ephesus on his 3rd Missionary journey, Paul got reports from one of the disciples there named Chloe that there were arguments and confusion in the church (1 Cor. 1:11). Paul

wrote this letter (epistle) as a response to those concerns. Apparently this was actually his second of what may have been a total of four letters to them (see 1 Cor. 5:9 and 2 Cor. 7:8), however this and 2 Corinthians are the two containing the essence of his message. Given that Paul was planning to leave Ephesus and go to Jerusalem for Pentecost, it appears that the letter was written in 56 AD.

Overview

Through the missionary efforts of Paul and others, the church has been established in Corinth, but Paul finds it difficult to keep Corinth out of the church. The pagan lifestyles exert pressure on the Christians there. In this letter, Paul deals firmly with problems such as divisiveness, false teaching, immorality, lawsuits, selfishness, abuses in worship, and unbelief about the resurrection. Paul gives words that he ascertains are “from the Spirit,” and also words that are his own opinion (he clearly states these). After an introductory greeting, Paul deals with Chloe’s report of the divisions. He then answers questions about immorality, the settling of disputes, marriage and “personal freedoms.” Because this is hard feedback, Paul gives an “interlude” about the standing as an apostle upon which he says these things (ch. 9). He then goes on to address rituals in worship, the appropriate use of spiritual gifts, and finally, questions about the resurrection. He closes the letter with a piece about offerings, and a series of greetings for the believers there.

Outline

- I. Addressing Chloe’s Reports of Division (1:1-4:21)**
 - A. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-1:9)
 - B. Report of Divisions (1:10-1:17)
 - C. Reasons for Divisions (1:18-4:21)
 1. Misunderstanding of The Gospel Message (1:18-3:4)
 - a) The Gospel is not Earthly Wisdom (1:18-2:5)
 - b) The Gospel is Heavenly Wisdom (2:6-2:16)
 2. Rock Star Religion (3:1-4:5)
 - a) Immature believers need superstars to follow (3:1-3:4)
 - b) Leaders are merely Co-Laborers with God (3:5-3:9)
 - c) Leaders are Accountable to God (3:10-4:5)
 3. Paul and Apollos are not Rock Stars, People Prop Them Up to Feel Proud of Themselves (4:6-4:21)
- II. Issues that Divide (5:1-6:20)**
 - A. Isolating Immorality and Insulating the Body (5:1-5:13)
 - B. Lawsuits and Inability to Settle Matters within (6:1-6:11)
 - C. Participation in the Cult of Sexual Immorality (6:12-6:20)
- III. Various Other Questions (7:1-15:58)**
 - A. Paul’s Counsel on Marriage and Preparedness For The Lord (7:1-7:40)
 1. Principles for Married Life (7:1-7:9)
 2. Principles for The Married Believer (7:10-7:16)
 3. Principles for Abiding In Christ (7:17-7:24)
 4. Principles for Unmarried (7:25-7:38)
 5. Principles for Remarried (7:39-7:40)
 - B. Participation in Rituals: Rights Versus Responsibilities (8:1-11:1)
 1. Principles of Liberty and the Weaker Brother (8:1-8:13)
 2. Paul’s Ethical Standing for Saying Such Things (9:1-9:27)
 3. Scriptures as an Example – avoid paganism (10:1-10:13)
 4. Use Liberty to Glorify God (10:24-11)
 - C. Public Worship (11:2-14:40)

1. Public Prayer as Public Witness (11:2-11:16)
 2. Abuse of The Lord's Supper (11:17-11:34)
 3. The Spiritual Gifts – Showing of and Envy versus Unity (12:1-14:40)
 - a) What Spirit is In Control? (12:1-12:3)
 - b) Diversity of Gifts (12:4-12:11)
 - c) Every Gift important (12:12-12:31)
 - d) Love is Central Motive for Gift Use (13:1-13:13)
 - e) Superiority of Prophecy (14:1-14:6)
 - f) The Gift of Public Tongues (14:7-14:25)
 - g) Exercising Gifts in Worship (14:26-14:40)
 - D. The Resurrection (15:1-15:58)
 - a) The Essence of The Gospel (15:1-15:11)
 - b) The Importance of The Resurrection (15:12-15:19)
 - c) The Order of Resurrections (15:20-15:28)
 - d) The Foolishness of Unbelief in The Resurrection (15:29-15:34)
 - e) The Resurrection Body (15:35-15:58)
- IV. **Final Concerns (16:1-16:24)**
- A. Offerings (16:1-16:4)
 - B. Greetings (16:5-16:24)

Some Keys to understanding The Book of 1 Corinthians

- Corinth was an entertainment city. People would travel there to “get their <whatever> on” during holidays, and “what happened in Corinth stayed in Corinth”
- The basic theme of this epistle is the application of Christian principles to carnality in the individual, in the church, and in the surrounding culture.
- 1 Corinthians is written against a cultural backdrop that must be taken into consideration. Paul's concern was that Christians represent a difference from the immorality that existed there. Hence, *some* of Paul's instructions were written to address specific behaviors and symbols that were common in Corinthians culture. An uncovered head on a woman in Corinth, for example, was a symbol of “availability,” and Christians were instructed to avoid looking like those who were participating in the cults and carnality.
- The cross of Christ is a message that is designed to transform the lives of believers and make them different as people and as a corporate body from the surrounding world. Fracturing, or division, in the church would have robbed the message of its power.
- Some of the Church celebrations in Corinth had turned into parties in which people's self-indulgence was getting out of control.
- 1 Corinthians emphasizes and explains the doctrine of bodily resurrection – that Jesus actually rose bodily and so will we at Christ's second coming.
- The preaching of the cross was more nonsensical then than it is now (we're more used to it). It seemed morbid to preach about a cross, a well-known symbol of Roman torture, as a means of salvation (sort of like preaching about a hangman's noose).

Some Lessons from 1 Corinthians

- Neither leadership nor follow-ship in God's church should ever be about personalities or charisma (a word that is related to “charisms” or gifts and graces). It should be about the Spirit's power to change lives on display.
- God often uses those who are seemingly unlikely as instruments for exhibiting his power.

- When we are saved, God places God's spirit in us. God gives us, through the Spirit, access to information and wisdom that no one else has. One must have (and be following) the spirit to access it.
- God uses many to pour into people and establish them in the truth. It is a group effort. Never be discouraged if you can't close the deal with someone – perhaps God only called you to plant.
- Our bodies are the place where the Spirit dwells. We should treat them accordingly.
- It is important to quarantine corruption and/or disobedience in God's house before it spreads
- God's has gifted each of us uniquely, and all are important. We should never elevate one or denigrate another because of what they can do or can't do. Love is the guiding factor.
- Participation in the practices of those around us must be evaluated in the light of what God's Word teaches us. We ought to infect the environment more than the environment affects us.
- There are times when one must sacrifice to protect one's personal freedoms to protect one's witness, and the witness of the church.
- God is a God of decency and order. We ought to be as concerned that people are getting the message as we are about how powerfully we are expressing it.
- The fulfillment of God's promise is coming. We ought to be free from concern and focused on doing all that we can for Christ as we await the great day of resurrection.