

The Gospel: the Good, Bad & the Ugly | I Corinthians | 9/28 & 10/1, 2017

Before we wade into First Corinthians I want to share with you a positive realization that I am experiencing in forcing myself to read, comprehend, digest and craft a message from an entire letter. It is allowing me time to enter into the dynamics and situations that surround the letters themselves. It is more normal for me to jump from the “situation” to the text from which normal messages are based. This extra time is allowing a unique perspective to come into view, even though it is very faint. I trust you are experiencing a similar experience while reading through entire letters.

First Corinthians is a long letter filled with diverse subjects. The church (probably house churches) in Corinth was planted by Paul on his second missionary journey in 50-52 A.D. This letter, written around 55, is his second letter to the church [see 5:9 referring to his first letter]. We are only talking about these believers being three to five years old in the faith! The array of subjects dealt with in the letter stem from: (1) his time with them; (2) his first letter; (3) a letter that the church sent with questions [see 7:1]; (4) news from “Chloe’s people” in 1:11, possibly a house church; and (5) individual leaders corresponding with Paul. No wonder the letter is so fragmented in its subject matter.

This letter presents to us *the Good, the Bad and the Ugly* of a very young community of faith. We not only learn “good” things from the bad and ugly – we gain navigational tools in order to live well in community. Following are three scholars and their perspective on this letter and Corinth itself. There are main subjects that seem to pop up in different places throughout the letter. These include: wisdom and knowledge; the gospel (which I will explore in a word study below); the Trinity - Father, Christ the Lord, and the Holy Spirit all have prominent positions; body language is laced through the letter, body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the body having many members; agape love and gifts; the resurrection and our eternal bodies; building up and divisions; Paul’s authority of lack thereof.

C.E. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Harper & Row, 1968).

I believe that the church in our generation needs to rediscover the apostolic Gospel; and for this it needs the Epistle to the Romans. It needs also to rediscover the relation between this Gospel and its order, discipline, worship, and ethics; and for this it needs the First Epistle to the Corinthians. v-vi

The epistle was not a successful document. Affairs in Corinth, and relations between the Corinthian church and the apostle, deteriorated. It seems that Paul paid a visit to Corinth, which ended in something near disaster, certainly in deep sorrow for him (2 Cor 2:1; 12:14, 21; 18:2). He wrote a severe letter, which cost him many tears (2 Cor 2:4; 7:8). He sent Titus to Corinth, and was overjoyed to hear good news from him (2 Cor 7:6 f.). But seeds of bitterness had been sown; Paul was abused by those who should have defended him (2 Cor 12:11), and his place was usurped by rivals who, though outwardly more impressive, lacked the inward authorization, and the conformity with the passion of Christ, that marked Paul’s apostolic work (2 Cor 12:12 f.)... Here we may note only that at the close of the first century the Corinthian church appears, if we may trust Clement of Rome that worthy presbyters had been deposed, and the church was splitting into factions. 5-6

1 Corinthians is a practical letter addressed to a single, though simple, situation, aimed at telling its readers not so much what they ought to think as what they ought to do—or ought not to do. The practical advice, however, is consciously grounded in theological principles. 17

How may an apostle be known? The Corinthian answer appears to have been: by eloquent speech; by an impressive theology of a Gnostic kind; by authoritarian behaviour. By none of these criteria did Paul qualify. He refused the media of argument and rhetoric, accepted the hardships of a pioneer, and behaved towards his converts with the gentleness of a father rather than the outward authority of a master... In all this, Paul and his fellow-apostles did not stand apart from the church as a whole, but manifested, as a particularly clear example, the pattern of Christian life. 21-22

The Corinthian church in the fifties (and this will doubtless apply to many contemporary societies) had no clearly marked form or structure. It was intensely alive; many spiritual gifts were exercised within it; many persons made their contributions, some large, some small, some quiet and solid, some showy and ephemeral. Paul appears to have made no conscious effort to give the church a permanent shape, but it is possible to see (with the aid of other New Testament books) how Christian life tended to create its own forms on the lines of the ministry of the word, loving service, and community discipline. 24-25

1 Corinthians has the great value of showing theology at work, theology being used as it was intended to be used, in the criticism and establishing of persons, institutions, practices, and ideas. As Biblical theology, theology is the question as to the foundation, as practical theology it is the question as to the aim, as dogmatic theology it is the question as to the content, of the language peculiar to the Church. As students of the New Testament we cannot distinguish biblical, practical, and dogmatic theology, but in 1 Corinthians we see the primary theological conviction of the apostle interrogating a particular church in all these ways; and not only the substance of the conviction but the manner of the interrogation are given us for our learning. 26-27

Corinth – The City

Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*, (Harper , San Francisco 2006).

Corinth, population 50,000. Despite its great prominence in early Christian history; Corinth was a brawling seaport, being notorious for its blatant immorality. Much of its population was transitory—sailors, freebooters, adventurers, swindlers of every sort. Corinth's great commercial advantage came from its location on a narrow isthmus, which offered a very substantial shortcut for westbound shipping from most other Greek ports, including Athens and Thessalonica. Rather than making the long voyage around the large Peloponnesian Peninsula, boats were off-loaded at Corinth and their cargoes hauled a few miles overland to the Adriatic, there to be reloaded and sent on. Sometimes the ships themselves were dragged overland and relaunched!

In 146 BCE [Before the Common Era] Corinth served as headquarters for the Achaean League, which rashly challenged Roman rule. The league was quickly defeated by the Roman Consul Lucius Mummius. As a lesson to all, Corinth's citizens were slaughtered or sold into slavery, and the city was burned and reduced to rubble. The Romans then devoted the site to the gods and prohibited any human habitation. But it was too good a site to be abandoned: in 46 BCE Julius Caesar had Corinth rebuilt and settled with a mixture of retired veterans of the legions and thousands of Rome's 'undesirables.' The results were predictable: "It was the most licentious city in all Greece; and the number of merchants who frequented it caused it to be the favorite resort of courtesans. The patron goddess of the city was Aphrodite, who had a splendid temple—where there were kept more than a thousand sacred female slaves for the service of strangers." 50

Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, (Yale University Press, 1983).

The senatorial province Achaia had its capital at Corinth. Like Thessalonica, Corinth owed its great commercial importance to its location, as Strabo observed: "Corinth is called 'wealthy' because of its commerce, since it lies at the Isthmus and controls two harbors, one of which is near Asia, the other near Italy, and it makes reciprocal exchange of cargoes easy." The two ports were Lechaeon, on the Gulf of Corinth, and Cenchreae, on the Saronian Gulf. The isthmus was narrow enough at Schoenus, just to the north of both these ports that some ships were actually hauled across. Corinth was not so fortunate in survival as Thessalonica, however. In 146, during Rome's campaign against the Achaean League, Lucius Mummius destroyed the city, and it lay desolate until Julius Caesar refounded it as a Roman colony, in 44.

Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, (Hendrickson, 1994).

Although the basic emphases on the Spirit are already to be found in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the greatest amount of Spirit language in Paul appears in the four great letters of the third missionary tour (1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans). Our present letter is especially crucial in this regard, since much of what Paul says about the Spirit is purposely corrective to some misunderstandings on the part of the Corinthians. That leads him at some point or another to touch on almost every aspect of the Spirit and Christian life that one finds in the corpus, from the person of the Spirit, to the Spirit as the essential matter of Christian existence, to the Spirit in the community and in its worship.

Our letter [1 Corinthians] is the third in a series of exchanges between Paul and this community ("I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people..." 5:9 and "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote..." 7:1), each of which I take to be in direct response to the preceding one. In his first letter Paul had forbidden certain practices; their letter to him, rather than seeking his counsel on matters over which they are divided internally, more likely takes exception to the prohibitions in his first letter. In response, our 1 Corinthians aims at convincing them he is right and they are wrong on these issues, now based on some additional inside information about the community reported to him by Chloe's people (1:10-12). 82

Gospel = *euaggelion*

TDNT, Vol

Most of the New Testament *euaggelion* [Gospel] passages are in Paul. How firm a magnitude the concept is for him may be seen from the fact that in almost half of the passages he speaks of **to euaggelion** [the Gospel] in the absolute. He does not need any noun or adjective to define it. The readers know what it is. Hence explanation is unnecessary. Nevertheless, for us it is not a consistent and clearly definable term which we can express in a brief formula. It is in keeping with the derivation of the word from the Old Testament and Rabbinic usage that... it describes the act of proclamation... We can see the direct presence of two different senses alongside one another in 1 Cor 9:14, where it means

“to live by the preaching of the Gospel” but *“to proclaim the gospel”* can only refer to the content of the Gospel. 729

That a specific content is to be declared with ***euaggelian*** is clear from the fact that it is combined with different verbs of speaking and hearing. The Gospel is proclaimed... In 1 Cor 15:1 the Gospel formerly preached is summed up in terms of the death, burial, resurrection and resurrection appearances of the risen Lord [see also Rom 1;1]. Neither passage is meant to be a full statement of what Paul understood by the Gospel... For Paul the heart of the good news is the story of Jesus and His suffering, death and resurrection. Everything connected with this may be preaching of the Gospel. It has the right to be so in virtue of its connection with Christ. 730

The Gospel does not merely bear witness to a historical event, for what it recounts, namely, resurrection and exaltation, is beyond the scope of historical judgment and transcends history. Nor does it consist only of narratives and sayings concerning Jesus which every Christian must know, and it certainly does not consist in a dogmatic formula alien to the world. On the contrary, it is related to human reality and proves itself to be living power. 1 Cor 15:3 *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...”* This *“for our sins”* makes the preaching of the death of Jesus into a message of judgment and joy. The proclamation *“...and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord”* in Rom 1:4 does not present the resurrection as an incidental or isolated event but as the beginning of the general resurrection. The Gospel does not merely bear witness to salvation history; it is itself salvation history. It breaks into the life of man, refashions it and creates communities. It cannot be generally perceived (2 Cor 4:3); in it there takes place a divine revelation. Through the Gospel God calls men to salvation. The preacher is the mouthpiece of God (2 Thess 2:14). Since the Gospel is God’s address, *“the Gospel of God”* {1 Thess 2:2, 9), to men, it demands decision and imposes obedience (Rom 10:16; 2 Cor 9:13). The attitude to the Gospel will be the basis of decision at the last judgment (2 Thess 1:8; cf. 1 Pt 4:17). The Gospel is not an empty word; it is effective power which brings to pass what it says because God is its author (Rom 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9). 731

In the New Testament ***euaggelian*** is oral preaching. Neither epistles nor gospels are called ***euaggelian***. The separation of the evangel from actual utterance may be seen already in Paul. For his epistles are at times a repetition of missionary preaching and in 1 Cor 15:1 he even says that he will share with the Corinthians in his letter the Gospel which he has proclaimed to them. The basic meaning is that ***euaggelian*** is the preached word. Since the preaching bears witness to Christ and His words and acts, and since these constitute the essence of the Gospel, the writings which contain the life and words of Jesus come to be given the name *“gospel.”* 735