

WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT

Church Life Is Messy

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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There are 27 books in our New Testament and 21 of them are letters, or epistles. In the beginning of the Christian era, an epistle was a special kind of letter--one intended for public consumption. Thousands such letters have been discovered and their form is exactly like the ones in our Bible. In other words, our New Testament writers took a familiar container and filled it with Christ's message. The Apostle Paul did not write all of these NT letters, but he wrote many of them. His pattern was to visit a city, establish a church, appoint leaders and move on, staying in touch with them through epistles. In a very real way, he could thus pastor several churches at once.

By the early second century AD (shortly after 100 AD), these letters were being quoted as authoritative in churches and writings. A chronology of the New Testament era will show that while many epistles were being written in the 50's and 60's, the Gospels did not come together until the 70's and 80's. In other words, we are holding in our hands the earliest documents of our faith! And by the way, we have only a handful of the manuscripts of Plato, Sophocles and Homer, but we have hundreds of NT manuscripts, and many are much closer to the actual events than those other ancient writings [N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, p. 178].

But here's a more important point. Do you know WHY we have so many good, practical, historically accurate epistles? Because church life was messy. Here's a summary of all the NT letters: church life is messy! Eugene Peterson reminds us (in his introduction to 1 Corinthians in *The Message*) that these Corinthians were unruly, hard-drinking and sexually promiscuous. They argued and disagreed. They were selfish and childish at times. They had problems, sin, and human failures. Just like we have problems, sin and human failure. (Remember this morning's text, vv. 10-12). Someone asked a pastor once how to be a good Christian. He replied, "Read your Bible, pray...and find out as little as possible about what's going on at church!" It can be messy.

Now it's interesting how Paul and other NT writers handled this messiness. Certain themes emerge, as a way of redirecting believers. One theme is grace. Paul uses the word in 1:3 and a great deal throughout his writings. Many centuries before our NT, in the centuries BC, the Greeks coined a word as they looked at the beauty of the sky and the majesty of the sea. It was grace. It was also used to describe that thing you do for the sheer pleasure of it and you expect nothing in return. Grace. And the word was just lying there. The Apostle Paul picked it up, dusted it off as a perfect description of what God does-- rescuing and forgiving us, not because He has to, but for the sheer pleasure of it.

And read v. 17 of our text. It's nothing we can work up or do ourselves. It's not our works; it's God's work. Now that's really important when church life gets messy and we begin to believe we are doing all this ourselves. Once when Winston Churchill was age 33, he remarked to a dinner guest, "Yes, we are all worms. But I do believe I am a glow-worm." Think how much mischief in the church has been wrought because of pride. We all want to be glow-worms. It's all grace.

Another antidote to church messiness--another theme developed in the epistles is the Cross. Read again v. 17 and this time, we add v. 18. The Cross. It is here that God dealt with sin. It is here that God smashes our pride. And it is here at the Cross that God shows us hope in suffering and shows us how to be servants, to live out our mission, sharing God's healing love. This summer at the Baptist World Congress, I heard Baptist leader Roy Medley say some powerful words: "The Church cannot live in a gated community. Believers have to get over our addiction to power, privilege and prestige. The Church cannot forget the Cross!" And then he added, "This is no time for us to be timid. And please, let's stop feeling sorry for ourselves!" The Cross! Think how messy church gets when we take our eyes off the Cross.

But there is one more way the NT epistles deal with messy church. They constantly lift up the Person of Jesus. Not just grace. Not just the Cross. Jesus himself. Note how Paul does that in vv. 10, 13, 17 of our text. If I could have one wish for you this morning, it would be for you to get to know Jesus, in all of his beauty and tenderness and saving power. Notice how throughout scripture, Jesus is so attractive, how he draws people like a magnet. One pastor said that the Bible does not give us air-tight arguments but an air-tight person against whom there is no argument [paraphrased from Dick Lucas, quoted in *Center Church*, by Tim Keller, p. 115]. And I would add, in whom there is no disappointment.

Maybe you're in church this morning, but you've given up on the church, or almost given up. But you're here because you sense that there has to be something more to life. You long for it. You hunger for it. Yes, you've been turned off by messy church. But the church does not save us. Jesus does. And in Jesus, there is no disappointment.