

Series: A Missional Church for a Pagan Culture

VBC

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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“A Missional Church for a Pagan Culture”

INTRO

David Middlestadt passed this on to me from Newsweek magazine--

In one of history's more absurd acts of totalitarianism

- China has banned Buddhist monks in Tibet from reincarnating without government permission

- the law goes into effect next month and “is an important move to institutionalize management of reincarnation”*

So you can come back as a fly, or as a queen, depending on whether the government says you can or can't

- it's an amazing statement of arrogance--OF OVEREACH

- what's next--Christians banned from entering heaven without political permission

In the New Testament, Paul wrote to a culture--to a spiritual community dealing with its own inflated view of self

- a book entitled I Corinthians

- where we will spend the next several months

SOMETHING ABOUT THE CONTEXT

- the more I have studied Corinth, this Greek city situated to the south of Athens (map slide)

- the more I discover its similarities with our culture

Corinth was a major cosmopolitan center

- situated strategically with a harbor on both sides of its narrow neck

- with ships that could either head for Europe or Asia

- the city was therefore a natural funnel for traffic, the central crossroads for the Mediterranean

- a major player when it came to world trade

- a business center where worth was based upon accomplishment

- where schmoozing, massaging egos, pulling strings, dragging rivals through the mud, self advancement, social pretentiousness, self-importance were the order of the day

- where public boasting and self-promotion became an art form

-being part of Greece--it was also an intellectual center
-as well as a prize holiday destination

1. There was a huge healing shrine--a Club Med--where many came to find cures
2. It was a big sports town--known for its sporting events, Nike sponsorships, broadcasts from ESPN
(its games--the Isthmian games--were second only to the Olympics)
3. Corinth was theatre, pleasure, sex play--it was a narcissistic culture where even prostitution was viewed as an act of worship
 - the temple to Aphrodite claimed to have 1000 cultic prostitutes
 - this was Bangkok, Amsterdam, New York, Vegas
 - This background is important to know
 - for much of this culture seeped into the church Paul planted
 - and so it was a messy church
 - a Christian community that was a mix of poor and rich, haves and have nots
 - and the haves were arrogant, personality driven--congregants who vied for power, status
 - even in the most holy moments like communion
 - leading to a church known for its divisiveness
 - people who met in various homes and attempted to impress others with their spirituality

-believers whose sexual behaviors, legal practices, and many other habits did not contrast with secular culture

Illustration-people sometimes say--if we could just get back to the New Testament church

-you read this book and ask--really?
-Corinth--much like our age--needed to be confronted with the word of God

So Paul wrote a letter--his longest recorded letter

-which behind it all was God using this man to share the heart of God and shape these people
-I've listened to it over and over in these past few weeks
-I spent one day on vacation trying to get a feel for the texture, the ethos of this book

-it is straightforward--at times gentle--other times--severe
-it speaks to a wide range of issues--it will get some of us mad
-Paul is not shy about confronting their lifestyles and practices
-lifestyles that were contrary to the cross
-they mocked Paul--they stuck it to him at times

-these were not people easy to love--they were arrogant, condescending, superior in their attitudes
-especially towards Paul their pastor

-but Paul was not intimidated

-he confronted issues that are not all that different today in the church--
-arrogance, superficial spirituality, power factions and cliques, laxity regarding sexual misconduct, divorce and broken homes, distorted attitudes regarding marital commitment, the tendency to settle matters in the court of law, idolatry, denying the resurrection, as well as disregard for order, reverence, and dignity in worship

-he also addressed a number of their questions--

1. Is it okay to leave my unbelieving husband?
2. Can I have sex if I am not married?
3. Would it be better to remain single?
4. Can I take a believer to court?
5. Can I buy meat at Safeway if the cows were butchered at Poseidon's temple?
6. Can I drink wine even if someone objects?
7. Which spiritual gifts are the best ones?
8. How do I get these?
9. Is it okay to speak in tongues?
10. Do I have to give anything to the church? (yes)
11. Do we really have a body in heaven? What does that look like?

Paul had the authority to address all of these issues because--

1. These were people he had invested in
2. He was God's appointed apostle
3. This church--as any church--is the hope of the world

So Paul writes--and begins rather nicely (read 1:1-9)

-my guess is you may be thinking--

-well this is rather domestic--harmless words

-kind of like the NFL preseason--activity that doesn't count for much--but builds some anticipation

-but why would Paul be so kind, so polite to such a carnal community?

-why does he seem to affirm what he will soon tear down?

-but what if he's not really being so nice?

-what if Paul is actually using the sort of language designed to pop their inflated view of selves

-call for major readjustment?

Consider this--

- a. practically every verb is passive
 - meaning that while we might assume we are the center of the action
 - the reality is--we are the recipients of the action
 - this is Paul's way of coming to grips with your humanity
 - there's nothing here we can really claim

- b. there is no mystery who is the subject of all of our verbs
 - it is Jesus
 - nine times in nine verses Paul mentions Jesus
 - to let us know--that we need to quit being full of ourselves
 - and become full of Jesus
 - He is the One who makes things happen--He is the center of the universe--not us

 - there are four words--four passive verbs in particular
 - that strip away our conceit, our propensity to become self-absorbed--that awaken a proper self-awareness

1) CALLED-verse 2

- from the very start, Paul reminds them, us
- that to be a Christ follower is to be a "called one"
- we have been deeply and profoundly called, set apart by God
- and it is when we respond to our call that we become our true selves

So what is it we are called to?

- we're called to be holy
- but what does this mean?

- we are called to be set apart in language, dress, demeanor, attitudes at work
- set apart from a pagan lifestyle--for it is woefully out of tune with God's ultimate intentions
- set apart from uncritically embracing its values
- set apart to be God' temple-the sanctuary of the living God
- set apart to be a consecrated community

-in order to live a radically different lifestyle bound by the holiness of God, in order to represent God

- call for justice, reconnect humanity back to Jesus, live in a way that declares we have a high respect for God's creation, love one another

2) GRACED-verse 4

- amazingly-Paul was grateful for these people--who at times were quite unkind towards him

- but his gratefulness was for God's grace
- consider again what he was saying

- grace that was given in spite of their past
- undercutting any tendency to egocentric pride in one's our achievements--any grounds for boasting

3) ENRICHED-verse 5

- this was a church richly gifted
- and they were rich in every way
- especially in word gifts, knowledge gifts
 - they excelled in everything (8:7), but speech and knowledge stood out

- as they saw it, they were a community of orators, prophets, who mastered words, were eloquent in speech, in spiritual language, in tongues

- and they were a people known for their wisdom, the type that came through inspiration of the Spirit
- people who had insight into God's mysteries, and understanding

- but unfortunately--what was one of their greatest assets--became one of their greatest liabilities
- like material wealth--it inspired its own self destructive attitudes
- this is the nature of the sin of pride--it tempts us at our strongest--not our weakest point

Hence-their richness in word led to self-importance, arrogance

- their richness in knowledge led to becoming puffed up--ego inflation, self-service, self-achievement

- they missed this--that there are no self made people in God's kingdom
- there is nothing we have not received

4) CONFIRMED-verse 8

- Paul constantly pointed them to eternity--he does this in the context of every subject but one
- to set things in context
- no one arrives this side of heaven
- no one becomes blameless apart from the work of God
- something that will not become complete until eternity

- in the meantime--all of us are in vast need of shaping, correcting, maturing--this ongoing work of confirmation

CONCLUSION

How do we steer clear of this Corinthian pattern?

- Scripture calls us to daily humble ourselves under God's mighty hand
- that no matter how graced, enriched we are
- the more successful we become—the more desperate we must be for Him

- that forever etched in our souls must be these words—APART FROM HIM—YOU CAN DO NOTHING