

The Ambiguity of the Church

(1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

The Anglican Priest and Scholar John Stott says the following about the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, the portion of this letter we will be studying for the next three months.

"The image of the church presented in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians is extremely ambiguous. For there is a paradox at the heart of the church. It is the painful tension between what the church claims to be and what it seems to be, between romantic talk about the "bride of Christ", and the very unromantic, ugly, unholy, and quarrelsome Christian community we know ourselves to be. It is the tension between our final, glorious destiny in heaven and our present, very inglorious performance on earth. This is the ambiguity of the church."¹

There are two words John Stott uses here that I want to define for you. The first is the noun *paradox*. This word comes from a Greek word that means "contrary to expectation" and is defined as "one that possesses seemingly contradictory qualities" The second noun is *ambiguity*. This word comes from the Latin. It means "to be undecided" and is defined as "capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways"

It is good to know that the Church in Corinth was a church marked by paradox and ambiguity, a church that had been founded within twenty years of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. As contemporary Christians we have a tendency to talk about the early church in glowing terms and attribute to her a kind of perfection that is not in keeping with what we read in the New Testament.

What the early church did have were leaders, like Paul, whose self understanding and understanding of the church was able to give direction to Jesus' early disciples, so they could continue to mature in Christ. So let's look first of all at Paul's self-understanding and secondly at his understanding of what the church is meant to be.

¹John Stott: Basic Christian Leadership, page 17.

- **Paul's Self-Understanding:**

Listen to how he begins his letter: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." The word Apostle means "a messenger". This is a special kind of messenger. When you study the word apostle in the New Testament it is used primarily to designate the Twelve, whom Jesus himself named Apostles. Please note that Paul was not an Apostle of the church but an Apostle of Christ. He was not speaking on behalf of the Church but to the Church on behalf of Christ. This is an important distinction. It was Paul's intent to be true to the mind of Jesus. He knew he was given a message to share that was timeless in its meaning and as pertinent in 21st Century Calgary as it was in 1 Century Corinth. Paul is one of a unique group of people whose writings have an authority for Christians that we do not credit to writings outside of the New Testament because he shared the following three characteristics:

- Paul and the other Apostles had been personally chosen, called and appointed directly by Jesus Christ, not by any human being or institution.
- They were eyewitnesses of the historical Jesus either of his public ministry for three years or at least witnesses to his resurrection
- They were promised a special inspiration of the Spirit of truth, who would both remind them of what Jesus had taught them (Jn 14:25-26) and supplement it as he led them into all truth (16:12-15) These great promises were fulfilled in the writing of the New Testament.

It is extremely important to maintain it is these three apostolic characteristics that give Paul and the other eyewitnesses their authority and qualify them for their unique ministry as scribes of the New Testament.²

Theological liberals are prone to say "That was Paul's opinion; this is mine" Or, "He was a first century witness to Christ, I am a twenty first century witness to Christ." Or "We wrote the Bible, so we can rewrite it."

But no, we did not write the Bible. Paul did not write in the name of the church or in his own name. On the contrary, he wrote in the name of Christ. This is why we receive

²I would like to suggest that you memorize these apostolic criteria. They are an important part of the argument needed in presenting why we give the New Testament the authority we do.

his writing as God's word.

Paul expected his teaching to be received this way. In what is probably his earliest letter he states "We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers." (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

As we study these early chapters of 1 Corinthians we shall not behave as if we thought the New Testament were a collection of the fallible opinions of fallible human beings. We shall rather put ourselves humbly under its authority and listen attentively to what God has to say to us through his word.

For while there is much ambiguity in the church there is no ambiguity as to how we are to view the New Testament. Its writers state very clearly that this document has an unparalleled authority because it is God's word. When we receive it as such, it has a way of working in our lives that will allow us to say with John Newton

"I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world. But still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."³

In writing this letter I want to suggest that Newton's dictum summarizes what Paul is saying to these Christians. "You are not what you ought to be. You are not what you want to be, You are not what you hope to be in another world. But still you are not what you once used to be, and by the grace of God you are what you are."

In the rest of this passage he lays out for them an understanding of who they are presently and who they will one day ultimately become. Which brings me to our second point.

- **Paul's understanding of what it means to be the Church.**

At verse 2 we read: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are

³Quoted in Stott's book and used here. You will remember that John Newton was at one time a slave trader. After his conversion to Jesus he became an Anglican Priest and is best known for the hymn "Amazing Grace".

sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." When Paul uses the word "sanctified" in this passage he means those who have been set apart for God. This is what it means to be a saint. When Paul uses the word saint, he is not speaking of a select few. Rather he is referring to all those who in the language of 1 Thessalonians are allowing God's word to work in their lives in transforming ways. This is the overarching purpose of the Christian life. Paul has a vision of God's work in our lives that stresses that it is not through our efforts that we are holy, but through the work that God by the Spirit is doing in our lives.

When we come under the authority of God's word it is like we come to the fountain of holiness and goodness. From this fountain God sanctifies us so that we recognize that it is by God's grace that I am who I am. It is also by God's grace that we can hold onto the promise Paul makes in verse 8 "He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is because we are not blameless now that there is ambiguity in your life and mine and by extension ambiguity in the church. But for Paul there is no ambiguity about our ultimate destiny. On the day of Christ, which Paul means is the time of Christ's Second Coming, all ambiguity will be in the past. For on the Day of Christ we will all be what we ought to be. On the Day of Christ we will all be what we want to be. On the Day of Christ we will all be what from where we stand now we hope to be.

It is because Paul's faith in God is so sure that even though the Corinthian Church is full of paradoxes and ambiguity he is able to write in verses 4-7

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Although this is a church that is wrought with problems notice the encouraging language Paul uses here. He thanks God always for these believers because they have received the grace of Jesus and know that they are living under God's merciful favour and steadfast love. It is because Paul knows they are living under grace that he can be so bold in what he will write to them in the chapters that follow. He says hard things

to them because he wants them to fully grow into a grace-filled life. And although they are yet to experience this life more deeply they are being enriched in Jesus Christ, in both their speech and knowledge.

What Paul is saying here is that when we testify clearly to who Jesus Christ is and what he has done and is doing in the lives of his people we are then able to more fully understand the gospel and communicate it to others by our words and actions. And while the ambiguity will always remain because we are not yet blameless, we will become people who are more decided in how we speak about our faith in Christ and more constant in how we live our life in Christ.

As Paul will teach in detail in chapters 12-14, a part of this book we will look at during January and February, God has bestowed upon us every spiritual gift, so that collectively we will not be lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we are able to admit that there is ambiguity in the church because your life and mine is as of yet far from blameless we can more fully love being a part of the church. Why? Because we have a book filled with apostolic authority that helps us to see

"I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world. But still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

And from this perspective of honesty we can join with each other in being a congregation of disciples growing in fellowship with Jesus and each other because the testimony of Jesus is being strengthened among us.

Yes there is paradox. Yes there is ambiguity. But thanks be to God that because of Paul's self-understanding and understanding of the church we have a way of living with this ambiguity so that as he says in verse 9 "we know that God is faithful, and has called us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ."

It is to these topics, fellowship with Jesus and the faithfulness of God, that Paul turns to in the rest of chapter 1 and will form the basis for our study for the next two weeks.