

The Church is Christ's 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 Epiphany 2A171-10-17

Paul writes to a church that has a lot of problems. The members are not far removed from the Corinthian paganism with its hedonism, strife, divisions, idolatry. Actually, it was much like our world today. And the temptations that plagued Corinthian Christians trouble us also. How Paul describes the church is with how the church can be described today. People are and have always been the same from age to age.

But it seems like Paul looks through rose-colored glasses when he describes them. He thanks God for them, even calls them sanctified, describes them as rich in speech and knowledge, not lacking any spiritual gift.

That is a most curious view of reality Paul is putting out there. Does he really believe that? He takes up most of both letters pointing out their faults and weaknesses. He has to explain so much, even how to love, and what love is. And yet these people, like us, are already sanctified in Christ?

Is Paul's church our church? We are hopefully more mature, as we have been in the word longer than the Corinthians. But the sin of Adam and Eve still dwells in us as it did them. Envy, greed, lust, laziness, and faithlessness have not vanished. Selfishness is still in vogue.

So again, why such a rosy description of the church and of us, if we are still bothered by the same sins? Paul describes them as he sees them. But, he's not deluding himself and seeing what is not there. The rest of the letter reminds us, as we shall see in the weeks ahead, that the church has issues to work out. Human weakness is exposed in broken families, addictions, sexual immorality, apathy toward the needy and worship and witness, careless, cruel words, and covetousness.

Though Paul spoke with great praise and thanksgiving to God toward the Corinthians, he was not looking through rose colored glasses. His lens is a darker shade of red. He is seeing this troubled church through blood-red colored glasses. That is, he describes them as a Church belonging to God, purchased by the redeeming bold Christ. In a later chapter, he refers to the cross when he writes, "you are not your own, you were bought with a price."

He is telling them who they are in Christ not who they are according to their deeds. If he is to expect them to be open to his correction, then he wants them to know why better things are expected of them. It is not true that if they strive for holiness they will belong to Christ. Rather it is true that if they know they already belong to Him, they will want to grow into holy living.

So Paul sees a people who are already sanctified in Christ, who stand before God in Christ. He sees them as ones adorned with the gifts of grace and peace. For where grace from God is present, there too is peace with God. Paul envisions a church lacking no spiritual gifts, but lacking only maturity to use them lovingly.

In telling them who they are, He can instruct them in regard to how they can live out that identity in their relationships both in the Church and in the world. And who they are is the blood bought possession of a loving God. And that is who we are as well.

The Church belongs to Christ. Sometimes we think the Church is ours, and that its success depends on us. But the Church is a hospital for the sick and restaurant for the hungry. Do the patients and the patrons of those places serve, or are they served? Christ came to serve, not to be served. We are here not to give to God, but to receive from Him. We come to this hospital sick of our sin to receive the assurance of his forgiveness through His word and sacrament. We come to this banquet table hungry for righteousness. We leave with hearts filled by the Good News that in Christ we are righteous. This righteousness can then respond with loving sacrifices of time, treasure, and talent, not to be saved, but because we are saved.

Yes, we the church still struggle in sin and weakness. We need God's gifts of grace. We come because here in His church Christ gives theme freely. When Martin Luther died, a note was found in his pocket, with the last words he ever wrote. "This is true, we are all beggars before God". Indeed. That is true, whether we lived in Paul's Corinth, Luther's Germany, or here and now. We praise God that He gives everything for which we beg in Christ. Amen.