

Title: What is a Church pt.2

Text: 1 Corinthians 1.4-9

Theme: Already, Not Yet

Series: 1 Corinthians #2

Prop Stmt. Paul is grateful that what God has started, he will finish, in spite of the obvious challenges that this church has to work through.

Marshall Applewhite and his wife Bonnie Nettles claimed to be Space Age Shepherds who were on a mission to lead a flock of humans to a higher level of existence. Marshall was known as “Bo” and Bonnie as “Peep.” Bonnie died of cancer in 1985, and Marshall seemed to drop out of the limelight. In March 1997, we all heard about him. Rancho Santa Fe, California is an exclusive community that sits on the west coast just north of San Diego. In a mansion at 18241 Colina Norte Drive, the bodies of 39 people, whose ages ranged from 26 to 72 were found lying in an orderly fashion, having committed suicide in an effort to join the UFO that was supposedly behind the Hale-Bopp comet. Applewhite taught that the comet was announcing the arrival of space vehicle from another dimension that usher a special group of people to their destiny in the stars. However, in order to be part of this special group, you had to get rid of your body so that your preexisting spirit would be free to be able to move to the next level. Among the dead were a 39-year old mother of five from Cincinnati, and a 72 year old grandmother from Iowa.

Our world is full of bizarre theories about secret and hidden mysteries that are known only by a select few. The mormon cult is built on this premise. The Da Vinci Code is cut out of the same bolt of cloth. Everyone wants to know, what is the secret to life? There has to be some mystery, some clue, some hidden path, some key to opening up the powers of the universe to me, some formula that releases all of my potential, or puts me in contact with the gods, or frees me from this lousy life that I currently have. People are very, very gullible. This idea that there are secret mysteries that are only revealed to a select few, who are of a higher intelligence, and a superior breed than the rest of the population has its roots in an old movement known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism was more of an influence that influenced many religions, instead of being a specific religion. For example, we can see the affects of Gnosticism in certain cults, religious movements and even today, certain theories in the science community reflect this thinking where a blending is taking place between what has traditionally been viewed as the spiritual world and the rational or scientific world.

Jacob Ilive was a prominent deist who was a member of London’s printers guild. He died in 1763. He taught that each human soul was a fallen angel imprisoned in a human body.

“The fallen angels are in prison, that is, embodied, so that Man is an apostate Angel and a Body.” Jacob Ilive, The Oration Spoke at Joyner’s Hall

Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon cult followed the same type of thinking. The foundational tenet of the Mormon religion is that as man is, god once was, as god is, man will be.

“You have got to learn how to become gods yourselves; to become Kings and Priests to God, the same as all gods have done, by going from a small degree to another.” Joseph Smith, King Follett Discourse

Today, the influence of Gnosticism is seen not only in the entertainment industry, but it still has a dangerous influence upon Christianity. The next Star Wars movie is set for release. The story line is full of Gnosticism. Yoda, jedi-master, knows the secrets to the universe and teaches them to Luke Skywalker, who unlike ordinary mortals, Luke is part of a select line of people known as Jedi Knights, so he can handle these mysteries of controlling and using the Force. The wildly popular Matrix movies clearly taught that “we live in an illusion, creation is an evil prison in which we serve the creator, and we must be freed.” Neo is chosen by the ascended master Morpheus in order to learn the grand secret behind all apparent reality.¹

This idea that there are secret truths that only a select few have and master was affecting the church at Corinth. Some of the people were claiming to be spiritually enlightened. The proof of their spiritual superiority was found in their experiences with spiritual gifts. Some of them were claiming that they had arrived. They were above the rest. They were separate from the others. They were living on a higher plane. They had spiritually evolved. Now, the truth is, there was some good things that had taken place in the church of Corinth. But, there were also some bad things. In fact, what we are going to see, is that the bad was in many cases a misunderstanding, or a misapplication of the good.

I remind you from last week, that Paul wrote this letter to these believers because they were experiencing all sorts of problems. But, before he addresses the problems, he reminds them of who they are (v.2) and he gives thanks to God for them. This thanksgiving is what occupies verses 4-9, our text for this morning. In these verses Paul is genuinely expressing thanks to God for the believers in Corinth and for the fact that God has gifted them for ministry. But I want you to see that even as Paul is expressing his thanks, he does it in a way to help re-direct their focus. These verses are clearly, God-driven, God-focused and God-glorifying. We will see that the gifts that God had given to these believers were being abused because they were being used to exalt themselves instead of for their intended purpose. So, even as he gives thanks, his words are saturated with God.

One night, Roy and I were eating a meal with a family in KC. For desert, we were served a rather large pastry that had some type of icing or frosting on the top. What I did not know is that the whole thing had been soaked in maple syrup. A little bite was equivalent to a meal. Verses 4-9 are like that. If you could bite them, the flavor of God would overwhelm your taste-buds. (read through the verses)

¹ Much of the information in the introduction was taken from, “The Making of the New Spirituality” by James A. Herrick, chapter 8.

Part #1 - The Exposition

1. **Thank God!** (4-8)

“I always thank God for you.” Wow! How could Paul say this? Some of these people were causing all sorts of problems, and in many ways these problems were reflecting on him. Paul had started this church at great personal cost, and some of these people were treating him like a disposable paper bag. I am convinced that behind Paul’s ability to write words like this, at a time like this, was because Paul did not view himself as the great apostle Paul. He saw himself as the chief of sinners, one who was not worthy of the grace of God. He is able to thank God for them, because even though this church has become shot full of problems, they are experiencing problems because they are believers. If they were not believers to begin with, then this occasion would never exist in the first place. Now, notice why Paul is giving thanks.

Paul thanks God because of:

A. **God’s grace to the believers.** (4)

This is part of the re-direct. Paul does not applaud them for their talents, building program, concert series, new bulletins, etc. Their talents are not his focus, but their God is!

God is gracious to us on the basis of Christ Jesus, because Christ Jesus is the only way whereby God can be gracious to us. God is not gracious to us because we deserve his grace. If we deserved his grace, it would not be grace. Brothers and sisters, this is so easy to forget. What do you have that you deserve? I am convinced that the biggest source of problems in relationships, whether that be in a church, or in a marriage, is because we lose sight of how undeserving we are of the grace of God. When we do that, we live with attitude instead of gratitude. Attitude says, you owe me, you don’t measure up, you let me down, you disappoint me, I am going to manipulate you, I am going to do things my way, I am going to live how I want, etc. Gratitude says, “Every breath I get is a sacred gift from the Almighty for me to live another moment for Him. My entire life is to be an expression of praise for Him by living in joyful dependence on Him and by serving my world. Paul understood this, which is why in the face of some hostile people he is able to give thanks for them. It is not about them or him anyway, but about God’s grace. By the way, in order to underscore that idea, notice how many times he refers to Christ in these opening verses. (4x in 1-3; 5x in 4-9) Christ is clearly to be the focus, which for the Corinthians had become lost from view.

The grace that Paul has in view, is not only grace for salvation from sin, but grace to live for Christ.

B. **They are equipped for life and ministry.** (5, 7)

Paul is also grateful because God in his grace has enriched these believers. This church apparently has all kinds of people who are gifted communicators, and others who have an impressive level of knowledge. As we will see, these people were very impressed with themselves in this regard which is obvious from the importance that they place upon their performance. Paul does not criticize the gifts (they are from God). He criticizes the misuse of the gifts.

In verse 5, Paul identifies two prominent gifts in the church at Corinth – Speaking and knowledge. Speaking would cover many things such as prophecy, preaching, teaching, the gift of languages. Knowledge is translated from the word, *gnosis* (Gnosticism). God had in his grace given people. These people certainly had a measure of knowledge about theology, but some were using this as a means to inflate themselves. This clearly is a problem at Corinth, where in these 2 epistles, the word, *gnosis* is used more than in the rest of the NT put together. In spite of the abuse of this gift, in spite of the arrogance that some were demonstrating, Paul recognizes that true knowledge is ultimately a gift from God, and should be seen as such.

In v.7 he says, “You do not lack any spiritual gift.” You have all that you need to be the kind of church that God intends for you to be. This church did not fall short in any of the gifts. They were very blessed in this way. The word for gift really emphasizes the fact that all that they had was the result of a free and generous act of the Giver (who is God). As I will point out in a minute, the Corinthian believers seemed to emphasize the first part of this verse (the fact that they had spiritual gifts) and did not connect that to the second half of the verse. They were acting as if they had already arrived, instead of being on guard and waiting for the return of Christ. However, the obvious presence of these spiritual gifts, is plenty of reason for Paul to give thanks.

Is Paul hinting at an issue that he will address later on? Were there people who were seeking more than what they had and Paul is saying, “You already have all that you need.”? I think that is part of the subtle message that he implies here, but later uses a sledge hammer in not such a delicate manner.

C. The ministry of the gospel bore fruit. (6)

Paul was able to see tangible evidence of the gospel in the lives of these people. The ministry of the gospel bore fruit. Their lives were changed. They were not changed as much as they needed to be, but there was evidence of God’s grace among them. In this passage Paul is saying that he has seen in their lives, the very same things that he has seen in the lives of other believers. The mark of the Spirit of God is evident on them.

D. God finishes what he starts. (8)

1) God will keep you to the end.

The end is referring to the day of Christ, which is the return of Christ. Paul consistently uses this type of language to speak of our glorification, that time when we are made to be

just like Christ. God will not let you go. God will not quit his work in you. That is a comfort to those who are seeking to grow and that is a warning to those who think they can run.

2) You will be blameless on the day of Christ.

This word blameless has the idea of being unimpeachable. On that day, there will not be a single thing in your life that would be a handle that anyone could grab on to. Right now, there are all sorts of handles. There are things that you have said, and thought, and done that have offended others. There have been times in which you may have been downright hurtful to someone else, and at the moment, you did not care, but later on, you realized how arrogant that was of you. You wondered, will I ever get it right? Will I ever be able to guard my mouth, or my emotions? Some day you will – perfectly. On that day, you will be unimpeachable.

2. **Praise God!** (9)

In the English language, our sentences usually follow a similar pattern. We tend to start with the subject, then we have the verb, then the direct object and maybe a prepositional phrase or two. Not all languages are like that. In some languages, the ending on the word will tell you whether it is the subject, verb or direct object. You do not have to follow a specific order since the word endings communicate the thought. The original language of the NT is a little like that. The NIV unfortunately places “faithful” at the end of the verse, while it is actually the first word in this sentence. Verses 4-8 are one long sentence in which Paul is thanking God. He starts a new sentence drawing attention to the faithfulness of God for which Paul praises God. Verse 9 brings the introduction to a close, but it really is an appropriate summary of what he has been saying here in the beginning. This God who does the calling (v.2-3), and does the keeping until the day of Christ (4-8) is faithful. He will not let you down.

Paul praises God because:

A. God has called you into fellowship
with his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord

Now, why do you think that Paul said this? These believers were called into fellowship! They were called to a partnership with God and Christ. This whole thing called Christianity is really all about Christ.

B. God is faithful

God has freely chosen to give us promises through which He has committed Himself to act in a specific way. God is the Sovereign God who can do anything that He pleases to do. And what is it that He has given Him pleasure? He has found pleasure in making you promises and in fulfilling those promises. God freely constrains himself by His own

pledges. God makes commitments, not because He has to, but because He has decided to. And this same God who makes the commitments, carries out those commitments.

Part #2 - The Analysis

There are a couple of things that I want you to see in these verses.

What is remarkable is that Paul is able to give thanks to God for many of the very things that are being abused by the believers. Paul is not being disingenuous. Here is a man who not only told the Thessalonian believers to give thanks in all circumstances, he is modeling that command in his own life. Please notice this, Paul did not allow the fact that the Corinthian believers were abusing their position in Christ to obscure the fact that they had a position in Christ. Nor did he allow the fact that they were abusing spiritual gifts to obscure the fact that they had spiritual gifts.

The second thing is this. In these opening verses, Paul has already established a theological grid that provides a very important way to understand the Christian life.

Notice in v.2 he calls believers sanctified, but in v.8 he says you will be blameless. In v.9 he says that you are called into fellowship with Christ, but in v.7 you eagerly wait for Christ to be revealed.

We call this the “Already, but Not Yet” tension. If you have come to faith in Christ then, already you are in Christ, but not yet have you experienced all of the benefits of it. Already you have a new position, a new identity in Christ. But not yet have your habits, attitudes and thoughts completely caught up with it. Already you have been declared righteous, but not yet do you live perfectly righteous. Already you are guaranteed an inheritance with Christ, but not yet are you living with that inheritance. One of the things that you are guaranteed is a new body, but by the looks of things this morning, I hate to tell you this, y’all still have the old one.

One of the huge problems in Corinth was the fact that some of the believers were overemphasizing the “Already” part of their salvation and were forgetting about the “Not yet.” They were convincing themselves that they had some spiritual secrets, gifts or powers that were enabling them to live on a higher spiritual plane than the others. Gnostic philosophy was already seeping into the church and they were calling it theology. The gifted ones had forgotten that a gift is something that is given to you. The lack of humility on the part of some was really killing the church. It is impossible to teach people who already know it all. On the other hand, those who over-emphasize the “not yet” and focus on their consistent failures can be extremely discouraged and are take over targets for legalism.

Part #3 – Application

- What does this say about how we view our role in the church?

It is all by grace. Your ministry here is so important because God uses the evidence of his grace in you to draw attention to the life-changing power of the gospel. But please keep this in mind. Spiritual gifts and abilities are not a cure-all for problems. These people had all the gifts and were a mess. Also, spiritual gifts and abilities are not more important than handling problems. The fact that a person is a good teacher or a good musician is not more important than the life he or she is leading.

- What does this say about how we view people who have problems?

One problem does not define a person. The church at Corinth was full of people who were full of problems. But Paul did not give up on them. Later on, he was clearly tempted to, but he didn't. Have you been trying to help another believer? Don't give up on them. You may need to include a few more people, but don't quit. When you are dealing with people who have problems, it is so easy to lose your perspective. Those of you who are lawyers or work in some line of law enforcement are particularly prone to this. You deal with problems in people's lives all the time. It is so easy to become hard and cynical because that is what you are confronted with all of the time. It is easy to view the church in the same way. But Paul models for us the right type of perspective since he focuses upon God's sufficiency, God's strength, and God's plan instead of the failures and fallacies of people. This passage is also a very compelling call to be grateful for the evidences of God's grace in the lives of people with whom you do not agree with on every matter.

- What does this say about how we view our own problems?

View them with a biblically balanced view.

What is the church – it is already and not yet. Already because God is faithful. Not yet, because we are eagerly waiting.