

THE COMPASS

The Worst Church in the World

Postcards from Paul, Part 2

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The one great thing about churches is that there are never any problems in them. You can go to church and just leave your cares behind, because in church, everybody gets along, there are no conflicts, no tensions. Everybody treats everybody else with love and respect, there's total understanding, it's wonderful, really.

Right?

Well, not exactly.

Most of us have experienced the disillusionment of "church problems" at one time or other in our lives.

Churches have conflicts just like families, just like team of employees in companies. Whenever people get together, with all their human flaws and differing perspectives and competing priorities, there's bound to be conflict.

And the apostle Paul takes on this issue, when it comes up in the Greek city of Corinth.

At this time he's 200 miles away, at Ephesus, in Turkey, working on a new project. He can't break away and jet over there to Corinth and kick some behinds.

So he sits down, and he starts to write a letter to the people in the church he founded.

He writes, and he writes. He writes almost 10,000 words.

And he's hot. He's disappointed, and he's angry.

Let's travel to Corinth, let's see what it was like there, and then let's see how Paul yells at his friends, and how it applies to us.

Greece lies along the north shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

At the southern end of Greece is an area called the Peloponnesian Peninsula; it's almost an island — it's only connected to the rest of Greece by this little strip of land, at one point only 5 miles wide.

Now this is significant because Greece lies smack dab in the middle of the Roman Empire. To the east you've got Palestine, Asia; to the west you have Rome and the rest of Western Europe.

So traffic is heavy. Ships are coming and going all the time, carrying merchandise and people back and forth from one end of the Empire to the other.

Boats would come in to the skinniest part of the peninsula, unload their stuff, cargo specialists would lug it across the peninsula, they'd load it back onto another boat, and be on their way.

Imagine the profit potential in a place like this — with millions of dollars' worth of merchandise and thousands upon thousands of sailors and travelers and thousands of ships, all coming and going through this one tiny space.

This was Corinth.

If you were going to set up a business in this situation, what would you do?

Maybe a cargo-hauling business.

Or food service — or the hotel business.

But religion? I don't think so.

Look at the demographic: you've got thousands upon thousands of tourists — and sailors. Does this sound like the perfect group of people to build a church with? Not exactly.

So the religious leaders of Corinth pursued kind of an unusual angle.

They went into the prostitution business.

Yup. You got people far from home, people only in town for a short time, and guys who've been out at sea for weeks or months.

Prostitution is the perfect way to make some bucks. It's a little odd for the religion industry, maybe, but if we manufacture some loophole in our faith system, so it's not a sin to have relations with a prostitute, we could drum up some business.

In fact, why not figure out a way to make it a good thing — let's bless these transactions, and give them the stamp of legitimacy.

So that's what they did. The temples of the ancient religions became houses of prostitution.

You would come to Corinth, you would visit the temple prostitutes.

At the peak of the industry, historians tell us, 1 out of every 200 citizens in the entire city was a temple prostitute.

Corinth became so famous for its sex industry that if you wanted to talk about someone who was sleazy, someone with loose morals, you called them a "Corinthian."

In the Roman Empire of the first century, they didn't use the term "hooker." Their nickname for a prostitute was "Corinthian girl."

And this was the city Paul chose to start a church in.

Religiously speaking, Corinth was a really tough town.

Immorality was accepted, even promoted. People were opportunistic, out to make a killing.

But in one key passage (**1 Corinthians 3**) of this long letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul lays out in no uncertain terms what Christ-followers are supposed to be about.

The Bible commentator Warren Wiersbe has outlined this passage well, and I used his outline as a launch-point for my own studies.

Now first of all, we should make sure of our terms.

We as individual Christians really *are* the church — the church isn't an institution, or a physical building, or a schedule of public events.

The church is people. If you are a Christ-follower, you are the church.

Whatever you do, the church is doing.

And we know that Jesus said life is really all about the two things:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” —Matthew 22:37-39

Love God, by loving people.

So in his letter, Paul lays out 3 crucial attributes of Christ-followers — revealing the way God designed people to function so they can effectively love God by loving people.

First of all: ***The church is a family — and the goal is maturity.***

This may seem obvious at first, it’s such a cliché.

But look at what it really means.

Paul is thinking back to when he was there pastoring the people at Corinth, and he’s talking about how he had to teach them — he says:

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

1 [Back then] ...I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ.

2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. [And you know what?] Indeed, you are still not ready.

3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

The church is a family. And what do you have in any family? A pecking order!

Admit it! There are leaders and there are followers.

But over time, as the various members of the family grow more mature, the dynamics change.

Your preschooler cannot play with the pocket knife because of what might happen.

But when that child is in middle school or high school, the time will come when you might try the pocket knife thing again, because eventually, you need to know how to use a knife safely.

You have to make a judgment about when that kid is ready to try it.

I’m ahead of my kid in the pecking order, so it’s my call. But the day will come when there’s no question about the pocket knife. My son will have matured in that area, to the point where he’s functioning like a responsible adult. (I have faith for this.)

As the members of the family grow, they can handle more and more situations on their own successfully.

Along the way, the leaders of the family try to spare them, as much as possible, the pain of learning the hard way.

What do we say to our kids when we try to give them additional opportunities and they blow it, and then we try it again and they blow it again?

We say, “Won’t you ever learn?”

Learning is a byproduct of life in a family. You don’t just grow older; you’re supposed to grow wiser, too.

I don’t just mature chronologically; I’m supposed to mature emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, socially.

In our church family, we're moving toward the goal of loving God better and loving people better — that's what maturity is all about — and we're moving at different speeds.

Some churches get hung up on the erroneous idea that everybody's the same. This is a mistake. People aren't the same. People are at different levels of maturity. But if you believe everybody's the same, then nobody can really give direction. Nobody can lead or teach. So these churches deteriorate into social clubs.

Other churches have the opposite problem. They have a certain standard, you're required to achieve that standard, and if you don't, you're out. There's no accounting for people being at different points on the journey of life. The result of this thinking is hypocrisy; people hide their failures. And if you can't admit your need, you can't very well get help. So you don't grow. These churches actually trap people in immaturity.

But Paul explodes both of these ideas in his letter to the Corinthians. He pushes hard for people to grow, but he acknowledges that in the quest to love God better and love people better, less mature people have to be dealt with differently than more mature people. Some can handle milk, others are ready for meat.

When we get together, it shouldn't just be a comfy place, a lovely "service" where there's nice music and formal prayer and a kind of ritual and Scripture reading and Bible teaching.

No. We're not intended to be a still pool. We're intended to be a river. We're supposed to be in motion. It's a journey. We're getting somewhere. We're growing. We're hopefully becoming more like the ideal that God designed us around.

The idea is to live differently. The idea is to love God better today than I did yesterday, by loving people better tomorrow than I did today.

If I am living today the same way I lived a year ago, this was a wasted year.

The church is not a place to get beat up on, but it is certainly a family — and a healthy family encourages maturity in each of its members.

We need to be people who give themselves permission to call each other to a higher standard of loving God and loving each other ... permission to draw each other toward God's design ... even when that process is difficult or awkward or uncomfortable.

We need to speak the truth in love, and live the truth in community, and help each other along on the journey however we can.

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Secondly: ***The church is a farm — and the goal is quantity.***

We are called to reach and love as many people as we can.

Jesus told the parable of the sower (**John 15**); the sower sowed lots of seed in order to get a few good plants.

A farmer doesn't go out into the middle of 10 acres and plant one kernel of corn. He plants as much corn as he can possibly squeeze in to those 10 acres.

Jesus talked about being "even more fruitful" (John 15:2), bearing "much fruit" (John 15:5). He said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8).

If we're doing the "2 things," loving God and loving people, we're going to attract people — because people are designed to be attracted to those two things!

But this doesn't mean we have to pursue the classic American dream of building bigger and bigger buildings to pack more and more people in, so we can have what we call a "big church."

I can only really actively love about a dozen people, and you can only actively love about a dozen people.

But if every follower of Christ were actively, authentically loving about a dozen people, the overlapping circles of people being authentically loved would blanket the earth!

The real challenge shouldn't how many people we can lure into our church service on Sunday morning at a certain time.

The real challenge should be how deeply and authentically can I love the handful of people I'm doing life with?

If I nail down this challenge — if I succeed in treating the people in my own immediate life with the same kind of love and compassion that Jesus would treat them with if he were here in physical form — then I would be pleasing God. And there would be no issue about whether my "church" needed to be "bigger."

True love breeds love. If God's love is spilling out of me into the lives of others, then God's love will spill out of them into the lives of still others, and so on and so forth.

That's the kind of quantity God is looking for.

But it doesn't happen. Not in my life, anyway.

Typically, I don't love people authentically.

I don't let the love of God spill out of me into the lives of others.

I don't love people richly, the way Jesus did — I love people cheaply.

I love people thinly. So that the moment conflict arises — I'm dealing with people on a cheap old human level.

And when church families break down into squabbles and conflicts, it kills growth. People don't gravitate toward a group where tensions are high.

The Christians in Corinth were divided over various leaders and strategies (**1 Corinthians 3:5-9**).

Some said "We do it Paul's way." Others were adamant about following a guy named Apollos, who was leading after Paul left town. Others were lined up behind Simon Peter.

But Paul says to the Corinthians, people aren't attracted by strategy. People are attracted by love.

We need to be able to disagree agreeably, and still love each other.

We need to recognize that different people have different perspectives and different strengths, but we're all serving together under the covering of Christ's authority.

Friction and strife will drive people away. But if we love each other, we'll attract people to what God can do in *their* lives through his love.

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Finally: ***The church is a temple — and the goal is quality.***

By using the term *temple*, I'm not talking about a building.

Jesus never referred to the church as a building. Neither did Paul or Peter.

The church is *you*.

But you, as the church, are a temple — because the work you are designed by God to do is not just your average, ordinary, everyday stuff.

You have a divine mandate. There is a supernatural process at work in your life.

There's a lot at stake in what you do and how you do it. Lives hang in the balance.

Paul says to the Corinthians — and the same applies to us:

1 Corinthians 3:10,11

10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.

11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

The right foundation is crucial, and Jesus is the foundation.

He's the guy our life-compass points toward.

Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God's character and love.

The perfect example of loving God by loving people.

Every day, we build on this good foundation.

Step by step, we learn to love God better, learn to love people better, as Jesus showed us to do.

We can produce a lot of cool Sunday morning church programs and complicated evangelism and discipleship strategies, but only what's truly of eternal quality is going to matter in the end.

Only what was really about loving God by loving people is going to hold up.

Paul told the Corinthians that at the end of time, when we all face the Father, it will be as if our lifetime of effort is tested in a furnace.

He said:

1 Corinthians 3:13-15

13 [A person's] work will be shown for what it is.... It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.

15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

When I get to the end of my life, I want to have been about the "2 things."

Our calling is to make a temple, and tend it.

Paul says in **1 Corinthians 3:16,17**:

16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

17 ...God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

We're a temple — we're a farm — we're a family.
We're about 2 things — loving God, and loving people.
Let's recommit ourselves to walking worthy of our calling in Christ.