

September 10, 2017

## ***The Most Excellent Way***

***"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."*** I Corinthians 1:4-9

"That's messed up" is one of my son-in-law's favorite phrases to describe things that just aren't right. It is also the perfect way to describe the believers in Corinth in the first century. The way they lived as believers was "messed up".

Corinth is a community located on a tiny isthmus connecting the upper and lower portions of Greece. It is an interesting and ancient city because it was at the crossroads between the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea and allowed travelers on their way to Italy from modern day Turkey to shorten their journey. I always think that Corinth in the first century must have been a little like the bar scene at the beginning of the first (fourth) Star Wars.

Because it sat astride nearly every trade route in its day it was populated by people from all over the known world. Nearly every religion was practiced in Corinth and probably nearly every sin. Paul arrived there traveling north from Athens by himself having left most of his team behind to build up churches he had planted in Greece.

In Corinth he met Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish believers who had been driven out of Rome. Together they planted the church in Corinth and the Apostle would eventually spend more than two years there trying to strengthen and train the believers there. Like the community the church undoubtedly had people from all over the known world, from all sorts of backgrounds, and from all economic levels. It was quite a mix.

From the standpoint of a functional church the believers in Corinth were especially blessed with the presence of the Holy Spirit, but still managed to mess up nearly everything they could in every way they could. Through the first twelve chapters Paul tries to straighten out a lot of their wrong attitudes and actions, with some success, and then he gives them what he will call ***"...the most excellent way..."***

The first problem that he addresses with these believers is the problem of division. Like most humans the Corinthians had a driving desire to be seen as better than others, even in the church. So, they had begun to compare who had converted them to Christ. ***"...One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'.*** Needless to say their competitive natures were tearing the church apart.

This problem of competitiveness still divides the church; the body of Christ, today. For centuries men have fought one another over which was the "right" church. This is one of the major reasons that so many different churches now exist. We are all driven to see ourselves as more important than or more special than others. For some reason we need this vindication of our own personal value.

What we overlook and what those first century believers overlooked is that we are not called to be better than others, but to see others as better than ourselves. In his letter to the believers in Philippi, the Apostle writes, ***"Do nothing out of selfish ambition and vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves..."*** (Philippians 2) He calls this ***"...the mind of Christ..."*** in both letters.

You and I are not called to the "right" church, but to Jesus Christ. Paul would say, "*...but we preach Christ crucified.*" The Apostle did not preach church, but salvation in Jesus Christ and these believers were not better than others because of who had preached to them. Nor are we better than other believers because we are the "right" church. Like the believers in Corinth, we are called to Jesus as sinners because that is what all of us are. All of us are seeking to understand what God has called us to as believers in the body of Christ, his church. All of us are still "messed up".

We do still have to be careful of what we preach and what we practice; individually and as a church. Paul would warn all who would build on the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ, "*But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Christ Jesus. If any man builds on this foundation...his work will be shown for what it is...*"

God has called us to unity in the church. Division has never and will never be justified for those who claim to follow our Master. Our unity, Jesus would say, is the only reliable measure of the truth of our discipleship. Division was not acceptable in Corinth and it is not acceptable now.

