

The Message of 1 Corinthians

by G. Campbell Morgan

The church's responsibility towards the city is to fulfill its function in proclaiming the Lordship of Christ, rebuking immorality, and cancelling selfishness, and this can only be done through complete separation from the city and a realization of its own life in Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 1 Corinthians 15:57, Ephesians 4:1-3, Philippians 4:1

Topics: "Church Responsibility", "Influence of the Church"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the contrast between the Church of God and the city of Corinth, highlighting how the spirit of the city has invaded the church, leading to failure in fulfilling its divine responsibilities. He discusses the causes of this failure, including religious license, moral laxity, and social disorder, and stresses the need for the church to realize its own life in Christ to succeed. The sermon calls for a recognition of the church's responsibility to influence the city positively, proclaiming the resurrection of Christ as the central message. Morgan urges the church to separate from the city's corrupting influences and to embody the love and purity of Christ in its mission. Ultimately, he encourages believers to be steadfast and active in their faith, fulfilling their role in the world.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching

i. The Causes of Failure.

a. The Spirit of the City had invaded the Church.

1. Religious Licence.

2. Moral Laxity.

3. Social Disorder.

b. The Failure of the Church to realize its own Life.

1. The Word of the Cross.

2. The Purity of the Christ.
3. The Law of His Love.
- ii. The Secrets of Success.
 - a. The Realization by the Church of its own Life.

1. The Organism

One Lord.

One Spirit.

One God.

2. The Law.

Love.

3. The supernatural Secret.

The Resurrection of Christ.

- b. The Spirit of the Church invading the City.

1. Proclaiming the Lord.
2. Rebuking Immorality.
3. Cancelling Selfishness.

- II. The Abiding Appeal

- i. To a Recognition of Responsibility.
- ii. To a complete Separation in order to a Fulfillment of Responsibility.
- iii. To a Fulfillment of her own Powers.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

- I. To the Church

- i. The Influence of a Church is the Influence of her Members.
- ii. The Conflict between the City and the Church.
- iii. Certain Questions.
 - a. What is our Influence?
 - b. Is there a Conflict?

c. If not, why not?

II. To the World

i. The Church is against the City as it is, in order to make the City what it ought to be.

ii. Our central Message is that of the Resurrection.

In attempting to discover the message of this letter a phrase in the introduction, "The church of God which is at Corinth," is of great value. It immediately suggests the theme of the letter, because in it two pictures are presented to the mind; first, that of the church of God, and secondly that of the city of Corinth; the church of God being a community sharing the life of God, governed by the will of God, cooperating in the work of God; Corinth being a city of the world, ignorant of God, self-governed, antagonistic to the purposes of God. The two pictures stand opposite each other in striking and vivid contrast.

Of course the phrase "The church of God" here had reference not to the whole Catholic Church, but to the local church in the city of Corinth. Nevertheless, because the local church is a microcosm of the Catholic Church, each local church embodying the principles and methods of the whole Church, being an assembly of men and women united in the bonds of the life of the Lord Christ, the very fact of their churchmanship consisting in their relation to Him and in the real presence in the midst of them of this Christ, the things said of the Church are most evidently true of the church at Corinth. It consisted of a community of people sharing the life of God, made partakers of the Divine nature; a community of people therefore governed by God; a theocracy, a holy nation; and consequently a people in fellowship with Him, in cooperation with Him in Corinth for the accomplishment of His work. All that is included in the first picture suggested by the phrase "The church of God which is at Corinth."

The city of Corinth was at the time a centre of learning and luxury. The name Corinth was a synonym for profligacy and vice. There was a proverb extant, "They live as they live at Corinth," which suggested life in lust, lasciviousness, and luxury. Corinth as a city was ignorant of the one true God, and entirely self-governed. Individual life in Corinth was self-centred, and consequently social life was self-governed. Therefore, unconsciously perhaps, but quite definitely, Corinth was a city antagonistic to God. It is impossible to have two things more entirely opposed brought close together into one brief phrase, than these two facts of the church of God, and the city of Corinth.

The atmosphere of this letter is that of Paul's conception of the responsibilities of the church for the city. In the Acts of the Apostles we have the account of the presence of this man in Athens in one brief declaration, "While he waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him, as he beheld the city full of idols." He left Athens and came to Corinth, and during that visit the foundations of the church were laid. Now, after some years had passed, he wrote a letter to the church there, and evidently his conception of the responsibility of the church concerning the city harmonizes with his own consciousness when in the city of Athens. At the commencement of the letter in the fundamental proposition he said, "God is faithful, through Whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord," and in these words we at once discover his conception of the responsibility of the church for the city. The word "fellowship" means a great deal more than privilege; it includes responsibility. Fellowship with Jesus Christ does not merely mean that all His resources are at our disposal; it means that all our resources are, or ought to be, at His disposal. The church in Corinth was in fellowship with Jesus Christ. All the resources of Christ were at her disposal, and all the resources of the church were properly at the disposal of Christ, and that in order to the accomplishment in Corinth of the work of God. Three sentences at the portal of the Roman

letter indicate the apostolic sense of responsibility, "I am debtor ... I am ready . . . I am not ashamed." Whereas in that case the note is personal, that sense, multiplied, reveals the apostolic conception of the responsibility of the church of God in any given city. The church of God in Corinth is in debt to Corinth, because the truth which the church holds as a deposit and has realized in her own life, is the very truth that Corinth needs. When Paul said, "I am ready to preach the gospel to you also that are in Rome," he expressed the true attitude of the church in every city. The church should be ready to declare to the city in its godlessness and its resulting lust, lasciviousness, and luxury, the same great evangel. When he said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," he indicated what should be the attitude of the church in the midst of the city. This whole letter to the Corinthian church was written out of this overwhelming sense of the responsibility of the church for the city in which it exists.

The church at Corinth had failed to discharge its debt to Corinth; failed in readiness to declare the evangel; failed in courage and conviction concerning her own gospel. That was the trouble which filled the heart of the apostle. It was not merely that the church was in itself carnal; it was rather that the carnal church in Corinth was unable to deliver the spiritual message to Corinth.

In this letter we discover the causes of the church's failure and the secret of her success. In dealing with the content we divided the letter into two sections: Corrective of the carnalities; Constructive-of the spiritualities. The carnalities prevented the church bearing spiritual witness in Corinth; the spiritualities were for the correction of "the carnalities, that the church might be enabled to deliver her message.

In dealing with the central teaching of the letter we notice first the causes of failure, and secondly the secrets of success.

Now, again if we fix our attention upon the two thoughts suggested by the phrases the church of God and the city of Corinth ; if imaginatively we look back through the centuries to Corinth, and see the church of God in the centre of its life, we shall understand the causes of the failure of the church there.

The first cause was that the spirit of the city had invaded the church. Every evil thing with which Paul dealt in his letter was an evil thing which had come into the church from the city. There was first religious licence; secondly, moral laxity; and thirdly, social disorder.

Look at Corinth alone and it will be seen full of religious licence. Intellectually, it was the centre of diverse opinions, for the hour was one of intellectual strife, and in that strife the city was finding amusement. It was an hour of superb rhetoric and eloquence; "Corinthian words" was another of the phrases of the times. a synonym for rhetoric. In the schools of Corinth men were debating, and rejoicing in the wisdom of words; all sorts of opinions were rife, and men were gathered into small sections defending those varied opinions. The city of Corinth religiously was characterized by diversities, differences; great dialectical skill; an infinite variety of opinions; perpetual arguments in the schools, and among the religious leaders. That was the spirit of the city. That spirit had invaded the church. Men and women within the fellowship had caught the intellectual restlessness of the religious life of the city, with the result that some said, We are of Paul, others, We are of Apollos, others, We are of Cephas; while yet others said, We are of Christ. The diversities of opinions expressed within the church were the results of the differing emphases in the preaching of these men, Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. All this was due to the invasion of the church by the intellectual restlessness of the outside world.

The city was also characterized by moral laxity. The effect of the diffusion of devotion was the lowering of the moral standard. For example, the nature of the worship of Aphrodite is a story too vile for telling in the

assembly of the saints. That moral laxity had invaded the church. Many of these Christian people were lax in their own moral life, and there was one case so flagrant and so terrible, that Paul declared that those outside the church would have been ashamed of it.

Finally, in the city self was supreme; there was no conscious responsibility for others. Each was for himself, and selfishness was the basis of all endeavour, the method of all government. This spirit also had invaded the church, and relative obligations were unrecognized.

Beneath all this there was something profounder. These were really effects, rather than causes. While Paul saw and corrected disorder in detail in the early part of this letter-and indeed throughout it, for even in the constructive part he perpetually returned to correction-he did so consistently by showing that the reason of the disorder was that the church had forgotten the central, unifying word of the Cross.

She had been invaded by the spirit of division from the city, and had created her own sects out of divisions and differences concerning doctrine, because she failed to respond to the word of the Cross in her own life. She had been invaded by the moral laxity of the city, because seeing that she had not lived according to the word of the Cross, neither had she lived in the power of the resurrection, which is the power of the infinite purity of Christ. The church had been invaded by the selfishness of the ideals of the city, because unyielded to the Cross; and devoid of the power of the resurrection, she had failed to be impelled by the abiding law of love.

The two central truths which this letter teaches are first that the church fails to fulfill her function in the city when she is invaded by the spirit of the city; secondly, that the church allows the spirit of the city to invade her when she is untrue to the central facts of her own life, when she does not realize in actual experience what she is potentially in the economy of God.

These facts account for the perpetual method of the apostolic writers and teachers ; that method which Paul adopted when in effect more than once in the course of his writings he said, You are saints, be saints ; you have put off the old man, put off the old man; you have put on the new man, put on the new man; be what you are; realize your own life; be true to the great word of the Cross by which you have become redeemed, ransomed people; let the word which is in you, dwell in you richly.

Here are laid bare the secrets of the Church's failure whenever the Church fails to deliver the message of God to the age. This is the secret of her failure through the centuries. The measure of failure on the part of the Church is the measure in which she has allowed herself to be influenced by the spirit of the age, because she has been untrue to the facts of her own life. We are sometimes told to-day that what the Church supremely needs is that she should catch the spirit of the age. A thousand times no. What the Church supremely needs is to correct the spirit of the age. The church in Corinth catching the spirit of Corinth became anemic, weak, and failed to deliver the message of God to Corinth. The church of God in London, invaded by the spirit of London, the materialism, militarism, sordidness, and selfishness of London, is too weak to save London.

When the Church of God is invaded by the spirit of the age or of the city, it is because the forces equal to repelling the invasion of that destructive spirit are neglected. The Church of God needs no new visitation of power from God. She needs the realization of the power she already has, the appropriation of the forces already resident within her.

The word of the Cross, the Corinthians had heard it, they knew it; the purity of Christ had touched them in regenerative miracle; the love of God was already shed abroad in their hearts; but they had not abandoned themselves to the claim of the word of the Cross; they had not yielded themselves in entirety to the impulse of His purity; they had not responded to the clamant cry of the love of Christ. The forces of their own preservation being weakened within themselves, the spirit of the city swept in, and the church in Corinth failed because she was invaded by the spirit of the city which she ought to have saved.

Thus we learn what are the secrets of success. The church can only be successful in fulfilling her function in the city by realization of her own life in Christ, that life which is revealed as an organism; one Lord, she shares the life of her Lord; one Spirit, she is under the government of that Spirit Who communicates gifts severally as He will, blessing each member of the body in order to the fulfillment of the function of the whole body; one God, she makes His glory the supreme and ultimate fact. The realization of these facts is the secret of success. Let the Church of God share the life of the Lord, obey the government of the Spirit, and seek the glory of God; and by that separation from the city, she prepares herself for the work of helping and lifting the city.

The law of the Church is the law of love, severest of sentinels as it watches the activity of men, mightiest of all motives as it impels life and service. At the centre of the classic passage on love which we know so well by letter is the declaration "Love never faileth." That is the law of the Church's life.

The supernatural secret of the Church is that of resurrection. The Church of God is a community of people related to the historic resurrection of Christ, and to the coming resurrection of the saints. Between these the Church must fulfill her function in immediate relation to both. Her life is life won out of death, and communicated by the resurrection of Christ. Her life is life tending to consummation and perfection in the resurrection of the saints at the second Advent. The Church is supernatural, mystical, separated in the very nature of her life from all the men of the age. The secret of the fulfillment by the church of her function in the city is her realization of these facts. She is an organism; she has one law, that of love; the supernatural secret of her life is that of resurrection.

The exercise of function is that of the Spirit of the church invading the city. If the Church's failure is due to the fact that the spirit of the city has invaded the church; the Church's success is due to the fact that the Spirit of the church invades the city, proclaiming the Lordship of Christ based upon His resurrection; rebuking the immorality of the city by the revelation of His purity; cancelling the selfishness of the city by her own example, and by insistence that all men shall have granted to them an opportunity to live.

The Church of God always fails when she becomes conformed to the methods, maxims, and manners of the city. The Church of God always succeeds when, true to the supernatural nature of her life, she stands in perfect separation from the city. Only thus is she able to touch and help the city.

Consequently the abiding appeal of the letter is patent. It calls the Church of God in every age to recognition of responsibility concerning the city. The church is responsible for the religious life of the city, for the moral standards of the city, for the social order of the city.

If you can persuade me that we have no responsibilities, that the Church exists merely for the conserving of the life of her own members, then I will leave the Church, and join with others who have a keener sense of moral and religious responsibility; but it is impossible to persuade me to that conclusion in the light of New Testament teaching. The Church is responsible for the religious life of the city, for the affirmation and revelation of God therein. There never was a time when the fulfillment of that function was more necessary

than now. We are no longer face to face with old-fashioned antagonism. A time there was when blatant infidelity had its halls in all our great towns, and in them made attack upon the very idea of the existence of God. There may be such halls of assembly still; but they lurk in hidden corners. The infidelity of the hour is the infidelity of indifference; and the business of the Church is to arrest the indifferent, to arouse the conscience, to affirm God, to compel men to the consideration of the infinite, eternal, and abiding things.

The religious effect must first be produced. Then resulting from it there must be the erection of moral standards. The Church is to deny that there can be lasting and final morality unless it is homed in spirituality of conception. In the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ there was always the closest connection between spiritual conception and moral standard; so with the Church, she is to stand in every age affirming that the only sufficient moral standard is that of right relationship to God and eternity.

Consequently the Church is responsible for the social order of the city. She cannot, if she be true to her own life, be silent and careless while there are in the city men, women, and little children without the opportunity of finding and worshipping God, living and working in such conditions' that culture of the essential spiritual life is impossible.

The call of this letter in the second place is a call to complete separation in order to the fulfillment of responsibility. Separation, first, from all licence in religious thinking. There is a toleration which is of the very essence of destruction. If we admit for a single moment that all these differing opinions outside the Church concerning matters of religion may lead ultimately to true religion, apart from the word of the Cross, that will presently make us untrue ourselves to the word of the Cross, which word declares all men guilty, and all human wisdom foolishness, and demands that men shall find their way into true wisdom and true life through, and only through, the surrender of the life to the Lord Christ.

We are called also to complete separation from all laxity in dealing with immorality. While the outside world is declaring to-day, for instance, that it is time we faced again the problem of the marriage relationship and made easier divorce laws, it is for the Church of God to abide in the name of Christ by the great ideal of the Bible, and whatever personal suffering may be entailed, insist upon it that men and women must be true to the marriage relationship in the interests of the family and the national life. That is only a passing illustration of the principle. The Church must never give countenance to the lax conceptions of morality which abound in the life of the city. The Church must be free from carelessness about social iniquities.

This letter calls us supremely therefore to the fulfillment of the powers of our own being; the life of the Lord in the Spirit; love supreme; the power of the resurrection, His resurrection from among the dead operating in victory in our own lives, our coming resurrection at the second Advent flashing like a beacon light upon all the pathway and calling us to purity.

The application of this great appeal to the Church of God may thus be stated. The influence of the Church is the influence of her members. The sum total of the membership in any church is the sum total of that church's influence. Thus ultimately the great truth about the Church is reduced to the point of personal application. Each one in the measure of personality is responsible for the influence of the church in the city.

There is a perpetual conflict between the city and the church; the city that is godless and the church which is God-centred. By way of application let one question be asked and answered alone. What is our influence in the life of the city? Is there any conflict between the Church of God and the city? If not, is it not because the spirit of the city has invaded the church until it has become difficult to discover where the city

ends and the church begins; sometimes almost impossible to distinguish between the man actuated by the godlessness of the city, and the man who, calling himself by the name of Christ, is yet not living the life God-centred and God-governed.

In some senses this letter has no message to the world. Inferentially it declares that the church is against the city as it is, in order to make the city what it ought to be. The Church lifts her voice in protest against iniquity in the city or nation, because her business is to make the city and the nation what God would have them be. Our central message to the world, according to the teaching of this letter, is that of the resurrection of the Lord. That resurrection unifies religious truth. Every doctrine is centred therein. That resurrection is the standard of morality, for in that stupendous mystery God did accept the Man of Nazareth as the type and pattern of humanity. That resurrection is the declaration of power at the disposal of all men, for in the mystery of His resurrection the Lord placed His life at the disposal of others.

Inclusively and finally, the appeal of the letter to the Church is contained in the actual words of the apostle, "Be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord."

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