

Church Live Re-Visited: Session One - Part 1

by Ron Bailey

Ron Bailey explores the significance of the New Covenant and local church dynamics through the lens of 1 Corinthians, emphasizing the importance of context and community in understanding church life.

Duration: 25:16

Scripture: Acts 18:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1

Topics: "New Covenant", "Local Church"

Description

This sermon delves into the topics of the New Covenant and the local church, exploring the speaker's strong convictions on these matters. It emphasizes the importance of increasing Bible study and understanding the nature of the Bible, as well as the significance of experiencing church life. The historical context of Corinth during Paul's time is discussed, highlighting the multicultural and religious landscape that influenced the early church.

Transcript

All right, well, welcome everybody. It's good to see you. And I want this first one of these sessions to be something of a kind of a pilot.

That's to say, I want us to sort of try and find our own level. I want to find the right level for what we're doing. And I can only do that if I get some feedback from you.

To know whether we're dealing with things in too intellectual a way or we're going too deep. I shan't know, and I'm not psychic, thankfully. I shan't know any of these things unless you actually tell me.

So I hope this really will be a learning experience where we can learn together. And I have, I suppose, two topics which fascinate me, which thrill me. Of course, I suppose there's always three in that Jesus Christ himself is always a great theme of our hearts.

But there are two aspects of his work which have excited me, thrilled me, and intrigued me, I think, for most of my Christian life. And from time to time they've led me into kind of fairly difficult situations and sometimes into situations of contention. The two issues are the New Covenant and the local church.

And I have very, very strong convictions about both of these. And when we talked briefly about the prospect of doing a series of Bible studies, I had sort of several ideas in my mind. One of the things I'd like us to do is maybe get an idea of how all of us can increase our own level of Bible study.

How can we actually learn more about the Bible? How are we to use this book that God has given to us? What's the nature of it? Do you need to go to Bible college? Do you need to have a certain level of intelligence? What do we need to really discover God's purpose in giving us this book? And when I was thinking about the local church, maybe some of you know, I guess most of you know, that for some years, maybe five or six years, we ran something down here in Reading that we call the Church Life School. In fact, this is why I came to Reading way back in 1987, 20 years ago now, to be part of the Church Life School. And the idea of the Church Life School was to give people, especially from abroad, an opportunity to come and experience church life.

That's why we call it the Church Life School. There were other places where there were Bible colleges, and they did Bible study. And there were other places subsequently that called themselves the Church Workers Program, and they tried to program church workers, or at least to prepare church workers.

But we call ours the Church Life School because our idea was that we wanted to give people an opportunity of what it was really like to be part of a functioning church. And we didn't have a kind of a curriculum or syllabus proper. What we had is areas of life that we tried to discuss, and I can't remember all of them now, but there were things like waiting on God as a way of life.

The cross as a way of life. Being part of the local church body as a way of life. Meditating in the scriptures as a way of life.

So at the end of every one of these things we had this little phrase, as a way of life, because the whole idea was to make it a living dynamic where people were living and moving on in their relationship with God, and with their relationship with one another. And for me it was a thrilling time. It was a thrilling time because we had people from many different countries.

I think I counted, I think there were over 20 different countries we had people from before we finished that particular series of Church Life School. And one of the things that thrilled me was we had a big Victorian table, some of the meetings were in this room, and we would sit around the table, and you'd have all these different folks, all with their own version of English, all kind of modifying it in a certain way that was intelligible to me, but the Nigerians weren't always understandable to the people from Hong Kong or the people from Finland or wherever it was. And one of the things that I kept on having to ask and answer for myself all the time was, what is church and what is culture? What is church and what is culture? Because we had, and I still have, no interest at all in exporting culture.

I have no interest in exporting fellowship culture. I have no interest in exporting English church life culture. To me, it was forever a search for what I call the irreducible minimum, as to say, what does a church really need to have to be a church? Because churches can function in all kinds of cultures, in all kinds of contexts, but there must be something which is key, a kernel of what it means to be a church, and what it means to function as a church.

And one of the great things about the Bible is that we have an amazing variety of different kinds of books and different aspects of teaching in it. But the letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians, is really absolutely unique. There's nothing like it in the rest of the Bible because it shows us a church at work.

And it shows us, to some degree, a church not at work, as to say, it shows us things that aren't going the way they ought to be going. And in a strange way, I think we ought to be grateful that things didn't always go the way they should do. Because the consequence of that is that we have the first letter to the

Corinthians, and we see Paul addressing all kinds of issues which are essential to the functioning of a real church.

So what I want to do is, I'm going to do this in three blocks this evening, and the first block, I'm going to look at what I call the context. Now, there'll be a bit of history in this, and if you agree with Henry Ford that history was just one darn thing after another, you might not enjoy this little bit too much. But it is important to understand the context into which Paul wrote 1 Corinthians because it was a living context, it wasn't something that happened in a museum.

It was real life, and these were real people that these were happening to. And you'd be amazed at how similar the culture that we live in is to the culture that they lived in. In fact, the culture we live in is more like the first century culture now than it has been at any period since then, since the first century.

Many of us, we look at the state of maybe Christianity and we think what it was like in Spurgeon's time with the great Victorians and all the rest of it, but in fact that wasn't very much at all like it was in the first century. And maybe we think about what it was like in Wesley's time, but actually that wasn't very much at all what it was like in the first century. We're living in a context now which is very, very similar to the first century.

When essentially there's kind of one superpower, where there's almost one language that makes it possible for people all over the world to communicate with one another. We're living in a situation where religion has become a kind of a supermarket, where all kinds of things have floated, particularly from the East, all kinds of weird and wonderful ideas and people now create their own sort of do-it-yourself religion. A little bit of this, a little bit of that, a little bit of the other.

And we say this is a terrible mess. And we look at the churches and we say, well, they're not really like we think churches ought to be. They're doing this and it's not quite right and they're doing that.

Actually this is exactly what it was like in the days that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. So this letter is a unique glimpse into ordinary church life, when it's not working the way it ought to work and it'll give us some real pointers as to why it wasn't working and we'll see how Paul handles those things. So the first epistle to the Corinthians, as we call it, was written to the church at Corinth.

And when Paul first visited Corinth, it was a really kind of aggressive, busy, bustling, commercial city. It had actually been razed to the ground, as I say, absolutely flattened a hundred years previously as a reprisal by Rome because they wouldn't do as they were told. And then they began to rebuild it and in a hundred years or so it had become a city of amazing energy.

If you know anything about the maps, Greece is really sort of in two halves and the two halves are joined together by a very narrow corridor, a thing that's called an isthmus or something like that, depending on if you've got the right teeth in. And on that isthmus is the city of Corinth. So it was perfectly positioned as a trade route.

A trade that was moving north to south went through Corinth. Trade that was moving east to west, coming from one sea to the other sea, also went through Corinth. They actually built a kind of a railway, not with steam, but a kind of a track so that they could unload ships at one end, put them on carts, move it all the way to the other end, put it on the other end and then move it on, which meant that they didn't have to sail around the dangerous seas.

So it was a very busy city. And I've got a couple of quotes here that I'm just going to read to you. These are things that I've picked up from different books I've read.

This is from a man named Leon Morris and he says this concerning Corinth and just how cosmopolitan it was. That's another thing you'll see about Corinth. It wasn't a one race culture.

It was very, very mixed. Let's see what he says. And then there's another quotation I've got here which says this.

Now that really will be a key to our understanding as to what was going wrong at Corinth. It was a reckless development of the individual. In other words, everyone was concerned about themselves, their own financial development, and in the church, to a degree, their own spiritual development.

They weren't thinking about others. They weren't thinking about the body. And one of the things that Paul will say to the Corinthians is, you're not discerning the body.

You're not seeing the body. You're not recognising that God has actually baptised you all by one spirit into one body and made you parts of one another. You've not understood the whole nature of a local church.

And that's why things were going so badly wrong. This other quotation goes on to say that the merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure, surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete, steel to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian times. In a word, the man who recognised no superior and no law but his own designs.

They were intensely individualistic. Greek culture was anyway, but Corinth more so. Well, when Corinth had been flattened and then rebuilt, they actually compelled lots and lots of freed slaves to set up residence in Corinth, which meant that you had a kind of a population that was made up of, I've got a little list here, it was made up of Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, Judeans, people who had been slaves and had then been freed for one reason or another.

So it was an intensely multicultural context. And you see why I say that this is so relevant. This really was a multi-ethnic, multi-culture city.

And one of the other things you notice is that in the letters in 1 Corinthians and in the letter to Romans, which Paul may well have written from Corinth, there are lots of names and lots of the names have kind of Latin endings which show this kind of Roman link because very often a slave, when he was made a slave, would take on the name of the family that he came from and those were kind of usually Roman names. Let's turn together to the Book of the Acts. And the Book of the Acts is not just a happy story.

It really is a vital timeline for us to understand what is happening. You couldn't understand the epistles without the Acts of the Apostles. It is absolutely necessary.

I mean you get to the epistle and you find references to things called churches and references to people called apostles and references to a man named Paul and if you didn't have the Acts of the Apostles you'd have no idea what any of these things were. So the Acts is really very, very important. This is Acts chapter 18 and it's where our story begins.

Acts 18 and I'm going to read the first two verses. After these things Paul left Athens and went to Corinth and he found a certain Jew named Achilla born in Pontus who had recently come from Italy with his wife

Priscilla because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome and he came to them. That's the first name I just want to pick out.

I'm thinking about the government to begin with. Claudius was the emperor, the emperor Claudius. He succeeded a man named Caligula and Claudius was an unusual character.

Some people aren't quite sure how sane he was. He certainly seemed to have kind of very odd tendencies of one kind or another. It was Claudius incidentally who invaded Britain so we do have an interest in Claudius.

And although this doesn't do much for our pride, he probably didn't invade it for any other reason other than he wanted what was called a triumph. A triumph was a triumphal procession where a Roman emperor was allowed to go in and an amazing spectacle that went through Rome and everyone was cheering and they were showing what a wonderful kind of victory it was and how it added to the lustre of Rome and all the rest of it and there wasn't much to conquer by this point except this kind of dark, miserable, misty island and Claudius kind of decided that this would be a good target. So that's why he came and Claudius' allegiance came and kind of conquered Britain or the southern half of it anyway.

So Claudius was, he was an emperor. And there are some interesting bits and pieces about Claudius. There's a man named Suetonius who was a Roman historian of sorts and he wrote the life stories of twelve of the Caesars.

And when he wrote the history of Claudius, there's a little point in it where he says this. He says that at a certain point because of constant disturbances amongst the Jewish population in Rome, Claudius banned all the Jews from Rome. He sent them out of the country.

And you can see there's a little reference here. Claudius, Suetonius actually says that the reason Claudius did it is because there were lots of rebellions that seemed to be instigated by someone who was called Crestus. Now, no one has any idea who Crestus was.

And there's no record of Crestus having been banished from Rome. And the supposition is that it was very likely that Crestus was actually Christos, was actually Christ. And that all the trouble that kept on breaking out of Rome was actually over somebody called the Christ.

And a typical kind of government way of dealing with it. He got rid of all the people who were causing the problems and he banished all the Jews from Rome. And that's why in the providence of God, an amazing couple named Priscilla and Achilla were banished from Rome and at this point had settled in Corinth.

Later on we'll find, this is a very mobile family, later on we'll find them in Ephesus, later on we'll find them back in Rome again and they're an amazing pair. It would be worth your while following the story of Priscilla and Achilla. Okay, now there's another man that we'll read of a little bit later on in the story and he's another Roman official and his name is Gallio.

And Gallio was the proconsul. Corinth was a sort of regional capital and they had a kind of a vice-caesar, a man called a proconsul, over that area. And the particular at this point was named Gallio.

And this, I hope this isn't boring you to death, but this is interesting particularly for Bible students because we know pretty much when Gallio was the proconsul in Corinth. He was there somewhere in between AD 51 and AD 54. Which means that it gives us actually one of the only few definite dates, and even that's a

span of four years, that we have in the whole of New Testament.

So if you've got a Bible that says this happened in AD 20 and this happened in AD 30 and this happened in AD 65, I need to tell you that all those are actually estimates and they're all based on the fact that Gallio was the proconsul in Corinth somewhere in between AD 51 and AD 54. So it really is a very, very useful kind of time link. Okay, so what else about the government? Well, they would have a sort of a local democracy in that they would have a kind of a town council.

And the interesting thing is that when the town council was gathered together, this gathering of the town council of people who were elected from all the members of the public who were allowed to vote in Corinth, this was actually called an Ecclesia. Now the interesting thing about that is that Ecclesia is the word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians when he writes to the Ecclesia of God that is in Corinth. If he hadn't said the Ecclesia of God, if he'd just said the Ecclesia in Corinth and the letter had gone astray, it would have ended up at the town hall because there was an organisation called an Ecclesia.

But this isn't what Paul is talking about. He's talking about another kind of a group and we'll see what it is in just a minute. What about religion then? Because these will have their impact upon this letter as well.

Well, in times past, kind of 100 years before, Corinth was notorious for its idolatry and its heathen temples. It had lots of ritual prostitution. The temple in Corinth 100 years before this had, they reckon, 1,000 ritual prostitutes.

It was a vile place. It was a vile place but it was a place where there was a lot of intellectual interest. So if someone spoke like a Corinthian, it meant that he was very well educated and really quite sophisticated.

But if someone lived like a Corinthian, it meant really that his life was immoral. And to Corinthianise somebody really meant that you had debauched them. You had corrupted them and made them as evil as the people in Corinth were.

So there were all kinds of false religions. But as well as that, there were lots of Jews in Corinth. Whenever there were 10 male Jews, it was a law for Judaism that they had to form a synagogue.

If there were 10 male Jews, that was enough. You had to have a synagogue. And someone has estimated, and he isn't a Bible person who's done this, but he's a historian, has estimated that in the time of the New Testament, probably something like about, and this is an amazing figure, about 10% of the population of the Mediterranean coastlands was Jewish.

How about that? 10% of the Mediterranean coastlands was Jewish. It was because they were trading, because they had spread out at times in the exile. These people were known as the diaspora or the dispersion.

But it meant that in every city, and there's a reference to this, if you remember. Have a quick look at Acts chapter 15. Acts chapter 15, verse 21.

When there was trouble earlier on in the history of the church as to what you were going to do with Christians, new Gentile Christians, whether you were going to circumcise them or not. This is a big council that they had together, a big conference. And in Acts chapter 15 and verse 21, you've got this statement.

This is actually James, the brother of the Lord, who says this in verse 21. He says, for Moses has had, throughout many generations, those who preach him in every city being read in the synagogues every Sabbath. There would probably have been dozens of synagogues in Corinth.

And there would have been lots and lots of people who had a very good knowledge of the Old Testament. And not only Jews, because Judaism, because of its moral stance, had quite an appeal to people who were sick to death of the immorality of pagan, heathen religion. And they were attracted to Judaism, but they weren't attracted to the narrowness of Judaism.

So they became what were known as proselytes. And proselytes didn't become full-blown Jews. They didn't keep the food laws, and they weren't circumcised.

But they believed in the God of Israel, the classical example of this was someone like Cornelius, that you'll read of in Acts chapter 10. So this was the kind of mixture. So you've got people who were from terrible backgrounds, pagan backgrounds.

You've got a very heavy kind of strata of people with a kind of a Jewish background and with Jewish connections. And then you have another group of people. And if you look at 1 Corinthians 10, verse 32, you'll see how Paul divides 1 Corinthians 10, verse 32, and he divides up Corinth.

1 Corinthians 10, and verse 32, where he says this. Give no offense either to the Jews or to the Greeks, that's to say the Gentiles, or to the Church of God. So you've got three categories of people here.

You've got the Jews with certain kinds of moral background and the people who are attached to them as proselytes. You've got the Greeks with all their heathen paganism religion. And you've got this other little group he calls the Church of God.

I'm going to pause now and we can...

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