

## **“Cities of the Future”**

*Reading: Acts 18:1-17; 1 Corinthians 3:1-17*

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This part of our story is truly amazing. This man who was the church’s greatest enemy is now not only its greatest theologian, but also perhaps its greatest church planter. In the space of a few short decades, less than 200 timid, fearful Christians have become a movement spreading rapidly around the globe. After several hundred years of waiting for God to fulfill His promise of sending a Messiah to His people, the Messiah has arrived suddenly and unlike anyone’s expectations, and He has extended the invitation to God’s family more broadly than anyone could have guessed. After thousands of years of laws and sacrifices forming a barrier separating God’s people from the world, that barrier has been torn down and room has been made for the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on this new family of God, and He has taken that family places that no one could have foreseen. It’s an amazing chapter in this story of God’s work to redeem His creation, and it’s a chapter that we are still living in today.

We read of how Paul spent many years of his life traveling all over the Mediterranean world planting and tending churches. We read about the struggles and joys he faced, of the beatings and imprisonments, and the successes and redeemed lives. He guided the church through some of its earliest controversies, he corrected errors in doctrine, and he preserved its identity as the household of Christ. There are not very many movements or institutions or nations or families that survive, much less thrive, for two thousand years, but Paul and the other leaders of that first generation of the church made sure that we today could be firmly rooted on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ.

It’s always interesting to speculate about what will survive into the future, and what the future will look like when it comes. One of the reasons I love science fiction is because it asks those kinds of questions and spurs us to think deeply about the consequences of our choices in the present and the future. It’s not uncommon in the realm of sci-fi to see people thinking about what cities will be like in the future; what will our civilization evolve into if we survive long enough? There have long been attempts at forming the perfect society, and the interesting thing is that utopian societies have rarely been utopian for very long.

In the past, there were religious orders that tried to set up separate cultures out in the wilderness somewhere; the Ephrata Cloister is one not far from here that many of you may be familiar with. More recently, people tried combinations of government and economic systems to build the perfect society, like communism or our system of representative democracy coupled with a type of capitalism. Some have worked better than others, but none of them has been perfect. After World War II especially there was this optimistic excitement at the possibilities of technology, and the cities of the future would have all kinds of technology seamlessly integrated into everyone’s homes, like in *The Jetsons*. Nowadays, when I see predictions of cities of the future, it’s not just technology that’s integrated into peoples’ lives, it’s also nature. So visions of cities of the future tend to have lots of trees and gardens growing on skyscrapers and things like that.

But in our chapter of the story for today, we see Paul and the other leaders of the church building a society of the future that is unlike any of these other visions for what the future should look like. He doesn’t use religious separatism or fanaticism like some have done (though there have been

elements of the church that have withdrawn from society at times). He doesn't build this society on a political or economic structure. He doesn't rely on new technology and growth as his foundation, nor does he focus on sustainability. He doesn't even operate by trying to conquer other people or forcing them to join him, like lots of people have tried. In fact, some might say that Paul goes about it completely the wrong way, judging by how everyone else has done it. Paul's so-called city of the future is based on a message about a person, and he builds a society that is *very* different. But, of course, the society Paul worked to build is still standing, two thousand years later.

We could look in a lot of places in the New Testament for examples of how Paul and the other church leaders build the church, but Paul's work in Corinth gives us a good overall picture, partly because Corinth was a church with some problems. It wasn't perfect, but it was still the church, and Paul's instructions to them show us a lot about what they should have been instead.

We have two of Paul's letters to the church at Corinth recorded in our Bibles today, though we know that he sent other letters as well. But the story starts before Paul wrote those letters. We read about the birth of the Corinthian church in Acts 18, and that story of its beginning maybe helps us understand why the church was as troubled as it was. As was often his custom, when Paul began preaching in Corinth, he started with his own people, the Jews. From the very start, this is a divided community. Paul has some success in the synagogue: Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire family become Christians, along with many other Corinthians. But even though the leader of their synagogue converts, we learn that many others in the synagogue are opposed to Paul to the point of being abusive, so much so that Paul storms off and decides to focus his preaching on the Gentiles instead.

That's not too uncommon, but then they drag Paul in front of Gallio, the Roman proconsul of the region, and try to bring charges against him. But Gallio has no interest in their squabbles, so he practically ignores them. The crowd then immediately turns on their new synagogue leader, named Sosthenes, and beats him in front of the proconsul, who doesn't do anything to stop them. That would be kind of like carrying on a fistfight right in front of the governor of Pennsylvania. So we get a picture of what the Corinthians are like: it's almost as though they'll turn on one another with very little provocation, and even their leaders seem to care little for justice or order. This is a church planted in a context of division; people who are used to fighting and settling their disputes through any means necessary.

As we look through the letters Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in later years, that division and confusion and stubbornness is pretty evident in the problems they're having. They're not used to being a community, but Paul is trying to form them into a community unlike any other. So while other people might try to form a community based on fear or economics or technology, by promising safety or wealth or happiness, Paul is trying to help them see that the church is a community that exists for waiting and witnessing. We wait for the return of Christ, which gives our community a reason for being, an expectation for the future, and a firm foundation in the person of Jesus Christ, our Messiah. But we are not just waiting for Him, we are also a witnessing community. The story of Jesus and His work for us and His expectant return are not just a story to us, they are our foundation and our guide for behavior. They motivate us to live a certain way as people who are waiting for our Lord; we want people to see us and hear us and know about the one we're waiting for.

And so we have a certain character in this community, Paul is telling them. This is something of a synthetic outline of Paul's statements to the Corinthians, but I think it's a fair way of summarizing what sort of community Paul is pointing them to in the midst of their problems. They are intended to be 1) the community of God 2) bound together by the Holy Spirit 3) in the name of Jesus Christ.

The church is first of all the community of God. You remember how our story has developed over these last several months: God created us for community with Him, but we rebelled against His Lordship and involved all of creation in our fall, and God has been working carefully ever since then to rebuild that community. He had a seedling of that community growing in His people Israel, and now the church is the next phase of that community's growth. And as God's community, there are certain things that mark us. One of them is holiness. There is a certain standard of conduct that marks God's people, a sort of behavior that flows from our closeness to God. God is holy, and so as we are near Him, we ought to live into the holiness that He gives us. And so as Paul is dealing with the Corinthians, He's dealing with issues of sexual immorality and other types of sin. He lets them know that unholy behavior, especially when it's willful and unrepentant sin, is simply incompatible with life in this community. There comes a time when such a person must be called to account and eventually expelled from the body, he says. Similarly, because we are the community of God we are distinct from the world. Holiness sets us apart; there are certain things we do differently (or don't do at all) than what the world does.

And what happens when we make light of this identity as the community of God is that we make light of our calling to holiness. We make light of the severity of sin. We slowly begin to adopt those practices of the world that ought not to be ours. Like I said, some of the Corinthians were justifying all sorts of sexual immorality. Some of them were using the courts to settle their disputes with one another, and thereby they were trumpeting their disunity before the world. The community of God is called to something different.

Second, he reminds them that they are the community of God that is bound together by the Holy Spirit. We told the story last Sunday of the outpouring of the Spirit on the church at Pentecost, and this presence of the Spirit is part of the definition of what the church is. The Spirit gifts us and empowers us for the mission of the church through acts of power and through the proclamation of the authority of Jesus. And it's critical to note that the Spirit is poured out on the entire church, because when we neglect this part of our identity, as the church at Corinth was doing and as some churches have done since then, we let an attitude of disunity creep in. Minor problems become church-killing splits, sinful people lead the church into error, personalities take center stage, and showmanship abounds. But no, Paul tells us: we are bound together by the Holy Spirit, who gives gifts to the body as a whole for the mission of the church. We are gifted *together*, we are empowered *together*, we do the work of the church *together*, and above all else, the Spirit calls us to love. The acts of power and proclamation are nothing compared to the love the Spirit gives us. This is what Paul calls "the most excellent way."

And third, we are the community of God bound together by the Spirit in the name of Christ. Christ crucified is our foundation. As I said before, we are the waiting and witnessing community: we don't just remember what Jesus did for us, we also eagerly await his return. In the name of Christ we have the hope of resurrection; He is the one who has conquered death and hell, and because He is alive, we do not have to fear death. He has promised to return and bring His kingdom to its

completion, when our resurrection hope will be fulfilled and His lordship will be eternal. Some of the Corinthian Christians were apparently questioning this part of our identity, and other Christians have done likewise through the ages: was Jesus really raised from the dead? Is He really coming back? But Paul reminds them of how critical this is to who we are as the church. If Christ is not alive today, our preaching is powerless, useless, empty, and we are of all people most to be pitied, because our hope is likewise empty. When we neglect this part of our identity, the church devolves into an empty social club with all the trappings of the church but none of its power. “If the dead are not raised,” Paul says, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

But as the community of God bound together by the Spirit in the name of Christ, we are a community unlike any other the world has ever seen. We are gifted and called for eternal life that begins here and now, and so we do not live as those who have no hope.

Paul often ended his letters to the churches with the instruction to “greet one another with a holy kiss,” a sign of affection and unity and equality in the body of Christ. Today we don’t often actually kiss, but instead we often “pass the peace,” shaking hands and giving one another the benediction “the peace of Christ be with you.” Today, let us be the church by passing the peace to one another and remembering that we are the community of God bound together by the Spirit in the name of Christ.



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