

## "The Turtles in the Road" 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

### Introduction

- One summer break during high school my kid sister Jill and I hopped in the car to go to our grandmother's lake front cabin in rural Kentucky. Some of my fondest memories involve that car ride and the anticipation of reaching this magical place where we could play in the woods, fish, and swim. The journey went smoothly enough until we came to some twisty country roads not unlike the roads around here. I'm driving. My sister's riding shotgun. As we approached a blind left hand curve all of a sudden we both spot a huge tortoise crossing the road. This wasn't a little box turtle but a huge behemoth of a turtle. Its shell was a good two feet in diameter; certainly one of the biggest turtles I've ever seen. The kind of thing you'd see on the Galapagos Islands. I had no time to stop. I had a split second to decide what to do. I could avoid the turtle and drive onto the shoulder to the right but risk sliding down into the gully next to the road. I could drive across the yellow lines into oncoming traffic and hope no one was coming the other way. Or I navigate the car directly over top the turtle itself. I chose the latter. And with a white knuckle grip on the steering wheel I maneuvered the middle of the car over the turtle.
- The sound of the undercarriage grating against turtle shell sounds worse than you'd think. We slowed the car to a halt and I looked into the rearview mirror to see the turtle spinning like a top; there's turtle flesh strewn all over the road. I still don't understand the physics of it. I sheered the top of that turtle's shell clean off. And my sister who's probably in sixth grade starts punching me in the arm crying, "you killed him—you killed him—you killed him."
- We are at a point in the life of this church—especially coming off a mountaintop experience like the building project—where the obstacles in front of us are going to multiply. Funny thing about churches. It's usually not the big obstacles in the road that bring churches to a halt but petty things; the color of carpet in the sanctuary, hurt feelings, unresolved conflict, poor communication, the loss of focus, gossip, power struggles and politics among the leadership, becoming comfortable, failing to step out in faith. How will you navigate the turtles in the road ahead of us?
- This morning we begin a study of 1 Corinthians and the reason for 1 Corinthians is simple. If ever there was a church that hit a turtle it's the church in Corinth. In fact, they didn't hit just one; they hit a whole fleet of turtles. And Paul gives some very practical advice about how to navigate turtle-like obstacles. I've heard the stories and I don't want it to happen here. Churches coming off building projects have fractured, splintered, and fallen apart. Knowing that obstacles are headed our way I want to prevent a Corinth from happening here. And that's the reason we're going to set up camp in 1 Corinthians for a while. Paul gives more practical advice concerning the nature of the church in this letter than in any of his other letters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fee, p. 17-18.

- Corinth is a picture of what not to be as a church. Just listen to some of these turtles this church hit: spiritually immature Christians forming partisan groups, a dissatisfaction with church leadership, abuses of the Lord's Table, at least one notorious case of sexual immorality, public litigation among members, uncertainties about the place of marriage, quibbling over food rituals, infatuation with the more spectacular of the charismatic gifts without any profound commitment to love one another, bad theology—especially as it relates to the resurrection.<sup>2</sup> These are the lessons from a failed church. And we're not going to be like them. We're going to do it right, this thing called church.

### Transition

So where do we begin? Let's start right at verse 1. Please open your bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 1. In the first three verses of chapter 1, in Paul's opening greeting nonetheless, often times a portion of Paul's letters we cursorily glance over, Paul addresses some of the major obstacles facing the Corinthian church.

### Proposition

- **Let's do it right, this thing called church**

### Organizational Sentence

I want to look at the **first of three (3) obstacles** that, if left unchecked, will stop this church dead in its tracks. We will not be effective if we hit these turtles. I guarantee you, if we haven't faced these obstacles yet, we will.

### Transition

Look at [verse 1](#). Listen. *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.*

### Main Points

- Of all the ways Paul opens his letters this one to the Corinthians stresses his authority and his right to shepherd the flock—maybe more than any other. In the letter to the Romans and Titus it's *Paul, a servant*. In 1 Thessalonians it's simply *Paul, Silas and Timothy*. In Philemon, it's *Paul a prisoner*. In Galatians it's *Paul an apostle*. In Ephesians it's close to what we have here; *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. But here it's, *Paul called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. Paul did not choose his ministry nor was he nominated for it. “He was captured and constrained by God’s sovereign call.”<sup>3</sup> He couldn't avoid it. And more than just being an apostle by the will of God he's an apostle of Christ. Paul belongs to Christ. First and foremost he's Christ's servant. He understands himself to be sent by Christ to speak authoritatively the full truth of the gospel with all of its implications. He writes with the utmost of apostolic authority to the situation in Corinth.<sup>4</sup> This emphasis, I believe, would not have escaped notice.

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, Moo, and Morris.

<sup>3</sup> Garland, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Garland, p. 24.

- I'm convinced Paul begins this way, so strongly emphasizing his right to spiritual oversight, because one of the main problems in the Corinthian church was a shallow, warped, even perverted view of those in leadership. That's the first turtle. The first obstacle. **Churches with improper or warped perceptions of their spiritual leaders are destined to flounder.** Flip ahead to 9:1-3. Listen to how Paul writes and the glimpse into the church's view of him. He says, *Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? 2 Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me.*
- What's your view of those in spiritual leadership? Are you easy to lead? Are you more apt to critique and judge your shepherds than to pray for them? Do you support with words and actions those who watch over you and labor on your behalf? Or do you find yourself cutting them down in conversations? Do you subvert their authority by not listening to what they say? When they teach and instruct do you pay attention as if they are speaking the very words of Christ? Do you believe that pastors are your lackeys or as 1 Corinthians 4:1 says are they *servants of Christ...those entrusted with the secret things of God?* Are you cognizant of the fact that the chief functions of spiritual oversight are equipping the people in the pews for the work of the ministry and dispensing the ministry of the Word?
- Please hear me. I'm not asking these questions of you because I somehow feel you've failed in this area. Nothing could be farther from the truth. You guys have been incredibly supportive of my ministry and my leadership. You're easy to lead. But be ready. The smooth sailing won't last forever. In the days ahead, one of the ways Satan will try to destroy the work of this church is by distorting and misshaping and warping your perception of those who have spiritual oversight of you. He will try to drive a wedge between you and me. He will try to erode your confidence in my ability to lead you. It's the first turtle in the road.
- Again, the only reason Paul played the trump card, the authority card on the Corinthians was because his position as apostle was based on his connection to Christ. He's was an *apostle of Christ*—called by Christ. And Paul was to be trusted because he was submitting to Christ's leadership. As long as your leaders are seeking to follow Christ and submitting to Christ's oversight in all they do, if they are working to please Christ instead of seeking to please men, then you can trust them. Follow them. They work for your benefit. But if someone who purports to have spiritual authority, in this church or in any you ever attend, is self-seeking, power-hungry, if they start putting their own interests or the interests of others ahead of Christ then don't trust them.

### Transition

Let me show you the second speed bump or obstacle in the way of a church on the move. Look at [verse 2](#). Listen. *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours.* The things that jump out at me as I read this verse are the things Paul says about the church. And that's the second obstacle, **distorted**

or warped perceptions of the church. What is your view of the church, this peculiar institution God has ordained as the strategic centerpiece for his work in the world?

- It's interesting, how you function as part of a church is determined to a great extent by your image of what the church is. One of my mentors shared this with me.<sup>5</sup> See if any of these fit you.
  - If the church is a country club then a good member participates, pays dues, has a good time, and invites guests.
  - If the church is a corporation then a good member makes a profit, attends board meetings, projects a successful image.
  - If the church is a spiritual co-op then a good member does his share to keep the organization afloat and gives in order to get.
  - If the church is a lecture series then a good member listens, pays attention, takes notes, attends regularly, gives feedback, and doesn't necessarily apply what's been heard.
  - If the church is a theater then a good member is on-time, appropriately dressed, comes to be entertained, applauds as appropriate, critically evaluates.
  - And if a church is a counseling center then a good member is honest and open and comes to get one's needs met.
- Now consider the alternative. These are all taken right from scripture.
  - If the church is the household of God then a good member builds their life on the foundation of the Word and recognizes they are part of a family.
  - If the church is God's building project then a good member labors with God to produce changed lives.
  - If the church is the body and bride of Christ then a good member loves, submits, and maintains unity.
  - If the church is centered on Christ then a good member obeys her leaders and involves himself in kingdom work.
  - If the church is God's flock then a good member serves willingly, is a follower and is not self-sufficient.
  - If the church is a nation of holy priests then a good member maintains a pure life, sets an example for others, and praised God.
  - And lastly, if the church is a center for disciple-making then a good member puts people with the goal of helping others be better followers of Christ. What's your view of the church?
- The Corinthian perception of the church was warped and distorted. Corinth floundered because of it and we'll flounder too without an accurate understanding. Corinth was a church of individual factions, partisan politics, and larger than life personalities. There was an obsessive concern about reputation and status. People

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<sup>5</sup> Greg Scharf

were self-promoters in order to win applause and to gain influence. Ambition to succeed was rampant often by manipulating networks of influence.<sup>6</sup> And Paul gently reminds corrects their misunderstandings in verse 2 by emphasizing the unity of the church, the owner of the church, the quality of the church, and connectedness of the church.

- That first phrase—*to the church of God in Corinth*. Paul doesn't address them as the many house churches which they probably were. He emphasizes their unity. It's one church. The church in Corinth. Let me ask you, are we one body here? Are we growing in our connectedness to one another? That's what true churches do. We cannot live in isolation from one another. Isolation is akin to hitting a turtle.
- But more than their unity Paul stresses the owner. They are God's church and no one else's. God's the owner. Paul writes *to the church that belongs to God at Corinth*. Who's the ringleader here? Is it a personality or is it Christ? In whose image is this church being fashioned? Whose stamp of ownership is on this church? Is it Christ's? When church becomes more about personality than about the character of God it has hit the turtle.
- Look at the next phrase. Paul writes to a group of believers who are growing in holiness—they're sanctified—called to a life of holiness. If you read through Paul's letter you kind of wonder who in the world he's talking about. The Corinthians were a mess. Positionally, they are holy. That's how God sees them. But practically, they were not living holy, sanctified lives. The implications are from Paul's description of them that they need to start acting like God's people. Let me ask you, is our behavior as a church consistent with our calling to be the holy, sanctified people of God? The trick of the enemy will be to convince you and me that personal holiness is no big deal. It's okay to fudge here and there. It's okay to compromise a bit on this. It's okay to slide a bit on that. Your holiness matters. If you are not growing in holiness it affects the whole life of this church. There is no such thing as private, individual sin. The testimony of the Bible is that all sin is corporate. Any sin compromises the integrity of the whole body which is why it is so critical that each of us take measured steps of growth in areas of personal holiness. Don't be the one that steers us into the turtle.
- Let me show you the last emphasis in verse 2. With his words *together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours* Paul emphasizes that the church in Corinth was not alone. They were part of a world-wide network of believers. One of Satan's ploys is not only individual isolation within the church particular but corporate isolation from the worldwide body of Christ. We are not the only pebble on the beach.<sup>7</sup> It's not about you and your personal private faith. We're called to be world Christians. It's you and all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Part of the problem in Corinth was their narrow, parochial thinking. They failed to see how their actions had worldwide implications. And the lesson for us is simple. In the coming months and years we have got to realize more clearly that we are part of something really big. How do we fit in?

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<sup>6</sup> NDBT, p. 297.

<sup>7</sup> Thiselton, p. 74.

What's our part? Katrina trips are a start. Hispanic church plant, that's better. What's our part? What's your view of the church?

### Transition

I want to transition now to the third and final obstacle. It's this; **an outlook void of grace and peace**. Look at **verse 3**. Listen. *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

- Grace and Peace. That's how Paul ends his greeting; with a blessing of grace and peace. In fact, he ends almost all of his greetings in all his letters this way. They are familiar words and they in some sense sum up the whole of Paul's theological outlook. The sum total of all God's activity toward his creatures is captured in the word grace. God has given himself mercifully and bountifully in the person of Christ. Nothing is deserved; nothing can be achieved. Grace. And the sum total of the benefits of grace result in the word peace. Peace meaning well being, wholeness, welfare."<sup>8</sup> Grace and peace. Grace leads to peace. Where there's grace there's wholeness, well-being. This is true both individually and corporately. Unfortunately, it is the natural tendency for churches to move away from a grace oriented outlook which leads to a breaking of the peace. It's what happened in the Corinthian church.
- The application for us is simple. We have to continue dealing with each other in terms of grace and grace alone. Extend grace in your personal relationships. Extend grace in your conversations and your emails with each other. Season your words with grace, grace, grace always giving the benefit of the doubt, always giving charity even when it isn't deserved. Be merciful and gracious in all you say and do. Churches that fall apart do so because people forget that receiving God's grace means extending grace to other people. Given where we're at. All of us tired and weary from the building project. These are great words. You've got to extend grace. If someone's on your nerves. Give grace. If someone has offended you or let you down. Give grace. Give grace and the wholeness, the peace of the body will be preserved. Grace and peace. Grace and peace. Grace and peace.

### Conclusion

- Whenever I think about the church I'm struck by the contrast. God has promised that he will build his church and the gates of hell won't prevail against it. The picture of that comes to mind from this verse is strength and power. But then again sometimes I think that with all our collective sinfulness magnified, the church is like a little origami paper bird—it's so fragile and delicate and you just touch it the wrong way and it falls apart. You know what, it's both. By faith we believe that God's promises will stand. The church wins. It won't fail. It will accomplish God's purposes. And yet what we have here is so fragile. It's only by God's grace that things don't disintegrate. Nurture this. Take care of each other. Don't take for granted what we have. Sidestep those turtles and we'll make it to our destination. Pray with me.

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<sup>8</sup> Fee, p. 35.