



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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## *This Was “A Church of God”?<sup>1</sup>*

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One of the most interesting paradoxes in Scripture is the tension we see between calls for churches to realize God’s ideal and the willingness to continue to work with and even fellowship some who fell far short of that ideal. By calling attention to this paradox—and the imperfection of the churches which helps create it—we are not endorsing the skepticism of some who argue that the call to restore the New Testament church is nonsensical because no church in that day was perfect (see the accompanying article, “Reflections on the Idea of Restoration”). We are venturing to suggest that there is more room for tolerance of failure than some would seem to allow.

Let’s begin by asking this: Knowing the situation in Corinth ahead of time, how many knowledgeable Christians do you know who would willingly identify with the Corinthian church? It was a church torn apart by factions, each identified with a prominent personality (1 Cor 1-4). Those factions were not merely week-day cliques or gossip groups, but were painfully evident in the church’s assemblies, creating problems for the Lord’s Supper and for the way they treated one another concerning spiritual gifts (chaps 11-14). It is also reasonable to suggest that the divisions were at least part of the cause for the public airing of church disputes in the pagan law courts (chap 6).

Nor were these all the problems at Corinth. There were misunderstandings of divorce and remarriage (chap 7), as well as open identification with the world to the point of at least some participation in the rituals of false religions (chaps 8, 10). Some had also denied the resurrection, the most fundamental of Christian beliefs (chap 15). And if all this was not enough, the church was tolerating sexual sin of a kind that would have shocked even non-Christian citizens of Corinth, a city infamous for its sexual license (chap 5; cf. 6:12-20).

As already suggested, many today would not even acknowledge this group as God’s church, much less place their membership there. A less troubled church in the area would be sought—a Thessalonica or Philippi perhaps. Failing that, effort would be undertaken to establish a new congregation devoid of such problems. Many today might write up the Corinthians in a report to Antioch or Jerusalem, but they would not embrace them as brothers and sisters in fellowship with either God or other congregations.

We will do well to reflect on Paul's approach to the Corinthian situation. What first impresses us is that he acknowledges the Corinthians as "a church of God." He called them that, not once, but five times in 1 Corinthians alone, something which amazes us even more when we learn that the term *ekklēsia* is used with a name for deity (usually God) only nine other times in the rest of the New Testament.

There can be no question that Paul compromised God's truth in his Corinthian correspondence. Indeed, the reason for the letters was to confront their doctrinal and moral errors. Still, he took the time to write to them, not about them, seeking to teach them, not denounce them. His attitude and practice suggest four lessons for us to consider.

First, it is obvious from what Paul says that there is a standard to which God's people can and should be held accountable. It is clear that this standard includes both matters of doctrine and practice. The very fact that Paul wrote the Corinthian letters shows that there is an ideal which people professing allegiance to Christ should strive to meet, that said ideal can be known, and that failure to live up to it must result in repentance or judgment. It is evident too that the Corinthians were condemned in part because they *should* have known that standard and how their actions failed to meet it. In light of Paul's repeated references to the fact that they were doing things about which they had been taught (note his use of "do you not know?" - e.g., 1 Cor 6:3, 9, 19), we conclude that the Corinthians were not babes who had never heard these things and who thus needed to be corrected (cf. Acts 18:24-28), but were more established believers who had departed from sound teaching.

But, second, even when we account for Paul's call to live up to God's standard, we learn that we should be careful not to give up on God's people too soon. There is no way to know how long the conditions in Corinth had existed before Paul wrote. That they had been reported by Chloe's people (1 Cor 1:11) indicates that some time was involved. Whatever the duration of their troubles, Paul was clearly not ready to give up on them. His tolerance was not of sin, but of people. He told them to purge the fornicator (chap 5), warned them about the danger of forfeiting their inheritance (chaps 9-10), and later told them that refusal to repent would have had disastrous consequences (2 Cor 7). But, while we cannot imagine him sitting idly by while they abused the Lord's Supper (chap 11) or denied the resurrection (chap 15), neither do we see him warning the Thessalonians to have nothing to do with them. It is clear that he was willing to give them more time to change and grow through their problems (which of course does not mean that some of them did not require more drastic measures—cf. 1 Cor 5).

Third, it is significant that, although they were clearly out of step with God's truth in so many ways, Paul still counted them as "a church of God." They had failed to maintain the unity inherent in God's nature (cf. Eph 4:1-6). They had serious problems of morality, doctrine and worship. But these abuses did not "unchristianize" them. Repentance was necessary. Being added to the church again was not.

Fourth, we learn much from the things Paul stressed in his rebuke. Things like fornication, greed, idolatry, reveling, drunkenness and dishonesty. As we have already observed, he was not unconcerned for doctrine, but his focus was not on unanimity of thought, but on open sin which was inimical to God's nature and will. One wonders what great revivals might be seen in some churches today if their preachers were, like Paul, as devoted to confronting moral problems and reminding local church members of what God's Word actually says as they are to

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repeated warnings of deficiencies in other autonomous congregations, most of whom their local members will never visit.

One cannot read the New Testament and conclude that correct teaching and a quest to live up to the ideal in doctrine and holiness do not matter. But neither can one read it without seeing the role that grace is expected to play in church life, not just the grace God extends to us, but also the grace we are to extend to each other (cf. Eph 4:32 where “forgive” translates *charizomai*, literally, “to extend grace toward”). Despite their disputes, immorality, pride and, yes, doctrinal failures, Paul, by inspiration, declared the Corinthian body “a church of God.” Before we dismiss a congregation or brotherhood segment, we must first ask what his example teaches us and then examine ourselves to see if we are abiding in that teaching.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally published as an article in *First Century Christian* in the July 2000 issue (pp. 8-9). The accompanying sidebar article that appeared in the same issue, “Reflections on the Ideas of Restoration” (p. 9), has been added as a separate article in this series.