

Series on 1 Corinthians (Part One) preached at the Cathedral of St Michael and St George Grahamstown, Jan-Feb 2017.

Week 1: Introduction - Interpreting the Scriptures

1 Cor 1:1-9

Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter

Introduction

Over the next few weeks, our NT readings will be select passages from Paul' first letter to the Corinthians.

As we begin, let me ask you a few random questions. Hands up if:

- You have been guilty of eating food sacrificed to idols
- You agree with Paul that it is better for a man not to marry
- You think women should always cover their heads at worship
- Drunkenness is a problem at our Eucharistic services
- You believe it is wrong for women to speak or preach in church

All of these issues (and many more) you will find addressed in 1 Corinthians. We might wonder what on earth the relevance of this book is for us in 2017?! (Maybe we should just ignore some of these teachings).

Let me ask you further:

- Do you, as a Christian, believe that the Bible is the Word of God?
- Does it teach the truth?
- Are we expected to obey its teachings?

If your answers are “Yes”, then how can you with a clear conscience dare to listen to a women preaching here today, when Paul says in 1 Cor 14:27 that women should be silent in the churches? Surely then, I am the greatest sinner of all?

I dare to suggest that the issues we are facing here is not so much the content of the verses, but rather the way in which we interpret them.

Some people say, “I don’t interpret the Bible. I just read it”.

“The Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s all there is to it”.

However, the fact is that we all interpret what we read, even if we are not fully aware of it. To read every verse of the Bible literally, taking verses out of context, might in fact be detrimental to your life.

What about these words of Jesus: “If your eye causes you to sin – pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin – chop it off”. If we read and obeyed what this text says (face value), wouldn’t most of us be blind or disabled?

So how then might we approach our reading of the Scriptures? As we begin this series, I want to share with you some basic tools (tried and tested exegetical methods!) given to help us come to a deeper understanding of the meaning of passages we find in the Scriptures. (see handout, inserted at the end of this sermon). We will look at a few of these today, and others in the remainder of the series.

INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES (Focus on Paul’s letters)

Some basic steps to follow: *Pray! We need the Holy Spirit!*

GENRE.

*What type of literature is this? Within the NT we find Gospels (within that, parables), Acts, **Letters**, Apocalypse- Revelation*

If we don’t ask this basic question, we may draw the wrong conclusions. To say the genre is “The Bible” is not specific enough –the Bible is a whole library of books (eg history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, letters) and even within those books there are different literature forms (eg parables, stories).

Take for example the opening chapters of Genesis. We are given two very different accounts of creation. In the first one, God creates in 7 days, by speaking. Male and female are created last of all, and both at the same time. However in chapter 2, God creates the man out of dust, then creates trees, rivers and garden, beasts and birds, and only then does God form woman by taking a rib out of the man. She is the suitable helper/companion, “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”. These 2 accounts give very different (contradictory) versions of creation. Therefore clearly they cannot be intended to be scientific or historical accounts. Instead, they serve a theological purpose. Rather than answering questions concerning the nuts and bolts of how exactly, how long ago (when) and over what period of time creation came into being – they tell us WHO created and WHY: God created.. People were created in God’s divine image. They were made for relationship – relationship with God, one another, and with the rest of God’s creation.

Turning to the genre of 1 Corinthians. It is a LETTER – written **by** someone (Paul) **to** someone (the Christians at the young church in Corinth) at a particular time (approx. 50 AD). Furthermore, we see that it is a **corrective letter** – people from Cloe’s household have informed Paul that there are problems in the church, so he is writing a response to the issues raised – to correct bad theology and practices in the church. As the founder of the church there, he writes as their pastor and spiritual leader.

CONSIDER THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT (*Especially with letters*).

Insights from Historical, social, cultural, (customs), religious, geographical background

(expanded notes)

Paul founded and established the church in Corinth during his 2nd missionary journey.

Geography:

- the city of Corinth was situated on an isthmus – a narrow piece of land connecting the southern part of Greece with the rest of the country
- because of its position, it became a prosperous centre of trade and commerce. By land, many travelled through Corinth. By sea – it had 2 seaports, one on each end. It had both wealth and immorality associated with the above. Known for debauchery.

History:

- Inhabited from before 3000Bc. Several wars
- 146 BC totally destroyed by Rome, levelled to the ground. People sold as slaves or killed. Lay desolate for 100 years.
- 44BC Julius Caesar restored the city as a Roman colony. People were 'imported' from all over to live there – hence rich mixture of religions, races, languages, cultures from all over the Roman Empire. Cosmopolitan.

Religions:

- 1) Worship of **Aphrodite or Goddess Diana** (love and fertility)
 - Dominating the city was a large temple dedicated to her on top of the 'Acrocorinth' (hill in the middle of the city)
 - Her 1000 priestesses were 'sacred prostitutes' (cut their hair/shaved their heads).
 - Sexual reversal (swopping of clothes, male/female organs on statues)
 - Cult dedicated to the glorification of sex
- 2) Worship of **Apollo** (god of music, song, poetry, male beauty)
 - Temple in the city
 - Nude statues of Apollo in abundance
 - Homosexual practices central to their life of worship
- 3) Cult of **Bacchus/Dionysus** (god of madness, wine, animal life)
 - Women played central role in the life of worship
 - To obtain communion with god- get drunk

- Religious feast of raw flesh: women tore apart animals and ate them warm, raw, bleeding – and so would receive the life of the god within.
- Women at worship - wild frenzy, noisy, shouting, shrieking, beating cymbals, ‘ecstasies of joy’(tongue of Bacchus).
- All worshippers drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, various stages of undress, women shaved heads, men wore veils or had long flowing hair.
- Only in a wild frenzy could one hold communion with god – so the soul left the body to become one with the god.

4) **The whole pantheon of Greek gods, Egyptian religions, Mystic religions and cults**

5) **The Jewish religion**

No wonder Paul speaks of his arrival in Corinth ‘with much fear and trembling’.

Converts to the Christian faith would come from all these religious backgrounds. Clearly they brought some of their religious practices with them.

It is no surprise therefore that Paul addresses issues such as

- Sexual immorality (expel the immoral brother)
- Women cover their heads (otherwise mistaken as sacred prostitutes or from cult of Bacchus)
- Women be silent (no wild frenzies, babbling, shrieking etc)
- Drunkenness and abuses at Lord’s Supper (don’t confuse Lord’s Supper with a pagan feast)

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE (*Read the passage in the light of what it probably meant to those for whom it was originally written.*)

When we read this letter, we need to consider what Paul's teaching would have meant for his original hearers, in their particular historical and religious context. Only then can we attempt to bridge the gap from then to now. This will enable us to discern if his teaching is a sacred truth that can be universally applied to all peoples in every generation, or is the truth of his teaching contained in a **principle** which can be applied today.

Turning briefly now to the text for today: 1 Cor 1:1-9

Vs 2 "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy..."

Given the historical and religious context, I am sure it comes as no surprise that right at the start of his letter, Paul emphasises the call to be holy.

In a context characterised by debauchery, licentiousness, bizarre pagan worship rituals;
Prosperity with its greed, corruption, wealthy oppressing the poor (slaves) etc

Paul reminds the Christians that they are called to be different. To be **holy** (even as God is holy).

To be holy means to be set apart for God; dedicated to God; blameless; morally pure; chaste; faultless in their behaviour; live their lives based on the ethics, morals and values of Jesus.

They were to repent (turn around 180 degrees) and leave behind their former pagan practices with its immorality and turn their backs on all forms of discrimination, greed and corruption. They were challenged to live in such a way that would bring honour and glory to God – whose very nature is holiness.

How are we to understand this message in our context today?

The reminder and challenge Paul gave to the Corinthian Church is a challenge that we need to hear again today: We are called to be holy, to be different.

At a time when there are those who seem bent on creating division, evoking hostility, fuelling the flames of tension and hatred between people of different races, languages, cultures, nationalities, sexual orientation, economic class – remember who you are. Remember who you are called to be. HOLY, set apart for God.

We are the church of God at the Cathedral in Grahamstown, sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy...together with all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus (regardless of our differences).

Christianity has come under fire in recent times. Many perceive it as a Western, foreign ideology to conquer, destroy take the land. It is being viewed in a hostile light as a pawn of white capitalism.

Is that the kind of Christianity that you represent? What kind of Christian are you? How do you live out your Christian faith? In what way can others see that your life is different, because you are living out your calling to be holy?

Application examples/ for reflection: What does it look like to live holy lives (some examples):

- At work (*examine the way you relate to colleagues, clients. Conduct your business with honesty, ethically, with integrity...*)
- At home (*there is no place for domestic violence, abuse in a Christian home. Called to submit to one another, show love, respect, honour...*)
- At School (*reach out to the lonely. Be a friend. Give of your best in all you do...*)
- At University (*in a context of instability, uncertainty, protests – be one who builds up rather than breaks down and destroys,*

reach out to others across racial and political divides, be angry-but in your anger do not sin...)

- Sexual behaviour (*where anything goes, sleeping around is the norm, guys act as if girls are there simply for their sexual pleasure – stand up for what is just, right, true – even if it goes against the tide. Dare to be different*)

Loving God,

May we, like the church at Corinth, hear (through Paul) and obey your call once again to **be holy, be different, go against the tide, stand up for what we know to be right**, and so live in such a way that brings honour and glory to you. Amen.

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