

Can you imagine showing up at the first day of a new job and being handed a revised job description that when read is clearly way above your ability? You are horrified because you realize that you are woefully unqualified for the duties on the paper. How do you respond?

You might ask for your old job back. You might try to bluff your way through and hope that no one notices. You could protest the revisions or you could admit your deficiency and ask for help. Regardless of the approach there's no doubt that you are in an awkward spot.

It reminds me of a letter that was sent to a church many years ago. The church was in Corinth and the writer was the Apostle Paul. In the Bible it is entitled First Corinthians. I am quite sure that when the church read the opening lines of the letter they were overwhelmed.

In verse two of the first chapter he labels them as being “called to be saints!” The Apostle knew them and he certainly knew they were not saints yet but he also knew and believed that there was hope and he believed in the message of personal holiness promised by God Himself. He was aware that the church was rife with dissension and even immorality among its members yet nineteen words into the letter he refers to them as:

*“² To the church of God in Corinth, to **those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people,**”*

I am sure in their hearts they were asking how in the world can we live up to that. Because this letter is included in the Bible these words are meant for us as well.

Today I want us to understand this middle ground that we often inhabit in our spiritual journeys and come to know and embrace the biblical concept that God Himself espouses. God calls us from middle ground to higher ground.

To understand this I want to take you on a little journey through the Corinthians church history. There was a path that Paul laid out for them and it is one that we too can follow.

1. Starting off good

At first Paul praises them because they have made a really good start in their walk of faith.

I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. 1 Corinthians 1:4 NLT

When you read this scripture you have to acknowledge that they were followers of Jesus Christ. They were “born again.”

Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. 1 Corinthians 1:5 NLT

They had been learning not only more about Jesus Christ but also how to share His story with others. These are basic signs of discipleship. All of us should be learning more about Christ and how to share and participate in His story on earth and in our community.

God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. 1 Corinthians 1:6 NLT

⁷ *Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift. . .* 1 Corinthians 1:7a NLT

They were using the God-given talents, gifts and strengths that God has given everyone on the earth. We all have something in us that makes us unique and we are to offer that to God for Him to use wherever and whenever He desires.

“ . . . you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 1 Corinthians 1:7b NLT

They made a good start on their spiritual journey but there were signs of trouble ahead.

2. Stumbling with godliness

Despite Paul’s glowing words of praise for his friends in Corinth, he saw their turmoil as well.

“There are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters,” 1 Corinthians 1:11

They were torn by doctrinal factions. 1 Corinthians 11-17

They placed themselves over one another, claiming to be more wise or more spiritually mature than one another. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you,” 1 Corinthians 5:1

The members of the church were taking each other to court, charging fraud and corruption. 1 Corinthians 6:1-8

They condemned one another for their beliefs on celibacy. 1 Corinthians 7:25-39 Eating food that had been purchased from pagan temples. 1 Corinthians 8 Whether women should cover their heads in worship services. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 And a host of other issues. How could any group of Christian people dissolve into such a bickering mob?

Sadly this is all too familiar of a story in many churches. It only takes a small group of disgruntled folks to begin to pick and pull apart what God is trying to do. Many pastors especially of smaller churches are completely unable to lead the church to really be effective in its mission because of the bickering and division it would cause to align the church back up with God’s word and mission.

Unsurrendered people living in the flesh will always cause trouble in the church.

Jesus said that to the disciple Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. In essence He said, “You are thinking with the fleshly mind and not the mind of Christ.”

3. Shaky middle ground

This church was trying hard to find a middle ground where they could live. Their minds were drawn to the things of God but they were not willing to give up the things of the flesh or this world. You could say that they were trying to live with one foot in heaven and the other on earth.

As a result they were living on shaky ground. Romans 7 describes some of what they must have been feeling:

I want to do what is right, but I can't. ¹⁹ I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. ²⁰ But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. Romans 18b – 20 NLT

They were on shaky ground because they had not yet arrived at the kind of life the Apostle Paul was pushing them toward in Romans 8. Paul's whole purpose in writing to them and us is to explain more fully how we can move away from shaky ground. We move from middle ground to higher ground.

Sometimes when people become Christians or Christfollowers they are surprised to learn that they still struggle with an inward something that seems to run contrary to God's will. They are even more surprised when they come to believe that God provides a way out of this shaky middle ground.

4. Sanctifying grace: God provides a way!

In the book of 1 Corinthians Paul begins to show them a better way to live. It is a mixture of exhortation, instruction and inspiration. He begins it in the last two verses of chapter one.

There is a calling:

God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. ³¹ Therefore, as the Scriptures say, “If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.” 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 NLT

We are called to be united with Christ, to be His witnesses in the world and to be pure and holy in the process. And we are to know freedom from sin not a fondness for always claiming that we are just poor miserable sinners that can never overcome our weaknesses.

There is a cross:

When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters—I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan.² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified.³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling.⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:1-4 NLT

Like most of the first century Greek world, these Christians were enamored with philosophy and great wisdom. They loved and had a passion for dialogue and argumentation. Debating and discussions were the norm.

Paul walks into this world and doesn't try to portray Jesus as being more sophisticated. He doesn't try to demonstrate His magical or miraculous power.

Instead he presents Him as One who is humble and willing to serve, suffer and even die for others. As a fully surrendered follower of Jesus Christ that is how Paul also now lives his life and how he does his ministry.

Does anybody see any contrast to this approach and the current mess of many (not all) of the high profile Christian ministries of our day? (New Mexico)

It is very troubling when week after week what people see is not a biblical model or a Christ like model at all. They demonstrate their love for expensive buildings, flashy clothes and expensive jewels. They often exhort their viewers to also expect these things from God.

There are churches and denominations that also try to impress the world with their sophistication and intellect. They long to be respected by the world and the academic community. Every denomination on the planet eventually gets here. Education and science become more important than the words of God found in the Bible. Facts become more important than faith. Even Jesus said that His teaching would seem like foolishness to many. It is so upside down to the way we have been taught and conditioned to think.

We are called to pick up our crosses and to follow a crucified Christ. He was despised and rejected. We are called to live like that and we are called to die like that. There is a death that needs to happen in the life of every Christfollower.

There is a crisis:

The original disciples are one to the best examples of this for us to look at.

Yet when I am among mature believers, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world or to the rulers of this world, who are soon forgotten.⁷ No, the wisdom we speak of is the mystery of God 1 Corinthians 2:6-7 NLT

And we have received God's Spirit (not the world's spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us. 1 Corinthians 2:12 NLT

There was something different about the approach and the attitude of these men and women. What was it?

It was and is the promised power and presence of the Holy Spirit of God. Certainly every believer receives a measure of God's Spirit when they start following Christ but there is something else that needs to happen.

There is a moment of crisis in our lives that must take place where we empty ourselves of ourselves. We lay down our own wishes, wants and desires. We crucify our inward sinfulness and allow the Holy Spirit into our lives and hearts 100% of the time.

There are a lot of people that would rather stay on shaky middle ground than let God in this deep into their lives because to do means you have to deal with you. You have to let go and let God inhabit your private sins, your struggles, your habits, your secret indulgences and anything else in your life that is contrary to God's ideal for our lives.

Can you begin to see and feel this? God calls us to be holy in both the Old and New Testament. It is His desire for us more than anything else. A great majority of us would rather not know this truth I am afraid, because it means a radical change in our behaviors and lifestyles both public and private.

What Paul is saying here is that the Holy Spirit was operating in the lives of the disciples and apostles in a far different way than He was in the lives of the Corinthians. Listen to his call in 1 Corinthians 3:

Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷ God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 NLT

To fully understand what I am teaching here today let me take you to what happened in the lives of the original twelve along with a little over a hundred other followers of Christ in Acts 2.

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus commissioned all believers and followers to take His message around the world making disciples wherever they went. This was for them and every followers since. But He also said to wait. He said don't go until.

Until what? Why would He say go and stop in the same breath?

He knew they were not yet ready. In their flesh they were given to petty bickering and weak faith. Allowed to operate in themselves they were capable of making nothing but a big mess and so He promised a gift. They were believers by the way. They had been baptized and they had been personally disciplined by Jesus Himself for three years. Now He says, wait for the promise. Wait for the presence of my Holy Spirit to indwell and inhabit your lives.

He said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Double-minded Peter became a fearless preacher who moved thousands of Jews to accept Christ. The same men who told Jesus to send the crowds away because they didn't have enough bread for them all invited 3000 new converts to the breaking of bread and prayers. The same men who could not cast out an evil spirit from a young boy now found themselves moving and ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The bottom line is there is a different way to live than most of us live. It's moving from middle ground to higher ground. The Holy Spirit gives us power not for show but for service and when we surrender our lives, our loves and our lifestyles to the power of God we become radically changed.

There is a calling. There is a cross. There is a crisis. And there is one more thing.

There is a consecration:

Consecration is simply the laying down of ourselves on the altar of God for Him to do with us as He pleases. It is offering our lives to God as though we were a blank check and letting Him fill in the amount.

Sanctification is God's job but consecration is our job. Don't pray for God to consecrate you. You consecrate you. You offer yourself up to God so that He can have you 24/7 at His disposal.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*: "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of--throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."

E. Stanly Jones wrote the following: "A visiting and very pompous Bishop asked some village people in India who were candidates for baptism, "What is it to be a Christian?" and expected a theological reply, but got this answer instead, "To live like Mr. Murray." Mr. Murray was the missionary who had taught them. The word of Christianity had become flesh in him. It was so in Jesus."

My question for us today is do we hunger and thirst for that kind of relationship with Christ and others.

Martyrdom is the privilege of every Christian, because the only way that Jesus Christ can live in our world is for you and me to die. Some of us died in the Coliseum, some died in the Nazi prisons while some of us are dying still in the factories, offices and a thousand other places where humble service is needed. Believe me the death of a self-willed ego can be just as painful as the death of one's physical body. But when the ego dies and Christ begins to live through us, the world is transformed. The Holy Spirit does that when we're ready to move on to higher ground.

Are you ready to move?

Are you willing to move?