

Hope for the Church

Paul's charge, our challenge, Christ's hope.

A ReVision Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe



T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Hope for the Church*

Welcome to *Hope for the Church*, an examination of Paul's stern charge to the Church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians. *Hope for the Church* is one of our *ReVision* studies in Biblical worldview.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 A Struggling Church

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love. 1 Corinthians 16.13, 14

Two failures

The Church in Corinth in the days of the Apostle Paul was a struggling church, not unlike many of our churches today.

In his first letter to the believers there Paul addressed the problems that were threatening to tear the church apart and bring disgrace on the Gospel. Essentially, the Corinthians were guilty of two failures: they failed to obey the teaching of Scripture they had received, and they were beginning to go beyond what the Scriptures require or permit in certain ways. They weren't living up to what they'd been taught, and they were making up the rules about being a church as they went along.

They'd reached the end of their rope. Schisms, scandals, lawsuits, misguided teaching on marriage and spiritual gifts, and a service of worship that had become a platform for parading individual "spirituality" – all these problems were threatening to split the church and compromise their witness for Christ.

The Corinthians sent messengers to Paul, explaining their dilemma. Paul's assessment of the situation led him to call for repentance and return to the true teaching and practice of the Gospel of the Kingdom. Our text represents his concluding charge to the Christians in Corinth, and sums up his message for struggling churches in every age.

Appearances can deceive

Such as ours.

At one level, the Church in America would appear to be anything but struggling. Everywhere we look new churches are beginning, mega-churches are flourishing, older churches are holding their own, and a Christian subculture of music, media, and more is thriving.

Christian schools abound, and abundant resources are available for Christian parents who choose to school their children at home.

The numbers look pretty good, too, with nearly 72 million Americans professing to have been born again through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Opportunities for Bible study, ministry activities, prayer groups, and mission or service projects can be engaged with a phone call in most communities; and, on any given Sunday, church parking lots would seem to indicate that all is well with the City of God in America.

But this is an illusion. For wherever you look in the Church in America today, it's not hard to find areas where the plain teaching of Scripture has been set aside, or at least, badly compromised, and the influence of the world and its man-centered ways is well-established, and growing.

Are we even aware?

The Corinthians were struggling and knew it; that's why they sent messengers to Paul, explaining the problems (some of which he'd already heard) and seeking his help in sorting things out. But the American Church seems scarcely aware of its plight. While there are doubtless problems and disappointments in every church, most Christians in this country today appear to be fairly content with the state of things. They would

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perhaps echo the sentiments of the Laodiceans in Revelation 3, “We are rich, we have prospered, and we need nothing.” If the unbelieving world would just leave us alone, we’d be fine, thank you very much.

But Jesus, I believe, would conclude otherwise.

The Church in America is struggling to find itself – or perhaps I should say, not to lose itself. Increasingly, and in many cases without knowing, churches are straying from faithful obedience to the plain text of Scripture, setting aside whatever strikes them as inconvenient to focus only on what draws and keeps the crowd.

At the same time, in many churches we are going beyond the teaching of Scripture, looking to the world and its ways for how we grow the church, worship the Lord, make disciples, and more. Many churches today are seeking their welfare not in the all-sufficient Scriptures, but in the ways of the world.

As a result, appearances notwithstanding, the American Church is struggling, and we could stand to reflect deeply on Paul’s concluding charge to the Corinthians.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you agree that the churches in America are struggling? Why or why not?
2. Paul insisted that the Corinthians weren’t practicing what he’d taught them from the Word of God. They weren’t following the Scriptures in important areas. How can you see that in the Corinthian church?
3. Paul also said they were going beyond Scripture, doing things as a church that Scripture didn’t teach. How can you see that?
4. Do you think churches today might be guilty of either or both these failings? Why or why not?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: How confident are you that everything your church is doing is according to the teaching of Scripture? Is any aspect of the life and ministry of your church guided more by the spirit of the age than the Spirit of God? Talk with a few fellow church members about these questions.

Prayer:

2 Watch

Watch... 1 Corinthians 16.13

Pay attention!

The Scriptures frequently exhort believers to pay attention to what's going on in their lives.

Paul's command to the Ephesians to be very careful how they walk (Eph. 5.15-17) echoes similar exhortations from Solomon, the prophets, Jesus, and other apostles. Christians – and churches – are charged with keeping a close eye on our discipleship.

It's when we stop paying attention to our lives – and our churches – that problems can begin to appear.

The Corinthians of Paul's day had evidently not been diligent in their watchfulness, for in a wide variety of ways they failed to keep their practice in line with the teaching he had given them from the Word of God. In his concluding charge to the Church of Corinth, Paul reminded them of the need to “watch” lest their problems multiply and they fail to bring their practice back in line with apostolic teaching.

This solemn charge to pay close attention to how we live and how we grow our churches is one the struggling American Church needs carefully to consider.

False teaching

In at least three ways the Church in America has failed in its duty to be watchful.

The first area is that of the *teaching* of the Church. The liberal views that undermined and led to the near collapse of mainline churches throughout the last century – so deftly exposed by the likes of J. Gresham Machen, Carl Henry, Cornelius Van Til, and Francis Schaeffer – are no longer a threat to more evangelical churches.

However, the worldview of postmodernism, with its emphasis on sentiment, individuality, pragmatism, and private meanings for just about everything, is.

Certain evangelical theologians today talk about the “relative” certainty we can have that Scripture is really true. They want us to believe we can only really understand the intentions of the Spirit of God if we salt in a fair measure of the spirit of the age in our Biblical exposition.

Many evangelical preachers, meanwhile, set aside clear exposition of the text to speak “from the heart” to the felt needs of congregations, as though meeting felt needs were the purpose of the Gospel and the mission of the Church.

On many fronts false teaching has penetrated the theological defenses of the Church; yet most church leaders are largely unaware of this drift, and the people in the pews hardly notice (Heb. 2.1).

Falling through temptation

Second, churches must exercise greater vigilance over *temptation*.

In our day we have seen Christian leader after Christian leader in churches, ministries, business, and politics exposed for some scandalous sin and dismissed from his ministry. Is it not likely that that the people they were leading are hardly more circumspect against temptation than they (Jn. 13.16)?

The Corinthians fell through temptation into sin by preferring *tolerance* to *truth*, and by accepting schism and division in the Body of Christ as normal. These same practices – in different guises and to differing degrees – plague the churches in America today, yet most Christians have never learned how to recognize temptation or deal with it in a Scriptural manner.

Blown opportunities

Finally, the churches need to be watchful so that they don't *miss opportunities* to minister the grace and truth of God to their local communities (Eph. 5.15-17). Once the building goes up, a typical church begins to be ingrown. Most of its budget and virtually all its facilities and ministries are invested in itself, with very little effort given to seeking the welfare of or the lost within the community around them.

So, just as in the areas of teaching and temptation, the churches in America need to be more watchful for opportunities to serve and love their neighbors. Otherwise we will continue to struggle and to anchor our place on the margin of society ever more firmly.

Watchfulness must take place at many levels in a local church, beginning in the souls of its members but extending from there to all a church's activities, plans, and expenditures. Unless we watch, brethren, how will we ever know if we're drifting from Scripture into the arms of worldly ways?

For reflection or discussion

1. Should churches today be more “watchful” over their members and ministries? Why or why not?
2. How does your church evaluate the ministries it sponsors? Do you think ministries should be evaluated? What would you suggest?
3. False teaching, temptation, and missed opportunities: The Corinthians failed to watch for all of these. How should a church exercise vigilance in these areas? What can we expect if we don't?
4. What would you say to someone who says, “Oh, well, you can't really evaluate ministries or people's spiritual lives”?
5. Meditate on Proverbs 4.20-27. What does Solomon recommend as a proper focus for our “watching”?

Next steps: Meditate on Hebrews 13.17. How do the elders or leaders in your church “watch” over the souls of church members? How do church leaders evaluate or assess church programs? See what you can find out about these questions.

Prayer:

3 Stand Fast

Watch, stand fast in the faith ... 1 Corinthians 16.13

Interesting, but Christian?

You could hardly say the Corinthians were standing fast in the faith.

Oh, undoubtedly they all *professed* faith in Jesus. They surely *sang* whatever Christian songs were current at the time when they gathered for worship, and they no doubt looked, for all appearances, like most churches of their day.

But they were not *practicing* the faith as they should have. They promoted divisions in the church, tolerated scandalous sin, fought with one another over material possessions, tried to lord it over the consciences of weaker brethren, and turned the worship of God into a platform for spiritual showing-off.

As J. Gresham Machen wrote of the liberal churches of his day, what the Corinthians were practicing may have been unique, interesting, well-planned, and appealing to many; it just wasn't the Christian faith as they had learned it from Paul and the Word of God.

Basic commitments

Sadly, the same can be said of much of Christianity in America today. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to stand fast *in the faith* is a timely one for churches today, and that in two ways.

First, in the practice of our Christian faith: Christian faith, as we read of it in the New Testament, demands certain *basic commitments* of its followers. Living a Christian life takes *discipline*. Christians must root and ground themselves in God's Word and prayer (Col. 3.16; Lk. 18.1). From that starting-point they are to take up the *pursuit of holiness* in the fear of God and devote themselves to *good works* of various sorts (2 Cor. 7.1; Tit. 3.1, 8).

Further, each believer has been given spiritual gifts which he or she is expected to put to fruitful use in the ministry of building the church (1 Pet. 4.10, 11).

But is this, in fact, what we see? Hardly. Spiritual disciplines are not taken very seriously by American Christians. A life of holiness is difficult to wedge into our getting-and-spending-fun-for-all lifestyles. And ministries in the churches follow a kind of 80/20 rule – 20 percent of the people do all the work and give most of the money while 80 percent wait to be served.

We are not practicing the faith of Christ as it is clearly taught throughout the Word of God. Instead, we have substituted a kind of "suit-yourself" Christianity for the "take-up-your-cross" calling the Scriptures plainly demand.

Witness

Moreover, we are not *proclaiming the faith* the way believers did in Paul's day.

The American Church today has become increasingly non-evangelistic, preferring to use its Sunday morning worship as a honey jar to attract the seeker bees in the community. Most churches do very little in the way of outreach to their communities, and the vast majority of Christians have never shared their testimony or the Gospel with another person.

What's more, the gospel we *do* proclaim, when we proclaim it, is not the Gospel of the Kingdom, such as

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Jesus and Paul announced, but a kind of message of love, forgiveness, acceptance, and going to heaven when we die. These are surely part of the Gospel, but they are not the Gospel of the Kingdom, to which we have been called and with which we are charged. Rather, they are a form of “[near Christianity](#)” which, in the end is another gospel, and therefore not the Gospel at all.

It’s difficult to see how we could describe ourselves as standing fast in the faith when our practice of it is inconsistent, at best, and our proclamation of it hardly exists.

The American Church will continue to struggle against a growing secular consensus unless and until we begin to take seriously Paul’s charge and restore sound practice and faithful proclamation to the churches of the land. We are not free to define the faith of Christ on our own terms.

The Corinthians thought they could do so, and they struggled to hold their churches together. Paul’s charge to them to stand fast – rather than flimsy – in their commitment to Christ and His Word is a message we need to hear today.

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you explain what Paul meant by encouraging the Corinthians to “stand fast in the faith”? How can we tell when someone, or a church, is not standing fast?
2. Review the “basic commitments” section of this lesson. Do you agree that these should be the basic commitments of every Christian? Why or why not?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating, how would you assess the state of these basic commitments in your life? Why did you select that number?
4. If we only share *part* of the Gospel with someone, instead of the *whole* Gospel, have we really shared the Gospel at all? Explain.
5. What is your personal responsibility for helping to make sure your church stands fast in the faith?

Next steps: What does it mean to be a “disciple” of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be His “witness”? Talk with some fellow church members about these questions. Are you the disciple and witness Christ wants you to be?

Prayer:

4 Grow Up!

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave ... 1 Corinthians 16.13

Babes in Christ

The believers in Corinth in the days of the Apostle Paul were not acting like mature adults in the Lord. Rather, they were acting like children, like “babes in Christ” (1 Cor. 3.1).

They weren’t growing, and they weren’t acting like responsible followers of Christ, able to deal with their problems by standing fast in the faith of Jesus. Paul chided the Corinthians as “babes in Christ” who hadn’t matured in the Lord one whit since his visit. His exasperation with them is palpable as you read through this epistle.

By the time he wrote his letter, Paul reasoned that the Corinthians should have been showing more marks of maturity – holiness, purity, generosity, forbearance, and dignity in worship. Instead, they were acting like a bunch of middle-schoolers with the teacher out of the room. The word translated, “be brave”, in our text actually means to “act like a man”, to “be mature” or “act responsibly.”

None of which the Corinthians were doing, even though they’d had plenty of time and opportunity.

In the same way, the Church in America could hardly be described as a mature community, one that stands fast in the Word like a grown and dignified adult, pursuing its work diligently and making a solid impact for the Lord. My wife’s beloved Bible teacher used to moan over the vast majority of Christians who, she insisted, “will arrive in heaven in the same delivery blanket in which they were born again.”

Unity

Paul wrote to the Ephesians about the true character of a healthy, growing church. He said nothing about numbers of people, size of budget, variety of programs and facilities, or whether or not it had a great worship band. He emphasized two characteristics – unity and maturity – which are in short supply in America’s churches today (Eph. 4.11-16).

By unity Paul meant real oneness, *visible* oneness, oneness that took the form of joining together in worship and ministry and sharing resources readily and generously to meet needs everywhere. Jesus taught us that such unity is essential to a believable witness (Jn. 17.21), and Paul cautioned us that we’ll have to work hard to attain and keep it (Eph. 4.3).

Today little unity is visible among the churches in any community, and lots of division characterizes individual congregations, just as it did in Corinth.

Mature believers and congregations link arms in ministry, join together in worship and prayer, use their tongues for mutual edification and prophetic witness, and share freely and happily of their resources to help churches and people in need.

Such unity among churches in America exists, but it’s hardly the norm.

Maturity

Mature churches, Paul wrote, are impervious to the changing winds of doctrine and culture. They are communities with real discernment where every member understands he or she has something to contribute to the growth and wellbeing of the whole. Ministry is every believer’s calling, and in mature churches pastors

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and teachers equip church members to live the serving life of Christ in their own Personal Mission Fields, and to take their place in the work of building-up the Body of Christ.

Moreover, mature churches reflect growth in love for God and neighbors, increasingly richer and more consistent manifestations of the resurrection life of Christ.

Finally, churches that are growing into the full measure of the mature stature of Christ, as His Body, will increasingly lay aside the trappings of adolescence and the preferences of the secular world to enter more richly and fully together into the upward prize of the high calling of God in the Savior.

Many churches today have become overrun with the kudzu of pop culture. All their worthwhile activities have to be above all “fun” for everyone involved. They work to create a “brand” in the community and market that brand by every available means. They have turned their worship services over to bands, vocal groups, klieg lights, drama, and comic-pastors who work as hard to entertain as to instruct. Meanwhile, spiritual adolescents of every age pew-up for a junk-food gospel each week, rather than the firm teaching and sound doctrine that fill, guide, and empower mature believers.

We are babes and adolescents as churches, when the times in which we live demand brave and responsible followers of Christ. It’s time to reflect deeply on Paul’s charge to act like men, not babes or adolescents, in our practice of the faith.

For reflection or discussion

1. How do you think the Apostle Paul would define a “babe in Christ”? Is it OK for Christians to remain babes in Christ? Why or why not?
2. Meditate on Ephesians 4.11-16. The word “until” is the fulcrum of this passage. Everything that comes before that leads to what comes after. What must happen for us all to come to unity and maturity?
3. Is there much unity among the Bible-believing churches in your community? If more were to exist, what would that look like?
4. How do your church leaders determine the overall health and growth of your church?
5. What should be your contribution to helping your church “grow up”?

Next steps: How would you assess the state of “unity” and “maturity” in your church? What can you do to help your church “grow up”? Talk with a church leader about these questions.

Prayer:

5 Be Strong

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. 1 Corinthians 16.13

Indications of weakness

The Corinthians, alas, were not strong in the Lord. This was evident to the Apostle Paul in a number of ways.

They allowed scandalous sinners to continue in their midst; squabbled over the supposed superiority of their various groups; looked down on weak brethren; preferred vindication in secular courts to peaceful agreement between brethren; made a mockery of worship and the Supper; and neglected to develop their spiritual gifts – except to the extent that they could vaunt them for personal gain.

People who are strong in the Lord don't act this way, so Paul added this next exhortation to his charge as a frame of reference for the whole. Only when believers are strong in the Lord, and in His mighty power, can they fulfill any of what the Scriptures and the apostles require.

If the Corinthian churches were going to hold together, they would have to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, not theirs.

Strong in His power

This is what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (6.10). We can't live the Christian life on our own strength. The law of sin is just too strong. If we try to be Christians without drawing on the power of God, we'll end up making a mess of things. We'll turn the faith into a personal comfort zone, compromise the grandeur of the Church and the majesty of worship, and make of our ministries a junk food feed-trough for sluggish believers rather than a lighthouse for the lost.

Being strong in the Lord begins with being *in* the Lord in the first place. Paul wasn't persuaded that all the Corinthians were true believers (2 Cor. 13.5). He called them to take up the meat of the Word, and leave the milk aside. He insisted that they deny their fleshly aspirations and indulgences and pursue holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1).

The fact that he exhorted them so surely indicates that this simply wasn't happening. They were weak, like babes, compromised with the world and their own convenience, and missing the point entirely of the strength of the Lord.

Being strong in the Lord begins with seeking the Lord in prayer and in His Word. If we have no time for spiritual disciplines – daily and increasingly – we will never find the strength of the Lord that He is able to bestow upon us.

Being strong in the Lord results from being humble before Him, bowed in prayer, receptive to His Word, and sensitive to the leading of His Spirit. From that position of growing strong in Him we may go forth to live in His mighty power.

The power of His might

The power of God's Spirit is at work within all who truly know the Lord, doing incredible things to make us willing and able to do the will of the Lord (Phil. 2.12, 13; Eph. 3.20). The mighty power of Lord works through the Spirit to bring us to more faithful obedience to God's Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27), greater fruitfulness (Gal. 5.22, 23), more effective use of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.7-11), and a more consistent witness for the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1.8).

The power of God's might enabled those first believers to turn their world upside-down for Jesus Christ (Acts 17.1-9).

And these, I submit, are all spiritual attributes the contemporary American Church sorely lacks.

The churches of this land need the full armor of God if they're going to be strong in Him. We must work harder at growing in our salvation, living by faith, walking in the truth, wielding the Sword of the Spirit, increasing in righteousness, and growing in prayer.

When our churches are populated by people like this, then the strength of God's Word and Spirit will flow within them in revival and renewal, and through them for awakening in the world.

Let us, then, turn to the Lord, that we may go forth from Him, strong in His power, to do all His bidding.

For reflection or discussion

1. Look at 2 Corinthians 13.5. Is it possible for someone to be *in* church but not in *Christ*? How does that happen?
2. What would you say are the tests for a person to determine whether or not he or she really is *in* Christ?
3. What's the difference between resting in our own strength and resting in the power of the Lord's might? Can you give some examples of how this might work out in someone's daily life?
4. "The mighty power of Lord works through the Spirit to bring us to more faithful obedience to God's Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27), greater fruitfulness (Gal. 5.22, 23), more effective use of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.7-11), and a more consistent witness for the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1.8)." Do you agree that this is the way God's power comes to expression in us? Why or why not? What does John 7.37-39 add to your thinking about this question?
5. Revival in God's people leads to renewal in His churches, and this overflows into awakening in the surrounding community and culture. Really? Is this possible in our day? Explain.

Next steps: Imagine if all the Bible-believing churches in your community were committed to growing in unity and maturity as Paul explains in Ephesians 4.11-16. And imagine if they actually worked together at this. What do you think this would look like in your community?

Prayer:

6 Everything in Love

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love. 1 Corinthians 16:13, 14

Too much self-love

Part of the problem with the Corinthians was that they loved themselves more than they loved their neighbors.

They loved themselves so much that they vaunted their chosen group over the others, reserved the right to indulge in sinful practices, dragged their brethren into court, and turned the Lord's Supper into a kind of privately catered party for people with means.

It's no wonder the theme of love features so prominently in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 13).

But, as Paul pointed out, the real measure of a Christian is the way that he loves others; if we have no love for others, then all our other advantages or achievements are just so many clanging cymbals, devoid of grace. Such self-denying love for others grows out of the love we have for God. But the Corinthians had turned their worship services into a festival of self-vaunting and self-indulgence, where love and fear of God came in under the category, "Oh, yeah, that too."

Only when the Corinthians renounced their out-of-control self-love and began to look at the world through the lens of love for God and neighbors would they be able to exercise the greatest gift and highest calling God could ever give.

The state of love

In Acts 6 we read the account of the first deacons. They were selected by the church in Jerusalem and ordained by the apostles to take care of a problem that threatened the integrity and continuity of the church. These spirit-filled men handled that situation with such love that even their critics were astonished, for we read that a great company of the priests, when they witnessed this community resolving its differences in love, became obedient to the faith.

I wonder what the state of love is in America's churches today. I'm sure that some exists, and I've seen many examples of it.

But can we say that we are doing everything in love, as the outflowing toward our neighbors of the love we have for God, and with a view to meeting the needs of others before our own needs. Can it be said of our churches that they're thinking more highly of the needs of others than themselves, serving and edifying others even at great cost to ourselves?

Hmmm.

What is the state of self-denying, sacrificial love in the churches of America today? If it were so pronounced, would young Christians publish books about themselves with titles like, *They Love Christ but not the Church*? Would we see so many young people fall away from the faith once they leave their homes and go to college? Would there be so much divorce, so many scandals, such low levels of giving, and so little shepherding in the churches if we really loved others like Christ has loved us?

Examine yourself

Each of us needs to ask himself: Am I doing everything in my life – at home, school, work, in the community

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– in the self-denying, sacrificial love of Jesus? Is my worship intended as an expression above all of love for God, or am I always just looking for something for me? Am I the first to reach for the towel and basin when needs come into view, or do I wait for others to do the dirty work? Do I readily sign up to be equipped for ministry opportunities that will put me in contact with people I can love? Do I see others with the eyes of Jesus?

Paul reminded the Corinthians – as he would remind us – that we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

Now if only we could get more of His love.

For reflection or discussion

1. How do we know when we truly love God as we should?
2. What about our neighbors? What are the indicators that tell us we love our neighbors as we should?
3. What aspects of your church's ministry have most helped you to increase in love for God? Love for your neighbors?
4. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 2.16. What does it mean to have the mind of Christ, and how does this relate to loving God and our neighbors?
5. In what ways would you like to improve in love for God and your neighbors? How can Christians help one another in this?

Next steps: How can Christians encourage one another to love God more and to show more of His love to their neighbors? Talk with some fellow church members about this question.

Prayer:

7 There's Hope

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love. 1 Corinthians 16:13, 14

A struggling church

Reading through 1 and 2 Corinthians can be a disappointing experience. This church had real problems. They had left off many of the things Paul taught them, and they were going beyond the Scriptures in areas where they had no divine warrant. They were struggling with many issues and looking in all the wrong places for the solutions to their ills.

In consequence, problems abounded in a church full of infants in the Lord. They wouldn't follow their leaders. They bad-mouthed Paul. They fought with one another and made worship a thing of entertainment more than majesty. They scorned the poor and "spiritual weak" in their midst. They lorded it over one another in various ways.

Poor Corinthians, we think, upon getting through the last chapter of Paul's letters to them. I wouldn't have wanted to be them.

I wonder if we feel the same way about our struggling churches today?

Not beyond the reach of grace

But, because the Corinthians were at no time beyond the reach of God's grace, there was always hope that things could improve. And, as it happened, by the grace of God they did.

Some years after the death of the Apostle Paul, Clement, one of Paul's traveling companions, became pastor of the church in Rome. This was late in the first century, around 90 AD.

A problem arose in the Corinthian church – no surprise there, we say – and the leaders wrote to Clement for advice. Clement took up his pen to correct the situation, and, in the process, he gave us a glimpse of what a struggling church, which had taken seriously Paul's charge, had become.

Clement's portrait of the Corinthians in his first epistle presents a completely different look at this struggling church than what we find in 1 and 2 Corinthians. For, having taken Paul's words to heart, the Corinthian church became a model of a healthy, growing church in less than a generation!

Clement extolled their gentleness and love for one another; praised them for their hospitality, which was known around the world; remarked the order and majesty of their worship; honored their holy leaders and elders; and commented on the peace, joy, and love that infused everything they did. They had become a shining witness and glory-filled example to people in Corinth and beyond.

Are we talking about the same people Paul took to the woodshed? We are!

By God's grace the Corinthians received the apostle's difficult challenge and took him seriously. They returned to the Word, and only the Word in all their life together as a community.

They watched carefully over what they were taught and labored to resist every temptation that came their way.

They got back to the Lord and His Word and stood fast in Him against the devil and every detractor.

They became anchored in His strength and abounded in His love.

They ceased being a church that was struggling to stay alive and became a church struggling together for the Kingdom of the Lord.

By every measure with which Paul had upbraided them, the Corinthians had upgraded their walk with the Lord and their life as a community of His people. They took Paul at his Word, and discovered afresh the hope of glory in Jesus Christ.

So there's hope for us, beloved, that the God of grace may yet revive and renew us and make us the "joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 4.1) once again. But we must take seriously the apostle's charge to our struggling churches, each one of us seeking the Lord earnestly, saying as He opens our hearts anew, "Here am I, Lord; send me."

For reflection or discussion

1. What's the purpose in citing Clement's letter to the Corinthians?
2. Should we expect our churches to improve in all the areas discussed in this study? Why or why not? What should your contribution be in this effort?
3. What are some ways this study could guide your prayers for your church?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to put that lesson to work in your life?

Next steps: What's one thing you can do to take Paul's challenge into your life as a believer and member of your church? Get together with some fellow church members, share your answer to this question, then join together in prayer for your church.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.