

29 SAINTS AND SOJOURNERS

Mandy had played first-chair trombone since she was a freshman. She was co-captain of the volleyball team, president of the junior class, and a straight A student. Mandy had it made—or at least that is what everyone thought.

Mandy would admit that her high school years were great. But if you spent a little time with her, she would share some of her worries and frustrations.

She was concerned about her younger brother who had been hospitalized for clinical depression. Mandy worried about fulfilling all the expectations people had placed upon her. Her family's farm was in danger of foreclosure—they already had lost 160 acres of land. Grandma Halvorson was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She had to be placed in the community nursing home for care.

For a young woman from a farm community, Mandy's life was promising, but it was not without its worries and struggles.

People's lives are not always what they appear to be on the surface.

3 STATEMENTS

- God guided the infant church through its troubles.
- Paul provided Christians with the basis for hope in the midst of troubles, trials, and even death.
- The church has never been a perfect institution.

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Source

TOGETHER IN CHRIST

What can we expect from the church? Is it a piece of heaven that has fallen to earth? Some people seem to think so. If the church disappoints them, they leave it. They believe that a church that is sincere and faithful should have no internal problems. It should be alive and vibrant. Any sign of disagreement within the church is regarded as a problem worth leaving behind.

People who stay with the church know that it has always had problems. The absence of difficulty is a luxury we rarely see. Though people may imagine that the church was once peaceful and problem-free, our history tells a different story. It was even true in the beginning. *God guided the infant church through its troubles.*

Luke's description of the early church in the book of Acts implied that everything was great. For a very brief time it was. Read Acts 2:42-47.

- Is there anything about this description of the church that you especially like?
- What is there in Luke's description that you find missing in the church today?

DIVISION IN THE BODY

There were, however, some serious problems in the early church. Some of these problems came from the inside, and some came from outside. The

church at Corinth faced a number of problems, so its leaders wrote the apostle Paul for advice.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Here Paul points out a problem among the church members at Corinth. What is this problem?

Try to imagine being a Christian in the early days of the church. You already saw in Session 27 that people in the church disagreed on keeping the whole law of Moses. When a difference of opinion arose over any matter, whom would you listen to? Whom would you trust?

Some quoted Hebrew scriptures to prove themselves right. Others said they were right because they had been with Jesus. There were many people who wanted to be leaders, and the church needed leaders, but the leaders did not always agree.

You can imagine that groups of Christians rallied around one leader or another. That is what happened in Corinth. Corinth was only one example of what happened in other places as well. The church was divided into factions, or parties. There would be Christians who only listened to what Peter taught. Others only listened to Apollos. Others trusted only Paul.

The strong differences of opinion in the church at this time, and the strong personalities that went with them, were a significant danger. The church with its gospel of Jesus Christ could have disintegrated into fighting factions, and faded away to nothing.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22. Here is more evidence of the division within the church and its evil consequences. This time, the division was between rich and poor.

God guided the infant church through its troubles.



1. In what important act of worship were the rich and the poor supposed to come together as one?

2. What happened instead?

3. Do you think people would want to be part of a church like that?

FALSE TEACHING

The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy were written to a young pastor serving the city of Ephesus. Ephesus was at the center of a network of rivers and roadways in what is now western Turkey. People from every part of the vast Roman empire lived in Ephesus and practiced their religions there. The young Christian congregation in Ephesus was always struggling to keep the gospel of Jesus Christ pure from the influence of pagan religious thought and ideas.

Timothy and the other leaders were carrying on the teachings of Jesus carefully and faithfully. They were reaching many people with the gospel. But even within the Christian community some desired more than the cross of Jesus Christ.

Some Christians had begun to mix the teachings of the apostles with Greek religion and thinking. These people were interested in what later came to be known as "gnosticism" (NOS-ticism). Gnosticism got its name from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means "knowledge."

This knowledge was a special, powerful understanding of things religious. Proper knowledge, it was thought, led to union with God. Gaining the knowledge (*gnosis*) of the truth about the world and about God would make possible a salvation of the soul.

Against this threat to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the writer of 1 and 2 Timothy gave the young pastor some good advice. Read 1 Timothy 1:3-7.

1. What was Timothy to do?

2. What did the writer say had happened?

3. Against what was the writer warning Timothy?

Within the community where there were divisions and false teachings, the writer made it clear how he expected Timothy to conduct the Christian ministry. Read 2 Timothy 2:23-26.

4. According to 2 Timothy 2:23, Timothy was told to stay out of the controversies. Why do you think the writer suggested this instead of telling Timothy to fight?

5. According to 2 Timothy 2:24-26, how was Timothy to respond to the problems in his community?



THE COMING OF THE LORD

Another problem the early church faced was the problem of the deaths of believers. Many Christians thought that Jesus would soon return to judge the world and to take the righteous ones to heaven. They based their understanding on the words of Jesus: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1). But time went on. Jesus did not return as they had expected. Believers were dying and the question arose, "What will happen to them? Will they be lost?"

Questions about the delay of Jesus' second coming, arguments about the date and place of that coming, and the questions about those who had died probably caused some to lose their faith and others to have severe doubts about the gospel. In 1 Thessalonians, the earliest of the existing letters of Paul, Paul wrote an answer to these questions. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1. Are Christians not supposed to feel sad over the deaths of their loved ones? Why or why not?

2. What evidence did Paul give that believers who have died are not "lost"?

The words of the Lord quoted in verse 15 provide the basis for consolation. The promise that "we will be with the Lord forever" (verse 17), together with the awareness that God has made provision for those believers who have already died, offers a means by which Christians can "encourage one another" (verse 18). Paul did not tell them not to grieve over the death of their loved ones. The issue was not whether to grieve, but how a Christian grieves.

Paul was not concerned with giving the believers a calendar of the Lord's coming. *Paul provided Christians with the basis for hope in the midst of trou-*

bles, trials, and even death. Paul's concern was that the people in the congregation minister to each other with this good news of the gospel rather than be preoccupied with thoughts of the end.

3. What happens to Christians who are overly concerned with the date and time of the Lord's second coming?

4. It is said that Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. His answer supposedly was, "I'd plant a tree." What do you think he meant by that statement?

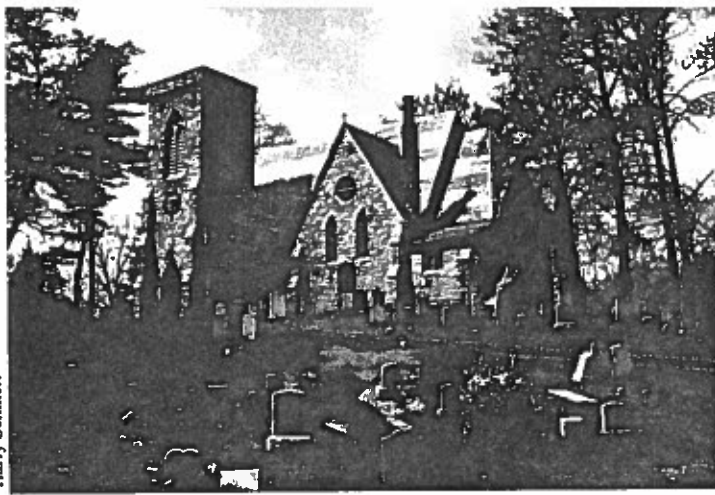
Paul provided Christians with the basis for hope in the midst of troubles, trials, and even death.



Shaping
life

SAINTS AND SOJOURNERS

God guided the church in those years, and continues to guide it today. Through the apostles the church stayed together. The church was threatened from within by division between the rich and poor. The threat of gnosticism distorted the faith of many people, but it did not replace the gospel in the church. At least some of the church's divisions were overcome. The delay of



Harry Schmeier

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the second coming demanded a strategy for the future and confidence in the face of death. It was a time of one problem after another, but God helped the church find solutions.

The church has never been a perfect institution. It is clear from these examples that there were problems in the early church and there have been ever since.

● How do you think God can work through a church that is less than perfect—a church that makes errors and suffers from internal and external problems?

● Make a check beside the statements about the church with which you agree.

- ___ 1. Many people in the church are hypocrites.
- ___ 2. The church is God's idea.
- ___ 3. The church is people's idea.
- ___ 4. People should be loyal to their church.
- ___ 5. There is a point at which people should leave a church.
- ___ 6. Most congregations could do more.
- ___ 7. Churches are too worried about money.
- ___ 8. Churches often expect the pastor to do what the members are supposed to do.
- ___ 9. Being a member of a church is still the best way for a Christian to do what Jesus taught.
- ___ 10. The church is "a business."
- ___ 11. The church is "the body of Christ."

One of the best ways to keep the church in perspective is by remembering a phrase used by Martin Luther. He said believers were *simul justus et peccator*. This means that believers are at the same time saints and sinners. The world sees our sin. We never fully outgrow it, and we cannot hide it. But God still forgives us and helps us go on. The church is here to carry on the work God has given us to do. This work must be done.

We can learn from the experience of the early church. As with all history, we learn about the past in order to avoid repeating its mistakes. We also look to the past for encouragement from those who met difficult challenges before us. No matter what may happen in the congregations and large church bodies today, we can look to the first church and discover that something similar happened to them first. We can see the hand of God at work guiding, directing, loving, and disciplining those who are saints and sojourners in the faith.

FURTHER

opportunities

Mishna minutes

Read 1 Timothy. This is one of three New Testament letters called the pastoral letters. The others are 2 Timothy and Titus. These letters give advice to Timothy and Titus about overseeing the church and correcting problems. Reading 1 Timothy will be an excellent way to see once again some of the problems the early church faced, and how they were dealt with. You are encouraged to write down words or phrases as you read that are evidence of problems in the church. You may want to memorize 1 Timothy 2:1-6.

Activity 1

Interview someone who has been a church member for a long

YOUR CHURCH

Involvement in your congregation's life and ministry helps shape your life. Through your church you have opportunities to serve your Lord. Your church is where you will find other people who share the same faith you do.

Compose a four-part prayer for your church. First, ask God's help for your church in whatever way you think best. Remember particular people in the church and the jobs they have.

In the next part of your prayer, list those things about your church for which you want to thank God. Remember all your church does for you and for others.

In the third part of the prayer, list what you think the church needs to be forgiven for. Ask yourself if you can find the same understanding, patience, and forgiveness for your church that you expect from God.

In the fourth part of the prayer, pray for yourself as a member of the church. Ask God to help you in whatever ways you would like to include.

time. Ask about encouraging times and discouraging times. Find out why this person remains a member of the church.

Activity 2

Write a letter to an imaginary friend. Encourage your friend to be a worshiping, working member of the congregation in town. You have heard about this church from your friend. You know it has some problems: dull services, few youth, and some people who always seem to disagree with the pastor. What will you say to your friend?

Activity 3

Talk to your pastor, or to another adult, and find out what his or her opinions are about the church's problems today. What are the solutions? Is there any way you can take part in implementing these solutions?

FOCUS



ON THE PASTORAL AND CATHOLIC LETTERS

By the end of the first century A.D. the Christian faith found itself in many different countries around the Mediterranean Sea. The church had grown far beyond its birthplace in Galilee and Jerusalem and was established in the great cities of the world. In the passing years, Christians also saw the death of their first teachers—the apostles. The rapid growth and the loss of leadership presented a crisis for the Christians. As the Christian movement expanded into the Greek and Roman world, it had to define itself within the world, strengthen itself from within, and protect itself against false teachings.

To address this crisis, leaders within the Christian movement wrote letters (or *epistles*) to one another and to established congregations. Those letters that are preserved in the New Testament are divided into two groups: "the pastoral letters" (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), and "the catholic letters" (James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, and 1, 2, and 3 John). These letters mark the final period of New Testament history.

The concern of the writers of these letters was to assist the Christian movement as it became an established church. The letters address three main areas: 1) encouragement to the Christians in times of persecution, 2) instruction concerning the faith, and 3) counsel concerning ordained leadership within the Christian communities.

Although they were written to the specific needs of Christians about 1900 years ago, Christians still look to them for guidance in the way Christians are to live in the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.