

Sermon 2: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3: The Church of God, in Corinth

OUTLINE

God's apostle
God's church
God's blessing

INTRODUCTION

Every church has its problems. We are not in the new creation yet, therefore we are all still under construction, and every church will have its own peculiar problems. Some of those problems will be the universal ones like we don't pray enough; we tend to be clicky; we quickly forget the wonder of God's saving actions in Christ; and trend towards selfishness not selflessness. Then there are the problems that result from our age, like in the 21st century we are dopamine addicted technology junkies who have very little self-discipline in the area of prayer and bible reading. We are materialistic and caught up in the consumerism of our age. We fill every moment of our lives with entertainment. We are media driven and politicized. We are highly tribal and happily wage a social media war dragging people's names through the mud. We are an anti-traditional age and a pornogrified age; and much more. And the sins of our age will of course shape the sins that we commit as a church.

The church in Corinth was a young church of three years in a progressive town, of new money, that had a notorious reputation for sexual immorality, and was a melting pot of culture and religions. The letter of 1 Corinthians is unique among Paul's letters because the majority of the letter is a case of Paul putting out fires because of the number of problems that have arisen in the church. If you look down at your bibles you will see some of these problems in the division headings. The church struggled with divisions as they followed their favorite preachers and brought carnal attitudes of competitiveness into the church, 1:10. The church was highly influenced by the current notions of wisdom and addicted to the cleverness and sophistication of the popular rhetoricians of the day. This led the Corinthians to despise Paul who tried to put some distance between himself and these orators, and they ended up despising his preaching and message as well. Most of chapters 1-4 deal with the problems that arise from this climate of man following and celebrity culture. In chapter 5 you will notice that the church was lax in the area of tolerating sexual immorality and Paul had to lead them in exercising it against a case of sexual immorality. In 6:1-8, Paul has to address the problem of the Corinthians entering into litigation against one another. Then he goes on to deal with the problem of sexual immorality that would have resulted from the practices associated with idolatry which people were still getting involved in. Chapter 7 deals with a number of questions the Corinthians had asked about celibacy, marriage and divorce. Most of 8-10 deals with the problem of eating meat offered to idols. Chapter 11 begins the section of worship issues that the Corinthians were getting wrong, here Paul deals with the issue of head coverings and proper gender roles; the neglect of the poor at the Lord's Supper; the problem of some using spiritual gifts for one-upmanship and self-promotion in 12-14. And chapter 15 deals with the problem of those who are denying the resurrection. The church is to be filled with the Holy Spirit and not the spirit of the age; we are to be in the world, and not the world in the church.

So today we come to the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. And as we have seen in the past, Paul is very thoughtful in how he writes and even from the very first verses he begins to sow seeds and ideas that will be expanded upon later in the letter. How do you start a letter to a church that is despising the apostle Paul and consequently his message because you are comparing him with the celebrities of the day and their entertaining way of speaking? Or a people so brainwashed by the values of their culture that the worldly attitudes of rich versus poor; self-promotion; and autonomy lead them to look down on their fellow brethren in Christ; to wage legal battles against them; to neglect them in the Lord's Supper and promote yourself at their expense in the time of gathered worship? How do you begin to address people whose identity, and morals, are still worldly resulting in them falling into old ways, tolerating sin in their midst, and not distinguishing themselves as God's people? We will see from 1 Corinthians 1:1-3 that Paul reminds the Corinthians that he is God's apostle; they are God's church; and they have received God's blessing. And these are our three headings.

God's apostle

V1, 'Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes.' Paul's refusal to indulge the manipulate techniques of the popular public speakers (2:1), his unimpressive personal presence as he came in fear and trembling and weakness (2:3), and his being appointed an apostle late (15:8), seem to have been points taken up by some to undermine Paul's message. Some false teachers had come with a different message to Paul, and they wanted the people to break their allegiance to Paul's message by trying to discredit Paul. Paul begins by stamping his God given authority. Paul does not like to talk about himself, and in those letters where his apostleship is not under attack, he writes simply "Paul" (1 Thess 1:1), or Paul a servant (Phil 1:1). There is a lesson here. There are some who are willing to promote themselves in the church of God; there are those who are confidence tricksters who can dazzle the unwitting with their speech, their shouting and ranting, their cleverness, the manipulative use of humor or stories or name dropping, they are well dressed, making all the right sounds and signals, yet they are not preaching the apostolic message. Because a rejection of Paul is a rejection of God's messenger and message, Paul begins by underlining this fact.

You will notice that he is not self-appointed, but 'called by the will of God.' The word called reminds us of God's appearance to Paul the persecutor of the church on the Damascus road. How Paul was not even looking for the role but was put into by God. Paul is an apostle not because he was from a well to do family who were Roman citizens and he had the best education that the ancient world could offer and was fluent in many languages, no he was saved by grace 1 Cor. 15:10. Jesus Christ appeared to Paul personally and made him an apostle, despite the fact he is not one of the original 12 he has seen the risen Savior and was handpicked by Christ Himself. How different this is to those are promoting themselves, and their wisdom and their message in Corinth. This foolish church has been hoodwinked as they have forgotten that the most important thing is not how well a person speaks or appears, or the amount of people that follow and applaud them, but whether they are speaking the truth of God.

Paul has the authority of an apostle, an office that no longer functions in the church today, in order to lay the foundation of the church, Eph. 2:20. He has more authority than a prophet, 1 Cor. 14:37; and can order the church of God on

behalf of God, deciding who can be an elder or a deacon or who can preach. Paul insists on this authority not to pull rank but to do God's will. But notice that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus. He is a sent messenger and he has a message, his authority is not an end in itself but to draw attention to the message, the message of the cross, the message of Christ given to save sinners. 1 Cor. 2:1-2, 'And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'

In this letter Paul will have to point out his apostolic authority in order to order the church according to God's will not the selfish way the Corinthians were doing to favor the rich, and those important in the eyes of the world; as well as a foolish preference for fluff and bluster in public speakers instead of apostolic content. He is going to point to his apostolic message as an antidote to the worldly wisdom that they have taken a shine to. And he will be pointing to his apostolic ethic and example as he will speak of his service to the weak as a rebuke to those who insist on their own way at the cost of others, laying out an example for them to imitate him as he imitates Christ 1 Cor. 11:1; doing all things to the glory of God not themselves, 1 Cor. 10:31.

Paul also mentions 'our brother Sosthenes.' Paul breaks with ordinary letter writing convention to mention these others. In this instance a brother, and Sosthenes. You will remember from Acts 18 that Crispus the ruler of the synagogue got saved. And after Gallio refused to entertain the Jews charges against Paul, they turned on and beat the new synagogue ruler, this is Sosthenes. It is apparent that he was also sympathetic to Paul and subsequently as converted, here we see him as a trophy of grace, and possibly party with those who brought the letter from Corinth to Paul. Paul includes him as he is known to them.

These weaknesses are not exclusive to the Corinthians. Do you despise the preaching of God's holy word because you prefer a young preacher not an old one; one who seems tuned into modern fashions not one who is faithful to the tradition that has been passed down? Are you overly critical of the preacher and judging him by external standards preferring someone more entertaining. Are you addicted to preaching that is full of the buzz words and hot topics of the day instead of the simple preaching of the cross of Christ? Are you going out in search of preaching that is more political, more Israel centered, that agrees with your hobby horses? Some are despising the regular preaching of the word of God to after online ministries that make it their business to constantly comment on all the news headlines. Are you testing the TV and radio preachers and approving them not by the amount of air time and followers they have but whether they agree with the apostolic message? Do you recognize the authority of the apostolic word to tell you how church should be done or do you think you can come into the church and do it any old way?

God's church

V2, 'To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.' Paul turns his attention from the importance of his role as an apostle, to their identity in Christ. The Corinthians are full of pride, self-confidence in their own wisdom and abilities, boasting, divisions, mistreating each other, a superiority complex, here are the

truths we need to hear to humble us. Firstly, we are the church of God. The church does not belong to you or to me, but to God. He is the owner of the church; He is the Lord of the church; He orders the church according to His wishes not yours; just as I cannot come into your house and order your wife and kids around and tell you how to arrange the furniture, we dare not come into God's church in a willful way. This is a point Paul will raise with serious consequences when addressing how ministers will have to give an account for how they built God's church and serve in His vineyard, 3:17, 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.' The word here for church is the word 'ekklesia' it could be used to describe any formal assembly, but it is used by the LXX to speak of Israel. Paul is using this word to set the tone for how we ought to view ourselves. We are a nation of priests, or worshippers, we are called to be holy, we are under God's authority and protection. It is not a manmade organization, therefore it is not the place for our own opinions. We are not to identify ourselves in a worldly way but as God's people. Roman citizenship is not what defines us; slave or free; Greek or Jew, we are the people of God. They are the church of God in Corinthian not the Corinthian church. We are the church of God in NZ not the NZ church. I emphasize this because of the tendency among some influenced by the renaissance of native cultures to take the church captive to Maori or other cultural practices. Our identity is first and foremost in God and this shapes us before anything else. Corinth is the place they live not where they truly belong to.

Secondly, Paul writes, 'to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints'. This is a surprising way to begin a letter written to a church so full of sin. Paul calls these immature, carnal, easily distracted, impure, divided, selfish, superior Corinthians, sanctified and saints. The word sanctified means to be set apart/consecrated; and the word saint means something similar, holy one. How can people who are so worldly be identified as set apart from the world? How can those who are so full of sin be described as holy ones? This is one of the wonders of the gospel. Every single believer is a saint, a holy one, not in themselves but as Paul says here in Christ Jesus. Paul is not describing their accomplishments and efforts in pursuing holiness, no he is describing them as they are in Christ. One of the ways I love to assure young Christians is by reminding them that the qualifications are to be holy as God is holy, but we all fall short of the glory of God. Then I go to 2 Cor. 5:21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' Here we see that God, in order to save us, made Jesus who was sinless to bear the guilt of our sin, it was imputed or reckoned as his. In order that His righteousness would be imputed, or reckoned as mine. The end result is that in Christ I become the righteousness of God. I do not take on the divine nature, I do not acquire the incommunicable attribute of God's own holiness, no but the human righteousness of Jesus that qualifies me for the presence of God, that satisfies all that God requires when He says, 'Be Holy as I am Holy' is fully met in Christ. I am as holy as God. This is not a description of my attainments, nor is it a description of my nature, it is a description of my legal standing as Christ's own righteousness is credited to me for righteousness. In myself, in my actions, motives, accomplishments, they are all imperfect; but in Christ God considers me as holy as Jesus Himself. Luther spoke about Christians as a walking contradiction, *simil iustus et peccator*, both just and sinful at the same time. But this is not a contradiction because they are not intended in the same sense. I am righteous legally as Christ's external righteousness is seen as mine; though I am still sinful inwardly as I still have a sinful nature. When Paul

calls the Corinthians set apart, and saints he is describing this gospel reality about them.

This is one of the encouraging parts of this letter, it is a stark reminder that we blow it, we fail, we are a work in progress, but this does not make us any less the children of God. Your holiness is dependent upon Christ and not yourself. This does not give us a free ticket to sin. Not at all, we will see very clearly how Paul will call the Corinthians to lay aside sin, to be what they are. Paul begins by reminding who they are, who God is to them, and builds on this as he calls them to holiness. John MacArthur shares a story that reinforces how being saved can incentivize us to holiness: 'Some years ago a young boy, whose father was a pastor, was put in jail for stealing some merchandise from a department store. His father happened to be playing golf with some of the church leaders at the time and received a call while on the golf course to come down to the jail to get his son. Thinking it was a mistake, the pastor took the other men with him to the police station, where embarrassment abounded. The deepest impression of the incident left on the boy's mind was made by the repeated reminders he received from those men, and from many others afterward, about who his father was. "Having a father like yours," they would ask, "how could you have done what you did?" Yet as humiliating and painful as the experience was, the boy knew he was still his father's son. He had not acted like a son of his father should have acted, but he was still a son.

As Christians one of the strongest rebukes we can have when we sin is to be reminded of who our Father is. And reminding ourselves of whose we are should be one of our strongest deterrents to sin. Remembering our position can compel us to improve our practice.'¹

Thirdly, we see that we are not Christians unto ourselves but are part of a body, 'together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours'. These Corinthians were individualistic, they were consumed with their own opinions, their own spiritual gifts, their own consciences, their own partaking of the Lord's Supper, their own favorite preacher. And as a result of this they ran rough shod over others in the church. Here Paul reminds us that we are a part of a body. There is one Lord, Eph. 4:5. He is the Lord of the weak and strong Christian Rom. 14:5-9. We are all saved by the same salvation, we have all called upon the name of the Lord to be saved, Rom. 10:13, 'For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Jews and Gentiles, rich or poor, Corinthians or Romans, all are sinners, all are worthy of judgment, all are saved by grace not because they are better than others.

Incidentally this also proves that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity and co-equally divine with the Father. Rom. 10:13 is of course a direct quote from Joel 2:32, that everyone who calls upon the name of YHWH will be saved; but this is applied directly to Jesus in the NT. This is one of those truths that the Jew would have grasped, Paul a Jew was saying that Jesus is the God who saves, or as he puts it in Tit. 2:13, 'our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.'

This idea of Jesus as our Lord also carries the obvious implication of Him as our Master. He owns us, and this makes Paul comfortable with the notion of being seen as a bondservant/slave. His will is to be our will, His will is supreme and to

1 John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 6-7.

be obeyed, we cannot do whatever we like with His church; with our bodies, or our sexuality, or our spiritual gifts. Paul prepares these Corinthians to put away their self-will by reminding them who is the Lord. In a town of independent thinkers, of the self-made rich, of the most sophisticated people with the most informed perspectives and holders to the latest fashions and opinions. To those who are used to being the boss, being the most important, being used to doing things their own way, Paul reminds us all Jesus is Lord.

God's blessing

V3, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' The typical letter of the time consisted of A to B, greetings. Paul takes the regular formula and renovates it with the gospel. Instead of charein, greetings, he writes charis, grace. He goes further than greetings to a prayer wish for them. Not only that he combines it with a typically Jewish greeting, peace. And these are God and Christ. Grace we know is the undeserved and demerited favor of God, God's goodness in salvation extended to the sinner who deserves judgement. And peace is result. We have peace with God because our sins are dealt with and we experience peace from God as a benefit that comes with being a child of God. There may be a little political undercurrent in this statement by Paul. You see the Caesar was considered to be Lord, and the Caesar gave the Roman Empire the pax romana, the roman peace. True peace comes from know Christ as our Lord and God as our Father, and this is only possible because of the grace of God to the unworthy not by the great accomplishment of human beings.

Paul has only just begun to address this carnal church, this sinful church, this proud church, this divided church, this worldly church. But already he has emphasized that we are God's church, that we are saved into a body not an individualistic life; that we are saved by God's grace because He is good not because we are so great; and that He is the Lord not us. These are the truths that we need when worldliness creeps into the church.