

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 – “Called Into Fellowship”

The letter of 1 Corinthians is a very important letter for us because it's a letter that dealt with some problems that were going on in the church at Corinth. Now you might think, *'Well that's cool, but we're not the church of Corinth. What does that have to do with us?'* And I get that thinking, but as we'll see, the problems that were hitting the church at Corinth, are the same things that seek to infiltrate the church today. After 2000 years of the existence of the church, what has become evident is that we are not immune from problems creeping into the church today. A big reason for this is well... people! If we could have a church without people, we'd not have to go through letters like this. But the church is all about people, and it's to be about people living for and exalting Jesus! But this is where the church at Corinth began to waiver. They began to get caught up in their own wants and desires and focussed more on themselves than others.

- They became a **divided** church.
- They became a **defiled** church through immoral living.
- They became a **disgraced** church through prideful and selfish living.
- They became a **doubting** church as they questioned some of the more foundational truths of Christianity.

This was not a church that you walked in to and thought: *Jesus is here.*

The problem at Corinth was instead of being a church that influenced the city, it was the city that began to influence the church. Boats are made to be in the water, but if you've got water in the boat, it's not a good thing. Paul has heard about these not so good things going on in the church at Corinth, so he writes this letter to address these various issues and problems and see this church built up in the truth.

Now let's take a look at the background of this letter and the city that Paul is contending with.

Corinth was a very important city in Paul's day. It had a long history dating back to 1200 B.C. "In 146 B.C. the Achaean League of Greek city-states, which had been defying Roman expansion for some time, collapsed and Corinth (which had led the opposition to Rome) was levelled; its citizens were killed or sold into slavery."¹

¹ Prior, D. (1985). *The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church* (p. 12). InterVarsity Press.

The city sat desolate for a time until Julius Caesar seeing the potential of this place refounded Corinth as a Roman colony back in 46 B.C.

This city became a melting pot of diverse ethnic backgrounds as Italians, Greeks, Jews, and a mixed multitude began to populate this city. In New Testament times the city was believed to have a population of 700,000 people (500k were slaves).

- This city was the capital of the province of Achaia and the 4th largest city in the Roman Empire.
- It was strategically located along a major travel and trade route. Corinth sat on a little isthmus that was about 20 miles long and about 5 miles wide. It joined southern Greece (the Peloponnesus) with the rest of Greece and it sat between the Gulf of Corinth to the west and the Saronic Gulf to the east.

When ships were bringing goods to Rome from the east, they would make their way across the Aegean Sea to Cenchrea. From here they would either unload the goods and carry them across this 4 mile wide isthmus, or if the ship was small enough they would actually roll the whole ship across this isthmus through Corinth and to Lechaemum on the Gulf of Corinth. They would do this to avoid the 250 mile treacherous voyage along the south of the Peloponnesus. Because of all this activity and action, Corinth became a major city of commerce and wealth. It was the hot spot and the gateway city to Rome from the east.

Interestingly, Caesar Nero began to create a canal through this isthmus in 40-66 A.D. It was only completed in 1893.

- Isthmia was another little town just east of Corinth. They hosted the Isthmus games every 2 or 3 years and was second in size only to the Olympic games. These athletic contests were a big part of Greek culture and life, and even Paul used illustrations from these athletic games in this letter (1 Cor 9:24-27).
- A special feature of the city was the 'Acrocorinth', a hill of over 1,850 feet. On this hill sat the temple to Aphrodite – the Greek goddess of love and beauty. As part of their religion and worship, this temple had 1000 temple prostitutes that would come down to the city each night and offer their services to male citizens and visitors. The worship of Aphrodite was parallel to that of the Ashtoreth idolatry in the days of Israel's kings.
- Not only was there a temple to Aphrodite but there was one for Apollo right in the city as well. Apollo was the god of music, song and poetry, and for good measure, the ideal of male beauty. This brought men in to acts of

physical devotion to Apollo, thus Corinth became a centre of homosexual practices.^{6 2}

As you can see, Corinth was not only a city of wealth and commerce, but it was a city of carnality and great licentiousness. It became so known by this that “the Greek language developed a verb, *korinthiazomai*, which meant “to live like a Corinthian in the practice of sexual immorality.””³ The word *Corinthian* became synonymous with an immoral, debased lifestyle.

The people of Corinth were intellectually alert, materially prosperous, but morally corrupt.

So, it’s to this city that Paul was led to come to on his second missionary journey and where this church was planted. We get the background and story of this in Acts 18.

- **Acts 18:1–11**, *“After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth.² And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them.³ So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.⁵ When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ.⁶ But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, “Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”⁷ And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue.⁸ Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.⁹ Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent;¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.”¹¹*

⁶ Cf. Rom. 1:26ff.

² Prior, D. (1985). *The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church* (p. 12). InterVarsity Press.

³ Barker, K. L. (1994). *Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition: New Testament)* (p. 606). Zondervan Publishing House.

And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."

Paul stayed a year and a half here, the second longest stay of any city (he was 3 years in Ephesus). And as we see, there were some difficult days and sleepless nights in Corinth. The Lord had to come with a **comforting** word: *I am with you...*

- Now that may sound nice and all, but the Lord was with him when he was stoned and left for dead, when he was beaten and whipped to a pulp, when he was put in prison. Perhaps Paul was thinking, *'Lord I'm not sure if you're getting distracted and not seeing what's going on, but it doesn't feel like you're with me! I'm getting caught in some serious crossfire here!'* At this point in Paul's ministry, you don't really know how to take those words *I am with you*.

But the Lord doesn't just give this comforting word, He gives a **confident** word: *no one will attack you to hurt you*.

- I think this is a little more along the lines of what Paul was hoping to hear. This makes it a little more clear and certain. God is going to keep Paul safe and protected so that he can continue in the work God has for him. Which I'm sure as Paul looks around, he's thinking, these people are all beyond the reach of God. But notice...

The Lord next gives a **contrary** word. *I have many people in this city*.

- Paul perhaps had been looking at this city as though it was a goner. Maybe he thought it was no use continuing on. Yet the Lord says to Paul that things are not what they seem. I have many people here.
- So often the Lord is working things out behind the scenes that we have no idea about. When things begin to look bleak don't be quick to pack up, but rest in the power of God's presence and promise, and be aware that He's often at work in ways you don't always readily see.

Paul was comforted in this and he made an unusually long stay at Corinth. God gave him a fruitful ministry there. What did Paul do? Hold concerts, do various seminars? No, he simply taught the Word! I love that.

And as we go through this letter we're going to be taught God's Word. We're going to be challenged, corrected, but I pray more than anything we'll be strengthened and encouraged as we seek to build ourselves upon these truths.

Before we get into it, did you know that 1 Corinthians was not the first letter Paul wrote to this church?

It would appear that 1 Corinthians was the second letter Paul wrote and 2 Corinthians was the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

In **1 Corinthians 5:9**, we read: *"I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people."*

William Barclay does a great job in laying out the order and flow of this correspondence between Paul and the church.

Paul's three visits and four letters may therefore be set out as follows in their chronological order:

1. The church founded; first visit (Acts 18).
2. The first letter (referred to in 1 Cor 5:9).
3. The second letter: 1 Corinthians. This is in response to those from Chloe's household that brought word to Paul in Ephesus of concerns in the church. It also addressed various questions others brought to Paul.
4. The painful visit (cf. 2 Cor 2:1).
5. The third letter: severe in tone (2 Cor 2:4; 7:8).
6. The fourth letter: 2 Corinthians.
7. The third visit. ⁴

Paul had much he needed to air out within this church. It was a church that was still lacking maturity. They were having problems of unity, struggling in immorality, people were suing each other in the church, there were issues in celebrating the Lord's supper, issues with spiritual gifts, and problems with their theology regarding the resurrection. So, Paul wrote to correct these problems that had arisen in the church.

- Stalker said that the letters of Paul take the roof off the early churches and let us see what went on inside. Of none of them is that truer than the letters to Corinth.

And as we move along this book it will possibly be an eye opener to the similarities we see today within the church and hopefully be a good instruction for us of how to stay away from these problems that could creep into our midst in a destructive manner.

⁴ Bruce, F. F. (1979). *New International Bible commentary* (p. 1348). Zondervan Publishing House.

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction – 1:1-9
- II. Conditions Reported to Paul – 1:10—6:20
 - A. Divisions in the church 1:10—4:21
 - B. Lack of discipline in the church 5—6
- III. Questions Asked of Paul – 7:1—16:12
 - A. Marriage and related matters 7
 - B. Food offered to idols 8:1-11:1
 - C. Propriety in worship 11:2-16
 - D. The Lord's Supper 11:17-34
 - E. Spiritual gifts and spiritual people 12—14
 - F. The resurrection of believers 15
 - G. The collection for the Jerusalem believers 16:1-12
- IV. Conclusion – 16:13-24
 - A. Final exhortations 16:13-18
 - B. Final greetings and benediction 16:19-24

Secondary Outline:

1. Introduction - 1:1-9
2. Divisions in the Church - 1:10-4:21
3. Disorders by the Church - 5-6
4. Difficulties for the Church - 7-14
5. Doctrinal Clarity to the Church - 15-16

“1 Corinthians is so vital to us. Conditions have not changed much. Many of the problems that confronted the Corinthians plagued present-day believers as well. Living wisely for God is not easy in the midst of a sinful and materialistic age. But 1 Corinthians is filled with valuable and important lessons... which (are) so essential for our walk with the Lord.” - J. Allen Blair ⁵

1. Paul's Greeting – 1:1-3

1:1 - *Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,*

⁵ Lasseigne, Jeff (2005). Ezra. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *Highway 66- A Unique Journey Through the 66 Books of the Bible* (p. 144-145). Santa Ana, CA: Calvary Chapel Publishing.

It's clear that Paul is the writer of this letter. He's writing from Ephesus while on his third missionary trip (probably around 56 A.D. – 5 years after his initial departure from Corinth).

And notice Paul can confidently say he is called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ (to be is in italics, meaning it was added by the translators. This actually reads: *Paul, called an apostle...*). This is not something Paul has chosen for himself. He's not taken some aptitude test to see what he would be good at. He's been called.

This would be challenged by some and Paul addresses it in 1 Corinthians 9.

- Paul was sent out with a purpose – to preach the gospel. And this wasn't some man given commission, this was ***through the will of God***.
- Paul saw confidently what God had for Him. And Paul didn't have to worry about his qualifications, because it's God who qualifies the called.
- Now you may still be navigating through that discovery of what God has called you to do, but that doesn't need to prevent you from carrying out what God has called you to be. He's called us to be witnesses, to be a light in the world, to be set apart for Him. This is how we need to live.
- There is no greater satisfaction in life that to be fulfilling this ***the will of God***.

...***and Sosthenes our brother***. Now this is interesting. We read of a Sosthenes in Acts 18 who was the present ruler of the synagogue at Corinth (after Crispus got saved). And a group of Jews, along with Sosthenes, took Paul before Gallio, the governor of Achaia, to accuse Paul of breaking Jewish law. Gallio wanted nothing to do with this Jewish affair and he drove them away. And then to make a point, the Greeks took Sosthenes and beat him before the judgment seat of Gallio (Acts 18:17).

- We're not sure if this is the same Sosthenes, but it's very possible that it is. You see something happened, through the beatings, through the complaints, through the criticism – he became converted. And now instead of leading a struggle against Paul, he's being a support to Paul.
- It's so wonderful to see the change that God can bring about in people. And how God will bring people together who were once at such odds. It's the unifying power that the gospel of Jesus brings.
- Those people that perhaps are being a pain in your side, don't give up on them, don't lose hope, because God can bring about incredible change in seconds. And it can end up being a blessing to you if you let it.

1:2 - To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

Notice, Paul doesn't say to the 'church of Corinth', or the 'church of Paul'. It's the **church of God**, just as it ought to be! This is His church. We're not our own little entity doing what we want, we are to be a church of God where He does what He wants.

Now though we're His church, we're a church with two addresses. This church was in Corinth, but they were also to be in Christ Jesus! This is the dichotomy of the church. We're to be in the world, but we're to be different than the world, we're to reflect Jesus in all we do. We must not forget both these missions.

Now sadly, the church at Corinth had begun to lose sight of their initial address, that they were to be in Christ Jesus.

"As Moffatt put it so succinctly, "The Church was in the world, as it had to be, but the world was in the Church, as it ought not to be."

Since such a situation is still common in many congregations, the relevance of 1 Corinthians is lasting." ⁶

This church had to remember that Jesus has sanctified them.

This can seem like such a lofty kind of goal. We may think, *Oh I'll never be sanctified. I'm not really even sure what it means, but it certainly sounds too spiritual for me.* But the idea of being sanctified means to be separated from the profane things of the world and to be dedicated to God. Now this is accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit available to all. And notice this is not only what God wants for you, it's how God views you:

called to be saints... In the original text it says, 'called saints', which means holy thing, or, much like sanctified, set apart. They weren't called to be saints, this is not something you attain through holy living, it is something you are if you are a born again believer in Jesus Christ. This is the work God does at conversion.

- Many times we don't live saintly lives because we don't think of ourselves as saints. Well, you are, so live like one!

...**with all**... The church was bigger than just what was at Corinth. In the same way, we need to realize we are a small part of a bigger work. So as Paul is writing this letter, he is wanting to include all those who call on Jesus Christ. In

⁶ MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1746). Thomas Nelson.

other words, if you are a Christian, this letter is of great importance and instruction to you.

1:3 - *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

17 of the 27 books in the New Testament contain this greeting – ***grace and peace***. They're the Siamese twins of Scripture. They always go in this order for you cannot experience the peace of God until you first know the grace of God.

- Grace (*charis*) was the typical Greek greeting while peace (*shalom*) was the typical Hebrew greeting.
- And truly, this grace and peace only comes from ***God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***. If you're lacking peace or grace, look to the one Who provides it.

2. Thanksgiving and Praise – 1:4-9

1:4 - *I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus,*

Now this is a pretty remarkable statement because Paul's been hearing a lot of trouble coming out of this church. Yet what does he do? He doesn't complain or criticize, he thanks God for the grace that they've been given by Christ Jesus. Truly if it wasn't for the grace of God, none of us would be standing. None of us would have much to be thankful for. Paul can look past the faults and shortcomings, and be thankful that they're a group of people that can still experience the grace given to them through Jesus Christ. It's not earned or achieved, it was given.

And may we give thanks as we think of other believers, regardless of how you might feel toward them, be thankful for the grace of God at work in their lives.

1:5-6 - *that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you,*

This church was truly enriched through the work of the Lord in their lives. I love that God doesn't just forgive us and remove our sinful penalty, but He chooses to enrich us and fill us, and bestow His gifts upon us which are to draw us into greater fellowship and blessing with Him and the saints.

These changed lives were evidence of the testimony of Christ that Paul shared with them. The word Paul preached has been confirmed to be true by what they have seen happen in their lives.

1:7-8 - *so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul reveals that these Corinthian believers have access to all that God has for them. They didn't need to come short in any gift or way that God would work in them. Now the greatest gift we could ever receive is simply being with Jesus.

And we should be ***eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ!***

Paul knew that being face to face with Jesus would be the ultimate prize or gift.

Now as we talk about gifts, we know that this church had to be corrected on how they exercise these gifts. Some got their eyes off the prize.

Living with an any day expectancy on the return of Jesus has such a purifying effect on us.

Now some have more of a dread than an excitement on Jesus coming again.

They feel like they may not be accepted, or they've disqualified themselves by watching that R rated movie they shouldn't have. But notice, Jesus ***confirms you to the end!*** As believers in Jesus; born again Christians, we've been sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13). We're His! He's saved us by His grace and He will receive us to Himself by His grace. And we'll stand blameless in that day of our Lord Jesus (Jude 24; Col 1:22).

This doesn't mean that when God saves us, we'll never sin again. It means that our sins have already been dealt with. And we stand before God guiltless because we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ which He imputed to us by our faith in Him.

This is not based on our goodness, but solely based on God's goodness. He is faithful to do this work...

1:9 - *God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

We have been blessed to not just be saved, but saved so that we can be brought into fellowship with Jesus.

Now there's things that we can allow in our lives that are going to hinder that fellowship with Jesus. This is clearly seen in this Corinthian church. Their **practice** was not aligning with their **position** in Christ. And so Paul goes to work

to deal with some of the situations that had been brought to his attention. The first one: Division.