

“Those Who Call Upon the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ”

The First in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Deuteronomy 12:8-21

It has been said that the city of Corinth was the New York, Las Vegas and Los Angeles of Paul’s day, all rolled into one.¹ The parallels between the ancient Greek city of Corinth and modern Southern California are so striking and obvious that a number of theologians have seen fit to make the comparison independently from one another. The church Paul helped to found in Corinth was largely Gentile and was made up of new Christians recently converted from paganism. These new Christians found themselves struggling to learn the doctrines of the Christian faith and then to live out their new faith in a city and a culture well-known for its rampant sexual immorality and idolatry. To be a Christian in first-century Corinth was a lot like being a Christian in twenty-first century America. The similarities between the Corinth of Paul’s day and Southern California of ours mean that there is much for us to learn from Paul’s remarkable letter to the church in Corinth, that letter known to us as 1 Corinthians.

As we begin a new series on Paul’s first Corinthian letter, we will spend much of our time in this sermon introducing this epistle, so that we have the necessary background to tackle the issues Paul addresses in the body of his letter. Although Reformed Christians often pride themselves on being students of Paul—devoting themselves to the study of Paul’s letters such as Romans, Galatians and Ephesians—1 Corinthians is often overlooked despite the fact that many of the issues Paul addresses in this epistle are absolutely vital to the health of Christ’s church. In fact, many of the issues prompting Paul to write to the Corinthians are facing the church again today. The importance of 1 Corinthians becomes especially clear once we make the connection between the paganism of first century Corinth and the religious climate of contemporary Southern California. They are very much alike.

Paul’s two Corinthian letters are often overlooked because of Paul’s discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and other controversial matters such as speaking in tongues. But this is a letter we should not ignore—in our context it is every bit as important as is Romans. In 1 Corinthians we find a number of important issues:

- 1). There is fascinating discussion of the collision between Christianity and paganism (specifically how Christians are to deal with idolatry).
- 2). There are a number of ethical issues addressed (Christians suing each other in secular courts, and engaging in sexual immorality).
- 3). Paul discusses at length the person and work of the Holy Spirit (in regeneration and the role of spiritual gifts).
- 4). Paul describes Christian worship—in this letter we have a description of the way the Lord’s Supper is administered, as well as a call for proper order in worship.
- 5). Paul also discusses the doctrine of the church (the dangers of division within the church, and the need

¹ Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 3.

to exercise church discipline).

6). 1 Corinthians ends with the most important discussion of the resurrection found anywhere in the New Testament.

So, there is much here that is worthwhile and certainly worthy of our time and attention.

Before we go one step further, I need to be crystal clear about one of my primary operating assumptions as we work our way through this epistle. Many people assume that the United States is a Christian nation currently in a state of moral decline. While there can be little doubt that contemporary American culture is increasingly sexualized, crude, vulgar, and openly pagan, the fact is the United States has never been a “Christian nation.” In the providence of God, throughout our history there have been many influential Christians living in America. I’m afraid the reality is that the United States is much more like ancient Rome than we often think. Add to this the fact that the intellectual and religious climate of modern America (even in Christian circles) has become much like that of ancient Greece, and all of a sudden a letter like Paul’s to the Corinthians (a Greek city with a Roman ethos) speaks very powerfully to our current situation. Modern Californians are very much like the ancient Corinthians. Since Paul deals with the intellectual collision between Christianity and paganism, a study of this letter will help prepare us to do combat with the highly sexualized and pagan environment in which we find ourselves.

Before we turn to our text this morning (the opening verses of this letter), I would like to do three things. First, we need to talk a bit about the city of Corinth (its history and background). Second we need to talk about Paul’s connection to the church there. Third, we need to discuss Paul’s reasons for composing this letter to those whom he knew so well, but who were struggling so mightily against the spirit of the age.

First, the city of Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroad located on the Isthmus of Corinth (a narrow peninsula). The city stood on the main trading road between the two nearby port cities of Cenchreae (to the east) and Lechaem (to the west), located on the Aegean and Ionian seas, respectively. Given the difficult nature of sailing along the southern coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula (especially during winter), much of the commerce between Italy and Asia went through Corinth, transiting across the isthmus on a paved road known as the *diolkos*. Ships would dock at either port, the cargo (or the ship itself) would be carried across the peninsula to the other port. The ancient geographer Strabo pointed out that Corinth’s strategic location makes it the master of two harbors so that the city dominated virtually all trade between Asia and Italy.

By the time of Paul, Corinth was probably like other large commercial seaport of that era, filled with merchants, slaves, and laborers.² This trade generated great wealth, and made Corinth into a cultural and ethnic melting pot much like Southern California (or any large America urban area today). Given the content of Paul’s two Corinthian letters and the names mentioned in the chapters of Acts which deal with this period, it appears that the vast majority of those in the church there were Gentiles. Most of the names are Latin and Greek, indicative of the fact that the area was under Roman law and ethos, although the city’s Greek past was certainly still part of the cultural fabric of daily life.

Corinth was also home to Isthmian Games, an athletic event second only to the Olympics in importance,

² C. K. Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 1 ff.

and dominated by celebrity-athletes (sound familiar?). Held every two years—even during the years the city sat in ruins—the Isthmian Games attracted huge crowds. In fact, the most important political office in the city was that of the sponsor of the games (much like the commissioner of the IOC today). This made Corinth a popular “tourist destination.” As we will see, what happened in Corinth didn’t stay in Corinth.

Much of the city was destroyed by Rome in 146 BC., and many of its residents were killed or taken into slavery. Despite the city’s strategic importance, the area lay in ruins until 44 BC, when Julius Caesar ordered a Roman colony built on the site. Many of the people living in Corinth when Paul established the church there were descendants of former slaves, Roman freedman, laborers, or retired soldiers who located in the area because of the thriving economy. Corinth was filled with “upwardly mobile” people, establishing another of the parallels between Corinth and modern America.³ The city was prosperous and self-sufficient, and Paul was there during a time of a great economic “boom.” This was an important place for Paul to seek to plant a church, because it was an ideal place to evangelize both the local population as well as those who passed through the area heading west to Italy or east into Asia.⁴

In pre-Roman days, Corinth had a bad reputation for being center of sexual promiscuity—much like Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Bangkok have today. One Athenian playwright (Aristophanes) used the phrase *korinthiazesthai* as a synonym for fornication. To call a young lady a “Corinthian girl” was to imply she was promiscuous. The city was filled prostitutes (many associated with temple worship), with perhaps as many as 1000 prostitutes associated with the temple of Aphrodite alone. Although this was the case before Corinth was destroyed by the Romans, the city had a long history of immorality which in Paul’s time was often most evident in the local guild hall (among the tradesmen). Because the trade guilds devoted themselves to various “gods” or “goddesses,” Corinth was dotted with pagan temples and statues devoted to these “gods and goddesses.” A statue of Athena still dominated the marketplace. The connection between pagan religion and sexual immorality cannot be overlooked. Wherever paganism dominates, sexual immorality is openly accepted. This too is very much like modern America.

All of this is to say that those who were converted to Christianity came from this pagan background and required much instruction in the Christian faith. Christians in Corinth faced the difficult struggle to give up long-held pagan practices and traditions. This was not an easy place to be a Christian.

Second, Paul’s strong personal ties to the city also figure prominently in this letter. According to Acts 18, Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey. By the time Paul arrived in Corinth, he was badly in need of a break. He had encountered fierce opposition from the Jews in nearby Philippi, and then again in Thessalonica and Berea. Paul also had a difficult time in Athens. So it is no wonder that early on his this letter he recalls that he first arrived in Corinth in weakness, fear, and trembling (1 Corinthians 2:3). Because of the lack of persecution he experienced in Corinth (Acts 18:10), Paul was able to stay for some eighteen months (Acts 18:11). We also know from the Book of Acts that the Lord told Paul in a vision that he had many people in this city yet to come to faith (Acts 18:10). How ironic that the doctrine of election became the basis for Paul’s efforts to evangelize the city.

³ Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians: Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 2 ff.

⁴ Anthony. C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1 ff.

We can date Paul's stay in Corinth about 50-51 AD. Paul probably left the city in the fall of 51. Upon the conclusion of the second missionary journey, Paul returned again to Asia on his third journey in the fall of 52 AD. According to Acts 19, Paul remained in Ephesus for nearly three years (Acts 19:10; 20:31), from the fall of 52 until the spring of 55. It was while Paul was in Ephesus that he first wrote to the Corinthians (in response to questions they had put to him), since Paul speaks of the Corinthians misunderstanding a previous (and unknown) letter he had sent earlier (1 Corinthians 5:9). Paul writes to clear up the misunderstanding, as well as address other issues which had come to his attention.

Third, according to Leon Morris, "the immediate occasion of the Epistle was the letter Paul had received from the Corinthian church, for which a reply was necessary. But what mattered much more to Paul was clearly the news that had come to him independently of the letter [from Chloe's family who were traveling through Ephesus]. There were disquieting irregularities in the conduct of the believers at Corinth. Paul was troubled by the tendency on the part of some believers to make the break with pagan society as indefinite as possible The Church was in the world, as it had to be, but the world was in the Church, as it ought not to be.' So much did this matter to Paul that he spends six chapters dealing with it before he so much as touched on the matters about which they had written him."⁵

As just noted, Paul mentions a letter he had written previously to the Corinth which was badly misunderstood by the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:9). In that letter he told them not to associate with immoral persons but they took this to mean *all* immoral persons, while Paul only meant immoral professing believers (5:10-13). This misunderstanding needed to be cleared up (which he does in chapter 5). Furthermore, while Paul was in Ephesus, he received disturbing news from certain members of Chloe's house (a family that Paul knew from Corinth). Presumably the report included other problems such as divisions and factions within the church (1:11), attitudes toward the apostles (4:1-21), immoral behavior (5:1-5), and lawsuits between Christians (6:1-11). These matters take up the first six chapters of this letter. Then in chapter 7, Paul states, "*now concerning the matters about which you wrote,*" indicating that Paul was also responding to issues raised by the Corinthians in correspondence to the apostle. Apparently a delegation of believers (including Stephanas, Fortunatas, and Achaicus [16:17]) came to Paul in Ephesus with these questions in the form of a letter. In chapter 7 and following, Paul is responding to these questions which had come to him through this delegation.

The first six chapters of 1 Corinthians are Paul's response to the report from Chloe—including both the correction of the Corinthians' misreading of Paul's first letter and specific problems reported by Chloe's family to Paul. Chapters 7-16 are written as a response to the questions raised by the congregation itself in their letter brought to Paul by Stephanas and friends.

So, with that historical background in mind, we are now able to turn to the opening section of the letter (verses 1-3).

"*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes.*" Paul's opening greeting is typical of a first-century epistle and includes the name of the sender (Paul), and his co-sender, (Sosthenes—who may be the synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:17).⁶ After introducing

⁵ Leon Morris, 1 Corinthians, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 25-26.

⁶ Hans Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), 19; Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 30.

himself to his readers—many of whom already know Paul personally because he had been in their midst for some eighteen months—he adds that the important qualification that he was called to be an apostle by the will of God. We know from Paul’s comments in Galatians 1:16 (“*God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles*”), that this particular calling took the form of his being the “apostle to the Gentiles.” Corinth was a Gentile city with an insignificant Jewish presence.

Paul introduces himself to the Corinthians as an apostle, because he will be speaking with the full apostolic authority of his office in order to both rebuke and instruct the Corinthian congregation in those areas in which they are struggling. The man writing is not “Paul, their buddy,” who hung out with them earlier. The man writing is Paul the apostle. And he is writing with divine authority. It is vital to notice that Paul is not an apostle by his own choice—“I think I’ll become an apostle”—but as recounted in Acts 9:1-31, his apostolic office is one to which he has been called by the will of God.

One of the reason Paul writes is to correct the misunderstanding in this church of what this office actually involves (1 Corinthians 4; 1 Corinthians 9:1-23). Since Paul writes with the authority of an apostle, then he speaks directly to those who have no such authority, but who have impressed the Corinthians with their charm and gifts, but who have not been called by God in any sense to their self-appointed “ministries.”⁷ Paul has the apostolic pedigree these other teachers do not have—he has seen the Risen Christ. Even though he originally came to Corinth in fear and trembling, without personal charisma or eloquent speech, the Corinthians must listen to him. Why? Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church says the Corinthians must listen to him! Paul is an apostle. He speaks for Christ.

This letter is addressed to the “Church” (*ekklesia*) in the city of Corinth. “*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus.*” Paul uses the term *ekklesia* twenty-two times in this letter. It refers to the “assembly” (which not only means “called out from the nations” as often understood), but especially emphasizes that group of Christian believers who “assemble” together for public worship, presumably to hear Paul’s letter read aloud.⁸ Although the word *ekklesia* can be used of any large secular assembly—such as that described in Acts 19:32, 41, during the rioting in Ephesus, when a mob assembled bent on doing harm to the apostle Paul—the term as used throughout the New Testament has acquired a distinctly Christian meaning. Christians were careful not to take over secular words used to refer to guilds or religious groups. They took the term [*ekklesia*] because it was the term used throughout the LXX for the people of Israel. Not only did these earlier Christians see the church as the New Israel, the church was no ordinary assembly. The church is the *ekklesia* of God.⁹ It is this particular assembly of people Paul says who are “*to those sanctified in Christ Jesus.*”

In fact, Paul speaks of his hearers as those “*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.*” Why is it that Paul emphasizes sanctification and the fact that believers in this church are called unto holiness, rather than emphasize justification? Well, in one sense he does emphasize justification. The term here for sanctified, is a perfect passive participle, which means that every believer is already reckoned as sanctified, even though many of those in this church were still engaging in sinful and unacceptable behavior typical of paganism.

⁷ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 31.

⁸ Cf. Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 32.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 35.

All believers are called to be “holy” (or saints). Definitive sanctification has already taken place by virtue of every believer’s union with Christ. All those in Christ are “sanctified” and “holy” by virtue of the fact that Christ’s righteousness has already been imputed to them through faith. This latter term, *hagioi*, does not apply to certain holy individuals who attain a higher level of personal holiness than others. Instead, it applies to all the members of this church who are set apart by God for his service, just as Israel’s priests and vessels had been set aside for the service of God in the temple.¹⁰ Paul speaks of all believers as “holy” and he will also speak of them as being set apart and endowed with spiritual gifts for service in the true temple—the mystical body of Jesus Christ in which all believers are living stones.

But what does such holiness actually entail? All those called by God were sinners when they were called. They had been called through the preaching of the gospel, and responded in faith, therefore they are set apart by God for God’s own purposes. God’s calling has a goal or a *telos*, which is holiness. Because they have been called by God, their lives should manifest this holiness. They can’t live like godless Gentiles any more. The reason Paul emphasizes these particular points in his opening greeting probably has to do with the specific issues facing this congregation. The Corinthians have been called out from paganism and are set apart by God. Their calling is unto holiness. But their conduct as reported to Paul by Chloe’s family and in their letter indicates that the Corinthian’s behavior is anything but “holy.” So, Paul begins by reminding his hearers of what they should know to be true. Their calling in Christ is unto holiness, not the kind of sinful behavior which had been reported to Paul. Definitive sanctification (and justification) should manifest itself in progressive sanctification.

When Paul speaks of this congregation as those “*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,*” he is reminding us that the calling together of the assembly at Corinth is not unique. All Christians who call upon the name of Jesus Christ are united to their head through faith, and are also sanctified in Christ and called to be holy. In this we see the church as the New Israel. In the Book of Deuteronomy (i.e., Deuteronomy 12:8-21, our Old Testament lesson) the Israelites were to collectively call upon God’s name from one particular place (Jerusalem). With the coming of Jesus Christ, and the expansion of the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth, no longer must the people of God go to a certain “holy” place to call upon the Lord. Christians are to call upon the Lord wherever they happen to be, even if that is in Corinth!¹¹ Or in Anaheim.

Paul is not in any sense holding the Corinthians to a different or unfair standard. Nor can the conduct in the Corinthian church be seen in total isolation from the other churches. Indeed, some of this conduct was so offensive that it came to Paul by word of mouth. And if Christians of the first century are like Christians today (and there is no reason to assume otherwise), then you can be sure that other Christians in other cities knew all about some of things going on in Corinth. If the Corinthians are not living up to their calling in Christ, they will suffer not only the temporal consequences of their actions, they risk the direct judgment of God. And if the Corinthians suffer, all the churches will suffer as well.

One other point which ought to be raised here has to do with the concept of the marks of the true church as stated in the Reformed confessions. The three marks include the pure preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments and church discipline (cf. Belgic Confession 29). Clearly, based

¹⁰ Hays, First Corinthians, 16.

¹¹ G. K. Beale, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 696.

upon what we know was going on in Corinth, the Corinthian congregation is undisciplined and struggling with the proper administration of the sacraments. And yet, Paul still refers to this body as “the church.” Some have deduced from this that the church in Corinth was still a true church, but would cease to be one if there was no repentance after Paul’s instructions arrive in the form of his two Corinthian letters. Others have concluded that if such a congregation was still considered a church by the apostle, then discipline cannot be a mark of the *essence* of a true church, even though discipline is necessary for the well-being of the church.¹² In either case, church discipline was lacking, and Paul writes in part to correct that.

In verse 3, we find the familiar apostolic greeting: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” While we easily read over these greetings, we ought to stop and reflect upon its contents. Grace is (*charis*), of course, a reference to God’s free gift to us of our salvation in Christ. While peace comes from the Hebrew greeting “shalom,” it not only refers to the peace the believer has with God through the cross of Jesus Christ (i.e. the war between God and the sinner is over), but also includes the blessing of spiritual prosperity. When these words are pronounced in Christian worship, God is greeting us, extending to us his grace in Jesus Christ, and all of the covenantal blessings of his “shalom.” This is why Christians have used these words to open worship from the beginning.

What then, should we take away from the opening verses of 1 Corinthians?

As we go through this book, I think we will find that the religious and cultural climate of Southern California is very much like that of first century Corinth. Just like the church there, God has called many of us out from the pagan culture, and all of us live in a time and place dominated by pagan ways of thinking and doing, and all the things that go with it. From our highly sexualized pop culture, to our culture’s increasing openness to all forms of paganism (things like interest in paranormal activity, vampires and witchcraft, eastern religion and the corresponding emphasis upon spirituality, meditation, etc.), to the scepticism of the age (no one dare make a truth claim about religion since religion is just a matter of faith and utterly subjective), the intellectual climate of Southern California, is just like that of ancient Corinth. Therefore, we need to know the contents of this letter. So as we work our way through this epistle, please read it repeatedly and study it carefully.

And as you do remember that just as the people of Israel were to assemble together in Jerusalem to call upon the name of YHWH, so too the people of God in the New Covenant era are to assemble together on the Lord’s Day wherever they happen to be. A group of new Christians assembled together in Corinth in the first century, and despite all their sins and troubles, they were still God’s people, sanctified, and set apart for God’s purposes—just like here in Anaheim nearly 2000 years later. And in this, we join those in every place and across the ages, as *those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.*

¹² See Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 576-578.