

FOUR TRUTHS FOR CONCERNED CHRISTIANS

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Let's Begin

First Corinthians is Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, which was one of the great metropolitan cities of the ancient world. God used Paul to establish the church in the city (cp. Acts 18). Corinth was an unlikely field for a successful evangelistic crusade. While it was a hard field in which to minister, great victories were won by God's grace (Acts 18:9-10). Paul labored in Corinth for 18 months.

Paul's "Corinthian correspondence," as scholars like to call it, is sometimes candid and even blunt. Yet as we shall see through our study, Paul's love for the church at Corinth stands without question.

Revealed to us in the first chapter are four overarching truths concerning the Christian life, truths we meet time and again scattered throughout Paul's words to Corinth. Let's observe the outline below:

- I. Sanctification (vv. 1-9)
- II. Fragmentation (vv. 10-16)
- III. Proclamation (vv. 17-25)
- IV. Identification (vv. 26-31)

I. Sanctification (vv. 1-9)

Paul usually opens his letters identifying himself and his recipients. He writes, "Paul called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's" (vv. 1-2). "Saint" is one of many words used in the New Testament for believers; others include "disciples," "those of the way," and "brethren."

A saint is a person who is different because he or she has been "set apart" or "sanctified." Sanctification primarily contains two ideas: *separation* and *consecration*.

Hence, saints are disciples of Jesus Christ who are separated for His service and consecrated for His glory. The problem is, since sanctification is a process rather than a one-time event, saints are many times not very saintly. With this in mind, Paul describes three aspects of sanctification.

The first aspect of sanctification is our *position*. Paul identifies the believers who are "at Corinth... in Christ" (vv. 1-3). Three words concisely sum up Corinth — culture, commerce, and corruption. That dignity and refinement describe the population of Corinth, no one will dispute. The city's knack for excellence in architecture, arts, and philosophy stands without doubt. Corinth was not only a booming commercial center of the ancient world, it hosted the most popular Greek games of the time. Yet Corinth was rotten to the core. It was not uncommon for one who was considered grossly immoral to be called "a Corinthian."

Christians were called to be different in the midst of corruption. Believers are "called to be saints," and "sanctified in Christ Jesus." Sometimes we complain about where we work, suggesting it is much too hard to live a Christian life in such an unchristian environment. Paul's words stand as a gentle rebuke to our complaints. It was tough to be a Christian in Corinth!

The first aspect of sanctification is our position.



Indeed the Christian life is meant to be lived in difficult places (John 17:15). The point is, if one could be a saint in Corinth, one can be a saint anywhere!

Moving from their geographical position, Paul focuses on their spiritual position — being “in Christ.” This phrase is a favorite for Paul. He uses “in Christ” at least 164 times in his correspondence. “In Christ” stands in direct contrast to “in Adam” (1 Cor. 15:22). Being “in Adam” makes one a sinner, but being “in Christ” makes one a saint. Indeed this little phrase is what makes a believer different, establishing a new environment, a new atmosphere. How sad to see the Christian church living beneath its God-given position. How odd — not to mention tragic — to live like a bum when we are born into God’s family!

The second aspect of sanctification is our *prosperity*. Paul writes, “That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge” (v. 5). According to the apostle, grace makes us “enriched by him” in everything we do.

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Reflection Connection

Since as believers we are “in Christ,” does that status mean we do not ever act as though we are still “in Adam”? Explain.

Most of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, live in the upper crust of the global economy. Unfortunately, far too few of us live in the upper crust of the spiritual economy where Christ’s true riches are without limits. What are His true riches? Paul sums His riches up as “the grace of God which is given you” (v. 3). Our sanctification in Christ can only be measured through grace freely given to us according to God’s mercy. If our relationship to God is defined in any way short of a grace-gift, we have yet to experience the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The third aspect of sanctification is our *promise*. With clarity Paul informs us that “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9). “God is faithful” is one of the greatest statements in the Bible describing God. This means He is trustworthy and dependable. The secret of victory for every Christian is in God— not in us. His faithfulness is sufficient even when ours is not.

II. Fragmentation (vv. 10-16)

Just because our position in Christ is secure is no guarantee Christians are not plunged into problems which plague the non-Christian world at large. Sometimes we wrongly idealize churches of the New Testament, believing they had it all together. Corinth will explode that myth! First century churches had their problems as do we. One of the most serious problems Corinth illustrates is church *fragmentation*.

Notice carefully the apostle Paul’s words, “For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ” (vv. 11-12). Someone blew the whistle on the Corinthian congregation. It’s amazing how church trouble travels faster than church triumph. Whatever happens inside the church is



known outside. Nor is Paul's information hearsay or gossip, for Paul possesses no reluctance to name names. Unity in the body of Christ was at stake.

Paul uses two words to discuss the fragmentation. First, he mentions "contentions." This term carries with it the idea of quarrels, wrangling, and strife. Fellow members of Christ's church were fussing with one another in an unbecoming, unchristian manner. How soon we forget the words of the Lord Jesus when He said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). Contention is a characteristic of an unsaved person (cp. Romans 1:29). Contention is indicative of rebellion and works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-23). While the two are not the same, contention is very close to envy (3:3).

And, about what were the Corinthians quarreling? One faction was suggesting they followed Paul, another followed Apollos, one followed Cephas, and still another Christ. Undoubtedly, each faction considered his or her party the "true" church. Those who claimed to follow Paul boasted intellectual superiority while those who "followed" Christ were the "spiritual" party.

A divided church grieves the Lord Jesus.

The second word Paul uses is "divisions." The Greek term translated "divisions" was used of a rip in a garment. What was once a whole piece of cloth was torn, the unity of the thread was breached. The church was split. A divided church grieves the Lord Jesus. It is one thing for God to divide the church (cp. John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19). However, it is quite another for people to divide the church through quarreling, knit-picking, jealousy, and the worship of men.

In addition, church fragmentation leads to spiritual *mutilation* (vv. 13-16). Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions, the first of which stops the divided church in its tracks, "Is Christ divided?" (v. 13). The apostle informs the Corinthians that by dividing into factions they have, in essence, divided Christ, mutilating the one body of the Lord Jesus. A church plagued by contention and division not only mutilates the *cross* of Christ (1 Cor. 2:2), but also mutilates the *cause* of Christ. What message could a church offer which has a mutilated Christ? How many people will be in hell because of church members who cut to pieces the cause of Christ?

The only solution to spiritual mutilation is Paul's plea for *restoration*. Note well his words: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (v. 10). Paul was not content to allow the divisive situation to remain. He pleads with the "brethren" to "be perfectly joined together." Here the apostle used a term often employed for mending fishing nets (Matt. 4:21). The Gospel net has been torn and must be repaired. Moreover, the same Greek term was used in medicine for setting a fractured bone (cp. Gal. 6:1).

Reflection Connection

Do you think church division is a major problem today? Why or why not? Are you aware of any overt problems in your fellowship? If so, make an appointment with the pastor to offer your support in solving the breach in fellowship.



III. Proclamation (vv. 17-25)

Paul now moves from fragmentation the proclamation (vv. 17-25). Wisdom can be found nowhere else for the church of Jesus Christ than in the Gospel. After confessing God's call on his life not to create wisdom himself (v. 17), Paul strongly asserts, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (v. 18).

First, note the Word of the cross. And, this Word is a *simple* word. The Gospel is not about human wisdom, but Divine power. An intrinsic part of the Gospel's power to persuade specifically lies in its latent simplicity. Jesus said, "suffer the little children to come unto me" (Matt. 19:14). Hence, our Lord knew the appeal the Gospel possessed even for young children.

Oddly, in the face of the Gospel simplicity we are often tempted today to make the Gospel more appealing to the human mind. Some preachers yield to flowery words or charming oratory. Others attempt to make the Gospel appealing to intellectuals, never mentioning Jesus, His cross, or His blood. Even Paul faced similar temptations (Acts 17). However, Paul explicitly asserts to do so is to empty the cross of its power. Adding to the cross does not disclose it; adding to the cross destroys it.

In addition, the Word of the cross is not only a simple word, it is a *saving* word. Paul mentions two classes of people in this section: people who are perishing and people who are pardoned. To those who are perishing, the preaching of the cross is foolishness. When those who are perishing are told sin separates the sinner from God, the response is negative and demeaning. Contrarily, to those people who are being saved, the cross is the power of God! The Word saves, sanctifies, and satisfies the humble heart toward God.

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Second, observe the Wisdom of the cross.

Once again, we are faced with what the apostle describes as "the foolishness of preaching," "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (vv. 19-21).

Preaching the cross exposes human failure. Quoting from Isaiah the prophet, Paul says the Gospel destroys the so-called human wisdom of this world (v. 19; cp. Isa. 29:14). Even as far as modern man has progressed in obtaining knowledge, not one soul has been saved as a result. Whether it's the question of origins, self-government, psychiatric know-how, or scientific advancement, fallen, sinful humanity cannot raise itself by its own bootstraps.

Therefore, our human foolishness reveals the striking futility of the world's wisdom (v. 21). Astronauts go into space and gaze upon the stars — and could do so for a thousand lifetimes — yet never see God. Scientists expend their



entire lives looking for a creator in a test tube or under a microscope and never find one. In the second letter to Corinth, Paul reminds them sin blinds the mind of those who believe not (2 Cor. 3:14; 4:4).

If ever a sinful human being is to know God, *God must take the initiative*. And, God not only has taken the initiative in saving His sinful creatures through Christ's death on the cross, He also continues the initiative to rescue the perishing through the preaching of the Gospel.

Third, note the Witness of the cross (vv. 22-25). Without apology, Paul preached "Christ and Him crucified" (v. 23). Similar to the section earlier (v. 18), Paul supposes two different types of people who hear the message preached. On the one hand, there are those who *reject* the message of the cross. Those who reject the Gospel are found among both Jews and Gentiles. For the Jew who rejects, the cross is perceived as a stumbling block, and for the Gentile who rejects, the cross is perceived as folly.

Nevertheless, there are those whom Paul reveals as, "the called" among both Jews and Gentiles. For them, the apostle affirms, "Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (v. 24).

IV. Identification (vv. 26-31)

The fourth overarching truth the apostle reveals concerns our identification with Christ. Paul writes, "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called...But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (vv. 26, 30). Paul encourages the Corinthian church to explore what might be called today, an in-house survey. In other words, he wanted the Corinthians to ask themselves, what kind of people make up the church? Paul's conclusion is, the church possesses an overwhelming number of nobodies — *God's nobodies*.

At first this may sound like an incredibly negative statement about the people who make up the church. Negativity is by no means the apostle's intention. Instead the apostle Paul is consistently teasing out his idea that our relationship with God is all about grace — *grace alone, grace period*. Paul proves this first by emphasizing the Christian's *selection* by Him.

Observe carefully Paul's focus on our "calling" from God (v. 26). We are a part of God's church not because we *chose* to be but because we were *called* to be. Remember: *if rebellious sinners are saved at all, God must initiate our rescue*. When God "calls" us through Gospel preaching, the "calling" is God's initiation, not ours.

Is this "calling" offered only to some people who hear the Gospel and not to all people who hear the Gospel? Scripture teaches "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). When the Gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit moves on the heart of the hearer, and as the Lord Jesus said, will "reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). When a person feels the guilt of sin when the Gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit is

Reflection Connection

Recall your first hearing of the Gospel. Were you immediately moved within to turn from sin? Explain. Are you ever tempted to take credit for God's initiative in rescuing you from your sin? Be ready to share with the entire group.



pulling, tugging, convincing, convicting, and persuading the hearer to turn from sin and trust Christ.

Because we are *selected* by Him, we are *located* in Him (vv. 30-31). Given the nature of the Gospel — its simplicity and spiritual wisdom unattainable through fleshly means — it is not surprising that only a few of the “wise,” “mighty,” or “noble” will ever accept its message and be found in Him. Why? Paul is clear, “That no flesh should glory in his presence” (vv. 29, 31). No person can appeal to either brains or beauty. Nor may they suggest works earned them a place in God’s kingdom or wealth purchased them a place.

Hear clearly Paul’s words, “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (v. 30). Jesus is our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption. His righteousness *covers* our past while His sanctification *confirms* our present, freeing us to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, His redemption *clinches* our future securely in Him (cp. Eph. 4:40; Heb. 9:12).

Golden Greek Nugget

The apostle Paul expresses confidence in the Christians at Corinth, affirming them as highly gifted believers on whom the Holy Spirit has bestowed an abundance of gifts as they await the “coming” of the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 7). The Greek word translated “coming” is “*apokalypsis*” and means “a laying bare” or a “making naked”. In other words, it is basically an “unveiling.” Paul refers to Christ’s return as an “unveiling” of God’s righteous rule when the Lord Jesus will reign as King over the earth (cp. Rev. 20:1-6).

Wrap Up

Four overarching truths make up the first chapter Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation. Our sanctification cannot be expressed through unhealthy divisions in the church. A fractured fellowship mutilates the body of Christ. Rather through proclamation of the simple but saving message of Christ’s cross, we find a new and stable identity in Him.

