

PAUL AND CORINTH
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
August 14, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist, Birmingham

We begin an expositional series this morning in the letter of 1 Corinthians. Paul planted the church at Corinth during his 2nd missionary journey. We read about this work in Acts 18:1-17. When we look at that passage, there are several things we see that were common every place that Paul planted a church:

1. Concentrated in large cities (Corinth – v. 1) – Corinth was the provincial capital of Achaia and served as *the* commercial crossroads of the Roman Empire. Of course, with this came the worldliness that often follows. Corinth was known for its immorality. The city had at least a dozen or more pagan temples, one of these dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, where temple prostitution was rampant. Other pagan deities also were common in Ancient Corinth.
2. Made good use of fellow workers (Aquila & Priscilla – v. 2; Silas & Timothy – v. 5)
3. Wise policy regarding money (tentmaker – v. 3)

Paul as a tentmaker, or leather worker. “Since rabbis were expected to perform their religious and legal functions without demanding a fee, it was necessary for them to have some other source of income.” [Marshall, *TNTC*, Acts, 293] (See also 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8; 2 Cor. 12:13)

Discuss: Importance of this as it pertains to countries that will not grant mission VISA's

4. Began with the local synagogue (v. 4; See also 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10; 18:19; 19:8)
5. Fearless preaching of the gospel (vv. 4-5) – “Reasoning” and “solemnly testifying”
6. Preferred to preach to responsive people (v. 6) – There was response to the gospel in Corinth (v. 8 – Crispus and his household)
7. Remained in a place long enough to plant a church (v. 11) – 18 months in Corinth.

Why have I gone to such lengths to show you Paul’s church planting techniques? Because the church at Corinth to which Paul addresses this letter was no longer the same church that Paul left on solid footing some three years earlier. Needless to say, they had digressed in many areas to the point that they were no longer distinguishable from the world when they came together in worship. Last week we saw how they abused the Lord’s Table and made it a party unto themselves. This is just one of many areas that Paul addresses in this letter that we will see in the coming weeks. The overarching concern for Paul in this letter is that *when there is no ascertainable difference between a local church and the world, then that local church has ceased to be the church God called them to be.*

I. Paul’s Letter to the Church at Corinth (1:1-3)

1. The Author

In letters we receive today, we have to wait until the end of the letter to know who wrote the letter. The greeting is reserved for the recipient in the form of “Dear...” or “To whom it may concern...” However, this was not the case in the 1st and 2nd centuries. The writer of the letter was identified at the outset. Every one of Paul’s letters identifies him as the author in the first

word of the letter. The same is seen in the letters of James and Peter. The only exceptions are the author of Hebrews and the epistles of John. While some argue Paul's authorship, it is unmistakably clear to me that Paul is the author of this letter to the church at Corinth. We have further verification of his authorship later in the letter where Paul reveals that he wrote the letter from Ephesus during his third missionary journey (1 Cor. 16:8). This helps us to narrow the date of writing to around A.D. 55.

(1) His conversion (1:1a)

Who was this man Paul? We are introduced to Paul as Saul in Acts 7:58: "When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul." This is the account of the persecution of Stephen. We go on to read that Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death (Acts 8:1) and that he "began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). Just in case you don't get how wonderful a guy Saul was, Luke further described Saul at this point in his life as one "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" who went to the high priest to get permission to enter the synagogues in Damascus and drag them out (Acts 9:1-2; see also 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13). Saul was not the kind of man you would want to bring home to Daddy!

Have you ever encountered people who hated your witness for Christ so intensely that they wanted to kill you? While persecution of this sort is not common in our country, it is in other areas of the world. Just this week we read of two Christian Life workers who were killed in Bangladesh for showing the *Jesus* film. Christians lose their lives daily for simply speaking the name of Christ. If their lives are spared, they often face other persecution such as imprisonment, beating and/or other social or physical harassments.

The incredible thing about Paul's story is that he thought he was doing the work of the Lord! For Paul it was unthinkable that this Jesus who the Christians followed could be the predicted Messiah. Therefore, their zeal must be extinguished. *Have you ever thought you were "dead right" and suddenly discovered you were "dead wrong"?* This is exactly what happened to Paul as we see God's magnificent grace abounding in the rest of the story of Paul's life. God miraculously intervened on the road to Damascus and called Paul unto Himself—and Paul was gloriously saved (Acts 9:3ff). This is the man who God set apart to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2)—and it is that gospel that he takes to Corinth and whose letter to them we are embarking to study this morning.

(2) His calling (1:1b)

Paul's calling as an apostle is of utmost importance as it verifies that what he wrote was the very Word of God Himself. This lies at the heart of apostolic calling. "Apostle" simply means "sent one" and has been further defined as "one appointed by the Lord to be a recipient and authenticator of the New Testament revelation" [James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians*, 4]. John MacArthur wrote the following:

Paul wrote with the authority of an apostle. *Apostolos* means "sent one" and in the New Testament is used as an official title of the men God uniquely chose to be the foundation layers of the church and the receivers, teachers, and writers of His final revelation—the New Testament. The apostolic duties were to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17), teach and pray (Acts 6:4), work miracles (2 Cor. 12:12), build up other leaders in the church (Acts 14:23), and write the Word of God (Ephesians 1:1; etc) [MacArthur, *Ephesians*, 1].

This group, the Apostles, is commonly referred to as “the Twelve,” that small band of men that were chosen by Christ (John 6:70) to fulfill the purpose of “foundation layers.” We see the list of those chosen in Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:17-19; and Luke 6:13-15. Do you notice anyone not mentioned? We know from Scripture that Judas betrayed Jesus and was so fraught with guilt that he hanged himself (Mt. 26:14-16, 25, 49; 27:3-5) and was replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:12-26). But still—no Paul. Did Paul arrogantly take the office of apostleship himself? Did he simply make himself equal to Peter and the others? The answer is NO! Paul goes to great lengths to defend his calling as an apostle as “**by the will of God**” (v. 1). While his calling as an apostle was a bit different, he was appointed by God just as the others had been. Twice in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8) Paul testifies that Christ appeared to him just as he had the other apostles and He reiterates his apostleship as being “**by the will of God**” in numerous other places (in every greeting other than Philippians and 1&2 Thessalonians). This divine appointment verified his calling as an apostle. William Hendriksen put it this way:

The apostle has attained his high office neither through *aspiration* nor through *usurpation* nor yet through *nomination* by other men but by divine *preparation*, having been set apart and qualified by the activity of God’s sovereign will. [*New Testament Commentary: Ephesians*, 70]

Having examined the author of this letter, we turn now to the recipients of the letter, the church at Corinth.

2. The Recipients (1:2)

Paul addresses this letter, “**To the church of God which is at Corinth**” (v. 2). Paul gives a threefold-designation of the recipients. They are described as “**sanctified in Christ Jesus.**” We tend to think of sanctification as an ongoing process, which is certainly true. However, here Paul speaks of sanctification as a past act that has been completed. He says that these at Corinth “**have been sanctified,**” not “are being sanctified. Paul does not contradict progressive sanctification in the life of the believer. If that were the case you could take about half of what he wrote in these epistles and throw it away, particularly Romans 6-8 and 12-16. What he is saying here is that before this lifelong process of sanctification begins, there is an initial sanctification that happens the moment one trusts Christ savingly. There is a moment in the life of every true believer where they make a decisive turn from sin and break from the ways of the world and follow Christ in faith and obedience. From that point forward, the believer grows in grace and is being conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). This is what Paul means “**sanctified in Christ Jesus.**”

Paul also says these Corinthian believers were “**saints by calling.**” **Saint**” means to be “set apart.” We read a further description of a saint in 1 Pet. 2:9: “But you are A CHOSEN RACE, a royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God’s* OWN POSSESSION.” A “**saint**” is to be in the world but not of the world. However, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, a “**saint**” has not only this outward sense, but also the inward sense of purification and cleansing from the pollution of sin [see Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose*, 26]. Therefore, the believer is called to manifest this inward cleansing by living a holy life in dependence upon Christ.

Paul’s third designation of these at Corinth was that they, with believers everywhere, “**call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord.**” This reminder will serve as a bit of a zinger for some at Corinth later in this letter. What Paul reminds them of here is that the believer is part of something much bigger – the body of Christ. The Christian is not to live in isolation, but live in unity with all who claim the name of Christ, “**their Lord and ours.**” There is no

place for spiritual Lone Rangers in the Body. As we will see next week, isolationism was a problem at Corinth. Here Paul reminds them that they are **“the church of God at Corinth.”**

3. The Greeting (1:3)

Paul’s greeting to the Corinthians is the customary greeting he uses in opening all of his letters: **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** (v. 3; also Rom. 1:7; 2 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 2:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 3). Given this, it might seem to us that these words were habitual and used almost flippantly by Paul, perhaps as we do when we say grace and recite the words “God is great, God is good” without much thought of the depth or magnitude of what we are saying. But this is not the case with Paul as Martyn Lloyd-Jones attests to with these words:

The Apostle does not use words such as this lightly and loosely and thoughtlessly; it is not a mere formula which he uses to automatically begin a letter; the words are charged with profound meaning. As he uses these words... he is desiring for them that they may experience fully all the riches that are to be found in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose*, 35]

If Lloyd-Jones is correct (and I believe he is), it is of utmost importance that we recognize those areas of our lives that we may take for granted. Our prayer life, our Bible study, our spiritual conversations, our Christian fellowship, etc., all should be examined in light of this truth. We often become slack and complacent in our walk with the Lord because we neglect the “little things.” *Is it possible you have become complacent in your walk with the Lord because things have become too familiar to you?*

Now to the greeting, **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** **“Grace”** has been simply defined as “God giving us what we don’t deserve.” Grace is a gift of God. Geoffrey Thomas said the following in a sermon on this text:

In the sight of the Holy One we sinners are morally like ugly little organisms that crawl under stones fleeing from the light, but the message of the New Testament is that God in his grace actually loves such sinners deeply. To them he shows good will, and pity, and patience, and faithfulness, and forgiveness, and tenderness, and comfort, and protection. His whole disposition towards favoured sinners is loving. His grace comes to them in all its comprehensiveness, and diversity, and constancy, and profundity. God is love and loves the utterly unlovable... The grace of God has achieved remarkable transformation in sinners. [<http://users.aber.ac.uk/emk/ap/sermons/eph3.htm>]

This **“grace”** leads to **“peace.”** We were sinners, at enmity with God and alienated from Him. **“Peace”** is a necessary consequence of **“grace.”** **“Peace”** is more than a mere halting or absence of hostilities. It signifies the presence of positive blessings: wholeness, soundness, or prosperity, especially in spiritual things [Curtis Vaughan, *Ephesians*, 16]. *Do you know the grace and peace that is according to Scripture alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, to the glory of God alone?*

II. Paul’s Testimony of the Church at Corinth (1:4, 6, 9b)

In verses 4-9 we read Paul’s description of a church that started right. There is no hint of the troubles in the church until we get to v. 10. It is there that Paul begins the long list of issues that we begin to look at next week. However, as is common in most of his letters, we see Paul’s pastoral heart, **“I thank my God always concerning you.”** Paul doesn’t just back up the dump truck and unload on them. He graciously begins by reminding them where they began and the

blessings that were theirs in Christ Jesus. And as he works his way through the list of issues he graciously yet firmly reminds them that if they will remember this and focus on Christ alone then they would be the church that God desired them to be. So how can Paul be thankful for this church that is in the midst of such spiritual turmoil?

1. Past grace (v. 4)

Paul was thankful for the Corinthian believers **“for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus.”** Paul here refers to their salvation that began with God by His grace alone. The tense of the verb **“given”** in the Greek is passive. God is the active agent of this grace, which **“was given.”** The Corinthian believers were the passive recipients. It is the same for us who have come to faith in Christ today. God is the giver or dispenser of grace; we are the recipients of His grace. This is an important aspect for Paul as he begins to deal with the pride and boastfulness of those at Corinth. He reminds them later in vv. 29-30, “no man may boast before God.” Why? Because “by His doing you are in Christ Jesus.” What is Paul’s conclusion in v. 31? **“LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”** So we see Paul begin to unpack the truth of God’s saving grace, grace that is free, not based upon any merit or goodness of man who is a passive recipient of this gift of grace.

In v. 9 Paul further declares that this grace is given to those who **“were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”** Only those who are called by God will receive this saving grace. In theological terms we call this *effectual calling*. There is a definite, effective call of God that those who come to faith in Christ hear and respond to by faith. John declared this very thought, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish”(John 10:27-28). The question usually arises at this point: “Is God’s calling effectual for everyone?” Let us allow Scripture to answer that question. Matthew wrote, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (22:14). That is, there are many who sit under the preaching and teaching of the gospel week in and week out that are called, or invited, to come to faith in Christ. We call this a *general call*. This is why I am called to proclaim the gospel all men and issue an invitation to come to Christ. However, that *general call* of the gospel will only take effect in the hearts of those who are chosen. Matthew is very plain here. The chosen will respond by faith to the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus collaborates with this teaching in the text we just read concerning His sheep in the gospel of John. He looked at the obstinate Jews who would not (and could not) believe in Him and said, “You do not believe because you are not of My sheep” (10:26) and, as we saw, only His sheep hear His voice and follow Him. That is effectual calling. That is why God’s grace is irresistible. So we see God as the initiator of our salvation.

Another aspect of God’s saving grace is that it is mentioned in relation to Jesus Christ, **“for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus.”** Again in v. 9, **“you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”** Salvation is by God’s grace alone in Christ alone. How does salvation come to us through Christ alone? Through the finished work of atonement by Christ at the Cross on behalf of those who hear His voice. Listen to the simplicity of this wonderful truth as given by Roger Ellsworth:

How can salvation come to us through Christ? It does so because he removed the obstacles between God and us. By his perfect life he provided the righteousness we need to stand before God, and by his death he paid the penalty for our sins. He actually bore in himself the wrath of God on our behalf. Salvation means Christ took on him our sin, and

by turning from our sins and trusting solely in him, we receive his righteousness.
[*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 18]

Christ fully accomplished salvation at the Cross for all who God initiates salvation by His grace. He bore the judgment we deserve because of sin and it is through trusting in Him and Him alone that one is rescued from the eternal wrath of God.

One last thing as it relates to this saving grace. In v. 6 Paul wrote, **“Even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you.”** **“The testimony concerning Christ”** is a reference to the gospel that had been **“confirmed in you.”** **“Confirmed”** means to become settled or assured of one’s convictions. This confirmation is a work of the Holy Spirit in relation to salvation. The saving grace that is initiated by God and accomplished by Christ is applied to the heart of a believer. How is it that one comes to faith in Christ? It is when the Holy Spirit shatters a hard heart of stone and makes it soft and responsive to the gospel. And this gospel is **“confirmed”** when the Spirit of God bears testimony with our spirit that we are truly saved (Rom. 8:16).

So we see the work of saving grace: initiated by God, accomplished by Christ, and applied by the Spirit. It is this that Paul gives thanks for in this greeting to the Corinthians.

2. Present grace (vv. 5, 7a)

God not only saves by grace in the past tense, but He continues to equip those that are saved by His grace in the present. In v. 5 we read, **“in everything you were enriched in Him.”** These believers were specially endowed by God’s grace to carry out the work of the gospel. They were rich, referring not to their material possessions but to their spiritual blessings. And again we must note the tense of the verb **“enriched”** in the Greek. It is an aorist tense, a reference to something already accomplished. The believer does not have to go looking for the resources to be a faithful witness for Christ. He already has them in Christ Jesus! The **“in Him”** is very important as it relates to **“in everything.”** The believer is **“enriched”** with everything they need (not necessarily what he wants) to be faithful to Christ. In his greeting to the Ephesians Paul refers to this same truth, “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

Paul gives three areas related to these spiritual blessings that are present by God’s grace in the life of a believer: (1) **“in all speech,”** (2) **“in all knowledge,”** and (3) in all gifts (v. 7). As we mentioned earlier, Paul is gracious in the way he approaches his strong rebuke later in this letter. Those at Corinth were abusing these three areas of present grace. That is why Paul reminded them in 2:1, “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come to you with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming the testimony of God.” There were those amongst the leadership at Corinth that had fallen prey to the cleverness of the world. They had failed to separate themselves from the worldly philosophical teachings of the day that paraded itself in puffed up knowledge and eloquent rhetoric. This was the heart of the problem at Corinth – they had continued to live according to the wisdom of the world and not under the Cross of Christ. Here Paul reminds them, prior to his rebuke, that as they live according to the Spirit and walk with Christ, God gives them everything they need to live according to the gospel – His words, His wisdom, His gifts.

3. Future grace (vv. 7b-8)

Having reminded the Corinthians of God’s grace past and present, Paul now turns to future grace. Paul again reminds the Corinthians of the way they started, how they were when he was

with them for those eighteen months. They initially were expectantly awaiting the Lord's return, **“awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** As we will see in Paul's defense of the resurrection in chapter 15, this expectancy had waned with some (1 Cor. 15:12; 33-34). It goes without say that the resurrection of our Lord is the basis of our future hope. If there is no resurrected Lord, then our faith is futile (15:14). If there is no resurrection, then there is no return and our hope is gone.

Paul continues his thought on future grace in v. 8 by reminding them as he did those at Philippi that “He who began a good work in you will perfect until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6), **“who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** The Corinthians could depend on this grace to continue to work in them and keep them until the day they stood blameless before Jesus Christ. What does it mean to be confirmed blameless? I like what John MacArthur says:

When we enter heaven we will not have our sins and shortcomings flashed before us for everyone to see, as we sometimes hear in popular theology. Christ will affirm before the eternal throne of God that we are now counted blameless. Only then will we be confirmed blameless, made blameless, actually *be* blameless—settled and secured in blamelessness for all eternity. [*Ephesians*, 21]

There is a sense in which this blamelessness is already true of the believer. Objectively, as it relates to our justification in Christ, God looks at us just as though we never sinned, blameless, and there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Yet these Corinthians, as we will see in the coming weeks, are far from being above reproach. The same can be said of us that know Christ. While our standing with God is already secure, there will come a day when the subjective state that we are in as sinners will perfectly correspond with the objective standing that is already ours in Christ (Geoffrey Wilson, *1 Corinthians*, 19). We will actually be, as Paul wrote elsewhere, exempt from all accusation (Rom. 8:33).

Conclusion

Notice v. 9, **“God is faithful.”** Paul's assurance was not based upon the faithfulness of these at Corinth. It was based upon the faithfulness of God. As we have seen, all of salvation, past, present and future is by God's grace alone. Man can take no credit for it. Our assurance comes from this truth that **“God is faithful”** to keep that which He has promised. There is a tremendous comfort in this for the believer who truly understands God's grace in salvation.

However, God is also faithful to his promises concerning those who do not know Christ savingly. Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this *comes* judgment.” Unless the Lord carries all in this place will die and when He returns all men will face judgment. The believer will be spared the wrath of God. The unbeliever will face the mighty fury of God face-to-face and will spend eternity under God's wrath.

“God is faithful” to the believer and the unbeliever alike. His judgments are sure and never changing.