

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Scott Lindsay

After a brief introduction last week, we are embarking this morning on a study of the letter called First Corinthians, focusing on chapter one, verses 1-9. In case you were not here last week, let me just summarize the introduction to the letter in the following way:

- a) Paul planted the Corinthian church during the second of 3 missionary journeys, around the year 55.
- b) After planting the church, he moved on to plant other churches and, in his absence, some serious problems developed *at Corinth*.
- c) Paul's letters to the Corinthians are an attempt to address those problems about which he has heard and, at the same time, to answer questions which they, the Corinthians, have asked.

That is the introduction, in a nutshell, I am going to read the passage now, but before I do, we should pray.

Now, you would not know it from the tone of these opening words themselves, but Paul *is writing to a church in crisis*. If you have spent any time reading this letter in the past, then you will know that the Corinthian church was a church with a whole host of problems, including:

- 1) Fighting and division
- 2) Sexual immorality
- 3) Christians taking other Christians into court
- 4) People accusing one another of idolatry
- 5) People acting like pigs and getting drunk at the church fellowships
- 6) Disorderly, chaotic worship services

In short, the Corinthian Church was a mess. They were self-centered, arrogant, immature, and were an absolute train wreck of a congregation. Yet, in spite of the current crisis, Paul in this letter says that he is *thankful*, he is *genuinely thankful* for the Corinthian Church. Now that is something worth stopping to think about.

One of my favorite bible teachers in the whole world says that whenever you look at the Bible, one of the things you ought to ask is this: "Is there anything surprising in this passage?" That is a great question to ask because God IS always surprising us in His Word and the reason for that lies in the nature of God

Himself. As the Bible says, His ways are higher than our ways, His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Right? God does not think like us. He does not plan like us. He does not react like us. He does not do things the way WE would do them. So, since the Bible is the record of God's activity in His universe, we ought to expect that it will contain things that will often *surprise us*. Therefore, asking the question, "Is there anything surprising here?" is a great question to ask. When we ask that question of *this* text what we discover is that there IS, in fact, a surprise. And the surprise comes because of what we've already seen, the Corinthian Church is an absolute mess and YET, Paul begins his letter by expressing *genuine* thankfulness for them and by affirming their status as a true *church of God*. "What is Paul doing here? Why does he start out his letter in this way?"

Well, to be sure, one reason would have been a *pastoral* one. In writing this letter, Paul knows he has some hard things to say to this congregation. And that being the case, he takes the time on the front end to assure them of his love and gratitude for them and of his *certainty* of their calling in Jesus and his *certainty* of a glorious future for them. So, in that sort of context, his words of warning and rebuke, which are just around the corner, are more likely to be better received than they might be otherwise. Therefore, there is likely a pastoral reason for what Paul does and says.

However, there is also a deeper and perhaps more significant *theological* reason behind Paul's thankfulness for the Corinthians, and it has everything to do with Paul's understanding of what has happened to them and who, ultimately, was responsible for it. So, what are the *theological* reasons for Paul's thankfulness?

Well, in spite of the current crisis, Paul is thankful for the Corinthians because, he knows that they belong to the Father. Paul is sure that the response the Corinthians first made to the Gospel was the real thing. Now, *how can Paul be so sure about that?*

For starters, Paul can be sure because he is the one who first preached the Gospel to them - so he knows that they did not get some corrupted version of it - they got the full, unedited, un-abridged, version of it. This is what verse 6 is referring to when it talks about the "testimony about Christ" - that is Paul's shorthand for the preaching of the Gospel.

This, in itself, is something worth stopping to reflect on - a reflection within a reflection. You see, at the heart of Paul's ministry, which is seen here and in many other places in his letters - is the preaching, the presentation, the explanation and the defense of the Gospel. He saw *that* exercise, that apparently insignificant, foolish, outwardly un-impressive activity as the crucial vehicle through which God worked among the Corinthians.

Indeed, it is instructive to note that in Acts 18, where you have the description of

the founding of the Corinthian church - Luke, who is the writer of Acts, summarizes a year and a half's worth of work with one sentence: "So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God." Now, you know that in a year and a half of ministry in that place, all kinds of things would have gone on, all kinds of things would have happened and yet, of all the ways that Paul *might* have summarized his work there, the way he chooses is to say he spent eighteen months "teaching them the Word of God."

So, Paul is sure about the genuineness of the Corinthian response partly because he knows that in his ministry of teaching the Word of God he gave them the true Gospel. Then, along with that, Paul is confident that the Corinthians' response was the real thing because he witnessed and experienced the *manifestation* of God's Spirit amongst them, in a variety of ways.

In other words, when a person genuinely responds to the Gospel, it is always a result of the Spirit's work within a person and *that work will* be evident in a number of different ways. Paul had seen the evidence of that in the Corinthians.

Now, at this point, when we start talking about the Spirit's work and the Spirit's gifts being made manifest amongst true believers, a couple things need to be said:

First, it is one thing to talk about the Spirit's indwelling making itself manifest in some concrete way. It is quite another to jump from that to saying that the Holy Spirit always manifests Himself *in the same way* within *every believer*. If you try to draw THAT conclusion from this passage, you are going beyond the text and, more importantly, you are going beyond Paul's explicit statements to the contrary, later on in this letter.

Nevertheless, that being said, the Corinthian Church *did manifest* the Spirit's work in their hearts in some pretty obvious ways, namely through the presence and operation of all kinds of gifts but, in their case, most especially the gifts of speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues and prophesying, etc. Now, as for what those things *are*, we will see much later on. For now it is necessary only to acknowledge them and to note that Paul is genuinely thankful that God's Spirit has gifted them in this way.

So, the presence and operation of the Spirit's gifts among them was something which confirmed to Paul the genuineness of their response to his teaching the Word of God to them. As a result, Paul is *confident* that the Corinthians are truly converted and that they DO belong to God the Father. But his thankfulness goes even further than that, which leads us to the next point.

In spite of the current crisis, Paul is thankful for the Corinthians not only because he knows that they belong to the Father BUT ALSO BECAUSE although *they*

have not yet arrived spiritually, He knows that God will finish the work He began with them. Now, as before, there are a couple of thoughts in there that need some unpacking. Firstly, if you go back to the greetings in verses 1-3, you see an interesting thing being said by Paul. On the one hand, he describes them as BEING or HAVING BEEN *sanctified* and then, in the next breath, describes them as *called TO BE holy* or *saints*, as in some translations.

Now, in order to make sense of what Paul is saying you have to understand how he is using the word "sanctified" here. That is, don't read a systematic theological understanding of that word back into this verse but rather understand it in its context as a word which is simply referring to the fact that *in Christ* the Corinthians, and indeed all believers, have been "set apart" - chosen, elect - distinguished from among the mass of humanity as those upon whom God will shower His love and mercy. This *setting apart* is not, in itself a *moral condition* but rather a description of one's *position* in Christ. That's what Paul means by "sanctified" here.

Nevertheless, while this "sanctification" or "setting apart" is not talking *about* one's *condition*, it is inseparably tied TO a person's condition because of the work of the Spirit that accompanies a person's being set apart in Christ. The result of the Spirit's indwelling is that the person increasingly comes to "bear the character of the God who has set him or her apart". In short, God's Spirit works to bring our *condition* in line with our *position*, in Christ.

That is the truth behind Paul's words in the opening few verses, and which is also seen later on in this same passage when Paul writes, "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now, later on, we'll see that Paul is also, with these words, alluding to a particular problem that had arisen amongst some of the Corinthians who, by some crazy twist of reasoning, had come to the conclusion that they HAD *already arrived* - positionally and conditionally. Now, of course, they HADN'T, and Paul will take pains to show them that later on in this letter. However, for the time being, he is happy to express his genuine thankfulness for them *precisely because* he has great confidence that God will finish what he has started within them.

This fact - the confidence that Paul has in God - is really the other thing that needs to be emphasized here. "God", says Paul in verses 9, "is faithful". In other words, Paul's confidence that the Corinthians will eventually come good is not based upon *their* gifts and abilities, as considerable as they were. Nor is it even based upon himself as their apostle, or in any other person. Paul's confidence is in God's ability to bring to completion the process which He began when he first called them into the fellowship of His Son.

Now that, I believe, is what this passage is saying and so, with the remainder of our time, I would like to draw your attention to some implications that I believe flow from these verses, and which are relevant for the church in our own day.

I think this passage underscores the *importance of not despising the role and function of teaching the Word of God to the People of God*. As we have already seen, Paul saw fit to describe a year and half's worth of work in just those terms. Now, you might think that this is something that should not need emphasizing but, sadly, it is - and increasingly so. There all sorts of ways in which Bible teaching is despised in our day. For starters, the Bible is most obviously despised when people do not care very much for Bible teaching, when people don't seek it out, when the lack of it is not seen as something of great concern, when it's being done badly or poorly is shrugged off as a matter of little consequence.

Further, Bible teaching is despised when people try to domesticate it or tame it in some way - usually by placing some sort of artificial limitation upon it - sometimes it is a time constraint (e.g., friend who, when he arrived as the new pastor at a certain church discovered that the congregation was used to getting a 12 minute sermon and would tolerate nothing else). Sometimes the artificial constraint is one of subject matter (e.g., I know of pastors who have been warned off from preaching on certain subjects).

Both of those actions just described are attempt to domesticate the bible and are the result of despising bible teaching.

Even further, bible teaching is despised when it is shied away from or apologized for or when something else that *masquerades* as bible teaching is put in its place - sermons that are nothing but an unending string of stories and jokes, sermons which are really based more on pop psychology than anything else, sermons which are the equivalent of a spiritual pep rally, sermons which are short on substance but long on theatrical presentation.

In these and other ways, the teaching of the Word of God to the People of God is often despised in our own day and we would do well to look again at the example of Paul and his ministry among the Corinthian believers, and the powerful way that God worked in and through him as he faithfully ministered the Word.

Second, and equally important, this passage underscores not only the importance of not despising the teaching of the Word, but also *the importance of not despising the church*. I'm sure that someone other than Paul might have been tempted to look at the situation at Corinth and simply write that church off or, more tragically, write off *the whole church* as a hopeless enterprise. But Paul doesn't do that, does he? On the contrary, Paul understands that the church is the way that God has chosen to work and will *continue* to work His purposes out. So, far from *despising* the church Paul shows that he loves the church, in many, many ways, and often *in spite of itself*.

Surely, this is a message we need to hear today and to keep hearing. We are

surrounded by ostensibly Christian movements and ministries that are all, in one way or another, pointing the finger at the church and saying, "what a mess" and then using that as a kind of mantra to authorize their own ministries and, at the same time, dismiss the relevance of the church. Friends, that sort of thinking is all around us. And when we are confronted with those things we need to return the Scriptures and ask, "What did Paul do? What was Paul's response when the church was a mess? Was Paul's response to ignore the church and just establish some sort of parallel structures outside of it? No! Paul's response was to act upon the belief and the hope that God would work out his purposes *through* his church - even when the church is a mess.

Third, NOTICE that Paul, *amazingly*, gives thanks for the VERY THINGS which have been the cause of so much trouble in the Corinthian church. He give thanks for their various gifts of speech and knowledge - even though these things have been horribly abused and have caused all manner of trouble. And in drawing attention to *these particular gifts* and expressing thankfulness for them, right up front, Paul is showing us a great deal. He is showing us that he recognized the reality and legitimacy of those gifts - that they truly were GOOD things and things for which the church ought to have been thankful. Yet, just because they were good does not mean that they would always be manifested in a helpful way or that they would not be used in a way which was hurtful.

In the light of that, it is instructive to note that Paul's response to their gifts is not to "throw the baby out with the bath water" but, as we shall see later on, his response is to call them to something higher, something more noble, something more loving.

This too, I believe, should provide food for thought for the church today, particular conservative churches like our own which can *sometimes* have this tendency to try and artificially *domesticate* the faith by eliminating anything that could be troublesome or that might be abused and perhaps *has been* abused at some point in the past.

Our gut reaction sometimes is to just rule things out, rather than face the possibility of having to struggle through some things, and then maybe experience the maturity that can come through that process.

Fourth, notice that it was the *whole church* in Corinth, and not the individual believers, which was described as *not lacking in any spiritual gift*. What you and I tend to do when we read the bible is just personalize everything and treat it as if it is just talking to you and me, individually, and then assuming that everything it says automatically applies to us *individually*. But you can't do that. You can't just woodenly apply that sort of approach to the Scriptures. And so we must be careful to understand that Paul sees *the whole church* as not lacking in any spiritual gifts. And what this means for you and me is that while each of us has *some* sort of gift that we contribute to the body, none of us has *all of them* or

even *most* of them.

Individual Christians, therefore, ARE lacking in all kinds of spiritual gifts. So, it is that this passage, in an indirect way, offers a strong argument for the necessity of the church. For the individual Christian, belonging to a local church is *crucial*, precisely because without such a connection the individual believer will be under-nourished, under-challenged, will under-use his or her gifts, and, in the end, will be severely disfigured and handicapped because of all the gifts you DO NOT have.

Fifth, *notice that the church IS a mess*. One of the great things we learn from the Corinthian Church is the surprising truth that a church that is so messed up and which has so many problems is, nevertheless, *still the church of God* and can still evoke Paul's highest hopes and praise and confidence in what God can do in and through them. What a lesson that is for the quitters and naysayers and despisers of the church in our day. What a rebuke that is for the *nomadic existence* of so many Christians in Baton Rouge who wander from one place to the next, looking for some church that is NOT like Corinth.

Am I saying that it is never right to leave a church? Of course not. Nevertheless, I am saying that the flimsy excuses that people often give for doing so, are just that - excuses, and they do not at ALL reflect the sort of "bulldog tenacity" and "one-eyed commitment" that characterized Paul's own view of the Church of God.

Sixth, *notice the complete compatibility of love and rebuke*. Paul obviously loves the Corinthian church. Paul obviously has the highest hopes for what God can and will do amongst them. At the same time, as this letter progresses, you will see that Paul feels quite free to tell these people, whom he loves, some very hard, and even harsh truths about themselves. It is quite possible to be genuinely thankful for and compassionate toward a person and, at the same time to despise the sinful and wrongful and hurtful things that they do, *and tell them so*.

That, my friends, is REAL LOVE. Not the worldly, plastic imitation that says loving people means accepting them - without exception, without comment - the fallacy that says you must accept them TOTALLY and embrace all that they are and all that they embrace - or you are not accepting them and, worse, you are hating them.

Friends that is not love. What it IS, is a JOKE, it's a LIE. Paul is thankful for the Corinthians and yet also feels quite free to show his great disappointment and anger towards them. That is what real love IS and that is what real love DOES. That is the love that you are called to show toward one another in THIS church.

Finally, notice that while one big problem with the Corinthians was that they believed they had arrived spiritually - and while that may be a problem in some

churches today, I think that for *our* church in particular, the problem is more likely to be just the opposite - *wondering if you ever WILL arrive*, wondering if the monster that resides within you will one day rise up and consume you completely, wondering if you will ever see victory over that one sin, or those several sins, which so constantly beset you, wondering how long you will have to fight this battle.

If that is where you are, let me urge you to spend some time reading this letter, but I want you to read it in a particular way. Rather than starting at the very beginning, start at chapter 1, verse 10, and read through the whole thing. And as you read, there will very likely be times when you will be tempted to put the letter down, there will be times when you will struggle to believe that God would have anything to do with a church like the one in Corinth.

Now, when you have made it to the end, go and look in the mirror, and ask yourself if you are really all that different from the people you are reading about. And then, as you are wrestling with the uncomfortable answer to that question and as you begin to wonder why God would have anything to do with YOU - go back and read 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, and the first 9 verses again. Listen to how Paul describes the Church of God in Corinth and when you get to verse 9, you grab onto that, and you hold on to that verse for dear life, and you fall on your knees and give thanks to God for the fact that HE IS THE FAITHFUL ONE, and that He is the one who will present you, before the Lord Jesus Christ, as his beloved and blameless child.

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