

INTRODUCTION

This is about 20 years after Calvary, less than 5 years after Paul has planted the Corinthian Church. For at least the past 1 year, reports about and from the Corinthian Church has been less than encouraging. There had been reports about factions, incest, lawsuits and immorality, revealing their contamination by the world. At the same time, the church was confused concerning marriage and single hood, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, collection for the saints as well as the cardinal doctrine of the resurrection! If your task is to write to the Corinthian church and address both their contamination and their confusion, what would you write? How would you start?

In our study today, we shall see how Paul begins his letter (the first 9 verses of **1 Corinthians**) as he aims to deal with their contamination and clear up their confusion:

¹Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ²to 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: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, ⁵that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, ⁶even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

OVERVIEW & STRUCTURE OF 1:1-9

The conventional formula for the commencement and structure of a letter in the Graeco-Roman world of the 1st century was as follows:

Sender – Addressee – Greetings – Prayer/Praise

As we scan these 9 verses, we note that Paul used the literary and social conventions of his time but with a Christian twist. For example, instead of just greetings, he would say ‘grace and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ to you’. And he would pray and praise God for the work of grace in the life of his readers. Hence, the structure of these 9 verses is as follows:

Verse 1 (Sender)
Verse 2 (Addressee)
Verse 3 (Greetings)
Verse 4-9 (Prayer/Praise)

This is an important practice to note from the apostle. It wasn’t Paul’s aim to be counterculture in every aspect of life. Unless his Christian theological and ethical values run counter to some prevailing assumption or practice, Paul would be happy to make use of the social customs and literary conventions of his day and age.

In the same way, unless our Asian customs and practices contradict our Christian doctrines, we should make use of them but with a Christian twist! Can you think of some of them?

EXPLANATION OF 1:1-3

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

Paul introduced himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. **What is an apostle?** The general meaning of the word 'apostle' means 'the one sent' while the technical meaning of this word in the New Testament points to the selected group of men who have been with Jesus from the baptism of John to that day when He ascended into the heavens, having witnessed His resurrection, and are now called the foundations of the church (**Acts 1:22, Ephesians 2:20**). This would normally refer to the Twelve, though Paul was included in this group as one born out of due time (**1 Corinthians 15:1-11**).

In calling himself an apostle of Jesus Christ -- one sent by Christ and comes with Christ's authority, Paul is telling us that what he is going to say and do in this letter is not according to his own personal wish or agenda. He is carrying out the task given to him by the One who sent him --- Jesus Christ!

How did Paul become an apostle? "Called to be an apostle through the will of God," replied Paul. Paul did not become an apostle by chance or by his own choosing, but by God's initiative. The word 'call' points to divine origin, whereby Paul was passive and God was active in the whole process. "Through the will of God" further underlined the divine origin of this appointment.

Why would Paul emphasise his apostleship? This is because if they harbour any doubts about his apostleship, then they will begin to treat what he has to say lightly, with the attitude of "I-can-accept-or-I-can-reject". And in fact, from the

letter, we know that some in the Corinthian Church have actually questioned his apostleship. Hence Paul wants to make it clear right from the beginning that he is speaking as an apostle of Jesus Christ, sent by Christ, coming with Christ's authority. If they reject him, then they are rejecting Christ!!

Who is Sosthenes? Paul did not call him "fellow apostle" but brother. Could he be the same person mentioned in **Acts 18:17**? The fact that Paul said nothing more about him in the rest of the letter reveals that Sosthenes was very well-known among the Corinthian Christians. If indeed Sosthenes was the person mentioned in **Acts 18:17**, then here we have any proof of the power of the gospel. Crispus, the original synagogue ruler was converted and Sosthenes was the replacement. In a matter of time, the replacement was converted too!

[2] *2to 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:*

This is one of the most wonderful statements in the New Testament! Normally, when one would write a letter to a resident of Corinth in the 1st century, he would not fail to praise Corinth and talk about the glories of Corinth. However, here we see Paul saying nothing about the glory of Corinth the city but focuses all his attention on the church in Corinth. And we know what a messed-up church it was! How astounding then to hear Paul addressed them with the words that he did here in **verse 2**!! Paul sees them *in Christ* before he sees anything else that's true of them. This observation is a crucial lesson for all of us in the way we relate to fellow believers.

In this one short sentence, we learn the following FOUR truths about God's people in this world:

[A] *The church of God which is at Corinth*

The word 'church' is *ekklesia* in Greek, which means an assembly. But it is not just an assembly or any assembly, but the assembly of God. These people have been called out of the world and called into fellowship with God. The Old Testament picture is that of Israel being brought / called out of Egypt, brought to Sinai to worship God and there be formed into His people (**Exodus 19:5-6**). To be called the assembly / church of God is to underline the fact that the ownership belongs to God. It is not Paul's church, not Peter's church, not Apollos' church, it is God's church! Yes, they are still in Corinth, but their real identity is not residents of Corinth alone but the church (called out ones) of God – called out by God and now belongs to God alone!

[B] *Sanctified in Christ Jesus*

The word 'sanctified' (ἡγιασμένοις ἁγιάζω) means to make holy, to consecrate. Using Old Testament Temple imagery, it means to separate an object from common use and devote it to the service of God's Temple. Paul used the perfect tense to denote completed action with lasting result while the passive mood indicates that God is the agent and that He sanctifies the Corinthians in Christ. "*The fundamental thought of the word is that of belonging to God, carrying with it the duty of being like Him in character.*"

Paul is hence reminding his readers of what is already true of them --- some point in their life, God has separated them from the world and

devoted them to Himself. This is their real and current identity. Now, what are the implications?

[C] *Called saints*

In **Exodus 19:6**, God said to Old Testament Israel that they are to be to Him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This is now true of New Testament Christians. As sanctified people, we are saints! Christians are already saints just as Paul was already apostle. It is something they receive, not achieve. They are saints by God’s call, not their voluntary choice. Saints mean holy people. Every believer is a saint, though we don’t always behave saintly. We are saints the moment we believe in Christ! How amazing that despite their various contaminations and multiple confusions, Paul the apostle would call them ‘saints’! Once again, Paul is reminding of them of real and current identity, with the implied message: *This is what you are, now live up to it!*

[D] *With all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.*

God calls us and in response, we call on the name of Jesus. This calling upon Jesus’ name is a New Testament way of conveying our believing and trust in Jesus for salvation. (**Acts 2:21, Romans 10:14**). However, we must also note that Paul used the present tense for ‘call’ here, conveying the message that this is an on-going experience for believers. Believers first called on the name of Jesus at conversion and since then, continued to call on Jesus all through life.

The Christian Life is not lived in isolation, but in communion with other believers. The believers in Corinth are not the only ones sanctified in Christ and called saints, but all who in every place call on Jesus are also sanctified in Him and called saints! The Corinthian Church must not lose sight of the Church Universal, neither must Shalom Church! The church of God is larger than the Corinthian Church, and larger than Shalom Church. They are not a self-sufficient community, but share a common faith with all other believers. This is a timely antidote to self-absorption and self-centeredness found in a local church. We are linked/united to other believers elsewhere, and the common bond is Jesus Christ! He is their Lord and He is our Lord!!

This little phrase "*our Lord, both theirs and ours*" also underlines the important aspect of Christian Discipleship in our faith. We have a Lord. He must be Lord, not just in name alone, but in reality. Is He?

From this one verse therefore, we have a rather complete doctrine of the church: *It is a divine creation. Their very existence as a community of believers is due to God's work alone, and not because of human organizational activity. It is a community of people who belongs to God through their faith in Jesus' redeeming work and who are gathered together for the worship of God. It has visible, concrete manifestation in this world, and as a people, is united to one another as they are united to Jesus Christ.*

[3] ³*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Who is wishing the Corinthian Christians grace and peace? You are not wrong to reply 'Paul'. However, we remember that Paul is here speaking as an apostle of Christ. Hence, we have to reply that ultimately, it is God and Christ!

Yes, the Corinthian Church is in a mess. Still God still wishes them grace and peace. God does not write off His children as soon as we fall into the world's evil ways. Christ does not put us away as His bride the moment we fail Him. Rather He continues to be concerned for us and wants us to have His grace and peace! What a God of grace! What a gracious Saviour!!

EXPLANATION OF 1:4-9

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

This is another amazing statement by Paul the apostle in this letter, and in it contained a precious lesson for us! The Corinthian Church has brought Paul nothing but pain for the past 12 months. The Corinthian Church (at that moment) is anything but a model church. Yet Paul said that he thank God always concerning them!!

The word 'always' (πάντοτε) means 'at every opportunity, as a regular habit'. In 1 Corinthians 15:58, it was translated as "at all times! And the tense is present, meaning it is an on-going activity! Paul did not pray for them and give thanks to God for them only as he was about to write to them. No, he remembers them before the throne of grace *always*. What a lesson!

For what did Paul give thanks to God concerning these people? For the grace of God which was given to them by Christ Jesus! In simple words, he thanked God for saving grace. He didn't cease to be amazed by the amazing and powerful grace of God in saving them. The very existence of faith outweighs any personal inconvenience, disappointment, anguish that their less-than-fitting attitudes and

lifestyle may bring to Paul. The very fact that they exist as Christians in a city like Corinth was enough materials for thanksgiving!! The fact that there is a Church in Corinth is due entirely to the grace of God - "the grace of God which was given to you"!

In saying that he thanked God concerning them for the grace of God given to them, Paul is also conveying to them once again that what they had now, they reflect on this, till it becomes real again, and gratitude flood your hearts. If this is the controlling thought of your life, would you still be bringing one another to the courts, would you still be despising others, would you still be boasting against each other?

[2] ⁵that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, ⁶even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷so that you come short in no gift . . .

From saving grace, Paul moves to equipping grace. He thanked God for so bountifully blessing them with so many grace-gifts. Note the words used:

- *enriched in everything*

The word is ἐπλουτίσθητε πλουτίζω, which means to make rich. The mood is passive, meaning the Corinthian Christians were passive in this whole matter. God was the One who was active. God was He who decided what He will give them and then gave those gifts to them. And it is not just enriched, but enriched in everything --- everything needed for them to serve Him!

- *in all utterance and all knowledge*

The word 'utterance' points to the "telling forth the truth" while "knowledge" points to "grasping the truth". These would be the two major areas of spiritual gifts that the Corinthian Christians possessed.

In saying “*so that you come short in no gift*”, Paul admits that this is a very gifted church. The danger lies not in God’s undisputed provision but in the Corinthians’ wrong attitudes. It is a fact that the Corinthian Church is a very gifted church, but the gifts are grace-gifts, linking it back to the gospel. Their giftedness should be attributed to God’s grace alone, not human agents or their own imagined worthiness. God has indeed blessed them with overwhelming generosity and that should be the occasion for humble thanksgiving to God!

- *even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you.*

Their possession of these grace-gifts is a confirmation of God’s blessings on Paul’s preaching. As Paul preached to them, they came to faith in Christ and then received from the Spirit these gifts. God confirmed Paul’s testimony concerning Jesus by changing their lives, seen in their giftedness.

[3] *eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

While Paul praises God for His equipping grace towards the Corinthian Christians, he “suddenly” shifts his attention to the future! This may come across as ‘strange’ unless we are aware that one of the underlying problems of the Corinthian Christians is that they lived for the present, wrongly believing in what is now called “over-realised eschatology” – that is, that the best is not yet to be but the best is now here! This could account for their “problem” with the resurrection (see **1 Corinthians 15**). As a good and concerned pastor, Paul would want to gently shift their focus upwards, to see the bigger picture, to point them to the return of Christ.

So he tells them to expect, eagerly await, look for and absolutely wait patiently (*ἀπεκδέχομαι*) for Christ's return. The return of Christ is here called His revealing as well as the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the equivalent of the Old Testament's Day of the LORD, a day that will bring both judgment and blessing, depending on who you are. Hence, it shall also be a day of assessment for God's people. How will that assessment be?

Paul is sure that they will be found 'blameless'. The word (*ἀνέγκλητος*) means strictly not having been called up or arraigned before a judge; hence free from reproach, blameless, not accused of having done anything wrong. In a word, unimpeachable! In saying this, Paul is careful to state that this is something God will do for them - *who will also confirm you*. The word 'confirm' (*βεβαιώσει βεβαιώω*) is the same word used in **verse 6**, and here it is an indicative verb, future tense and active mood. In other words, Christ is going to confirm them, make them secure, sustain them to the end.

The assurance of this result is located in God Himself - **verse 9** starts with "*faithful God . . .*" in the Greek, calling our attention to this one attribute of God. Faithful is God, the God who called you to enter into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. He who called you will keep you. The grace that saves is the grace that keeps. Hence Paul ends his prayer of thanksgiving by thanking God for His preserving grace, besides saving and equipping grace.

This last phrase adds another dimension to our understanding of the church --- it is a fellowship == a sharing in and a sharing with; but not any fellowship, but the fellowship of Jesus Christ. We share in and with Christ!

CONCLUSION -- 1:1-9

As we look back over these 9 verses, we see that it is the name of Jesus Christ that gives unity and meaning to every sentence. The name of Jesus Christ appears nine times in the nine short verses.

Paul has been called to be Christ's apostle. Believers are sanctified in Christ and called into His fellowship. And it is as they call upon Him that they are saved. In Him, as with God the Father, grace and peace find their source and by Him are bestowed the spiritual gifts which confirm the testimony of Paul and equip his fellow Christians for life and service. Christ's return is the centre of their hopes, the day of His reappearing will be the consummation of their joy. In the meantime, participation in His life is the essence of their experience, the explanation of their character and the assurance of their destiny. Surely, as members of His Church, Jesus Christ should become increasingly all in all.

It is not a cliché to say that Jesus is the answer! As the apostle moves to deal with the Corinthian's contamination and confusion, he starts with Jesus, he points them to Jesus, and he reminds them of Jesus. He is absolutely central. They have lost sight of Him. They have become obsessed with themselves. This is why they are where they are now.

Reflect on the study above, and . . .

❖ write down one lesson you've learnt:

❖ write down how you will make this one lesson real in your life: