

Section One: 1:1-9, Salutation and Introductory Comments

“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1:9)

Define the following words or phrases as they are used in context:

- ❑ **1:2 – sanctified** (see 1 Cor 6:11, 2 Thess 2:13, Heb 10:10):
- ❑ **1:2 – saints** (see Rom 1:6-7):
- ❑ **1:4 – grace of God** (see Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:4-7, Heb 4:16):
- ❑ **1:7 – gift** (see Rom 12:4-8, 1 Pet 4:10-11):
- ❑ **1:7 – revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ** (see 2 Thess 1:6-8, 1 Pet 1:13, 1 John 2:28):
- ❑ **1:9 – fellowship** (see 2 Cor 6:14-16, Eph 3:6, 1 John 1:3,6-7):

Practical exposition:

Paul served as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,” not according to the will or authority of men (1:1). He was “called” to be an apostle: this was not a responsibility that he chose himself, but that which was given or entrusted to him (Acts 9:15-16, 26:16-18, Col 1:25). Parallel passages include:

- ❑ (Gal 1:1) “Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead)”
- ❑ (Eph 1:1) “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus”
- ❑ (1 Tim 1:1) “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope”
- ❑ (2 Tim 2:1) “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus”
- ❑ (Titus 1:1) “Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth”

As for “Sosthenes,” nothing else is known about this man unless he is the same as who is mentioned in Acts 18:17. It is incorrect to assume that, because the letter is also “from” Sosthenes, that he wields the same spiritual authority as the apostle Paul. It is possible that Paul dictated this epistle to him; the letter is nonetheless endorsed with Paul’s characteristic signature (16:21).

The “church of God which is at Corinth” (1:2) identifies a singular, self-governed *earthly* congregation and not the entire *spiritual* body of Christ (compare 1 Cor 1:2 with Col 1:18, for example). Christ’s church is comprised of spiritual souls; the church at Corinth is comprised of human beings. These are extremely important distinctions. The two (Christ’s church and the church at Corinth) are not interchangeable, are not in the same context, and do not operate in the exact same way. Christ is *irrefutably* the “head” of His church by virtue of His identity (as its

Redeemer) and His authority (as the Son of God). Whether or not He serves as the “head” of the church at Corinth will be determined by the faithfulness of those who comprise that congregation. Christ’s fellowship (1:9) is not automatic or assumed; it can only be present if people agree to the terms of that fellowship. Christ must dictate these terms, not people.

The parallel manner in which Paul defines the Christians at Corinth is valuable to us (1:2):

- ❑ **“the church of God which is at Corinth”**: While “church of Christ” is used only once in Scripture to identify congregations of believers (Rom 16:16), “church of God” is used numerous times: Acts 20:28, 1 Cor 10:32, 11:16,22, 2 Cor 1:1, 1 Thess 2:14, 2 Thess 1:4, and 1 Tim 3:5.
- ❑ **“those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus”**: The church at Corinth could not be legitimately recognized by Christ’s apostle unless those people *belonged* to Christ. A church can certainly exist without having any allegiance to Christ; the very word “church” (Greek, *ekklesia*) is not exclusively a religious word (see Acts 19:39,41, where “assembly” is derived from the same Greek word but has no religious context whatsoever). The church at Corinth was identified *with* Christ through their having been sanctified *by* Christ.
- ❑ **“saints by calling”**: “Saints” literally means “holy ones,” which describes not only the (ideally) virtuous nature of such people (1 Pet 1:13-16, Rev 19:8) but also their access to the Father through Christ (Eph 2:17-19).
- ❑ **“those who...call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”**: To “call upon the name of the Lord” means to appeal to Christ for the salvation that He offers. In order to *be* the “called” (Jude 1), two essential conditions must be met: God must offer His *gospel* (since no one can respond to God’s call without Him having first called; 1 Cor 1:9, 2 Thess 2:14, 2 Pet 1:3); and one must make a proper *response* to the gospel. This response must be manifested through obedient faith, a demonstration of which includes (but is not limited to) belief, confession (Rom 10:9-10), repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:38, 22:16).

Paul told the Corinthians that “in everything you were enriched in Him [Christ]” (1:5). This is still true today: while we are not given miraculous abilities as were bestowed upon these people, we still gain our knowledge, strength, confidence, and hope through Jesus Christ (Col 1:9-10, Heb 10:19-22, et al) *with regard to (or in the context of) our salvation*. Such blessings (“gifts”) come through His Word (2 Tim 3:16-17), our exercise of those virtues taught to us by Christ (John 13:17), and however God chooses to answer our prayers (Jas 1:5). Notice, then, that the source of our spiritual strength and maturity originates with God (Heb 13:20-21) and not ourselves or others. As Jesus said (John 15:5), “. . . apart from Me you can do nothing”—that is, nothing that benefits our salvation or spiritual growth.

“Gifts of grace are a valuable, and indeed indispensable, accompaniment of Christian life, which without them would fail to bear witness to its supernatural origin. They are not, however, the end of Christian life, in which men ‘await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ’.”¹ The same God who so freely calls into fellowship those who are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ will be faithful to see their salvation to its end (1:9).

¹ C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1996), 38.

Questions:

- 1.) Could one's congregation be legitimately called "church of God" (1:2)? If so, why do some congregations insist on being called "church of Christ"? What is implied in the fact that *how we choose to identify ourselves* can be determined (at least in part) by human decisions and not divine decree?

- 2.) For all the corrections and admonitions Paul will give to the Corinthians, he still begins by calling them "saints" (1:2) and refers to them throughout this letter as "brethren." What does this tell us concerning:
 - a. Believers who are *misguided* and *in error*, yet still strive to serve Christ as Lord? (Does Christ allow these people to be called Christians?)
 - b. Paul's expectations of those who are misguided and in error? (Is he content to let them continue in this way?)
 - c. Our own fellowship with such people? (If Paul recognized *his* fellowship with such people, how then should we regard them?)

Section Two: 1:10-17, Divisions in the Church

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment." (1:10)

Define the following words or phrases as they are used in context:

- 1:10 – divisions** (see Rom 16:17, 1 Cor 11:18, 12:25, Jude 1:19):
- 1:10 – be made complete** (see Rom 15:5-6, Phil 1:27, Col 1:28):
- 1:12 – Apollos** and **Cephas** (see John 1:40-42, Acts 18:24-28):
- 1:13 – baptized** (see Acts 2:41, 8:12, Rom 6:3, 1 Cor 12:13):

Practical exposition:

When Paul told the Corinthians to “all agree” (1:10), he did *not* mean that their church was to be dictated merely by human consensus. The *source* of their agreement must conform to the doctrine which they have already been given by Paul—that which is already unified according to heaven (John 17:17-23). God has only one doctrine (gospel), not several (Eph 4:1-6). Anyone in agreement with God must conform to and be unified by this one doctrine; the “unity of the Spirit” is impossible otherwise. Thus, there is only “one baptism” that God recognizes: that which is performed in faithful obedience to the gospel of Christ for the purpose of entering into fellowship with God. All other baptisms—for any other reason, by any other authority—are not recognized by God.

This is the crux of Paul’s point. The Corinthians were baptized *rightly*, but they began distinguishing or identifying themselves *wrongly*. “They looked upon the gospel as another form of wisdom like that of the Greeks [i.e., philosophers—CMS], the Christian evangelists as teachers of wisdom, and themselves as wise for following a particular teacher.”² By associating themselves with the *man* who performed their baptisms, or with the man by whom they justified themselves, they contradicted the authority of *Christ* by whose cross they were redeemed *and* in whose name they were baptized. Since *Christ* has not been divided (1:13), therefore the *church of Corinth* had no right to be divided—especially over that which was supposed to unite them! The substance of their fellowship was with God in Christ (1:9), not through Paul or any other preacher. In dividing the congregation into schisms or party names (i.e., denominations), they succumbed to a very worldly mentality. Such worldly thinking, if continued, would make the cross of Christ “void” or nullified among them.

Paul’s statement, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1:17), is hardly meant to discredit or reduce the need for Christian baptism. (See John 4:1-2, for example, where Jesus required His disciples to baptize people but He Himself did not baptize.) On the contrary, baptism is essential in one’s conversion experience (Mt 28:19, 1 Pet 3:21); for this reason, even Paul himself was baptized (Acts 9:18, 22:16). Thus, the context of Paul’s statement indicates the priority of *his* commission from Christ: not to literally immerse people in water (which any other Christian man can do), but “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:16-18).

Questions:

- 1.) What was the source of the divisions within the Corinthian church? In other words, what prompted these people to call themselves after mere men rather than be identified only with Christ? Does this same spirit of division still manifest itself among the brotherhood today? Please explain.

² Mike Willis, *A Commentary on Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Fairmount, IN: Cogdill Foundation, 1979), 24.

- 2.) How is being “of the same mind” reconciled with the fact that we are all at varying levels of spiritual knowledge, maturity, and abilities? Consider some of the major thoughts from Rom 14:1 – 15:7 in your answer.

Section Three: 1:18 – 2:5, The Paradoxical Word of the Cross

“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1:18)

Define the following words or phrases as they are used in context:

- ❑ **1:18 – word of the cross** (see Eph 2:14-16, Col 1:19-20):
- ❑ **1:20 – wisdom of the world** (see Eph 4:17-19, Jas 3:13-15, 1 John 4:4-6):
- ❑ **1:23 – stumbling block** (see Mt 21:42-44, Rom 9:30-33, 1 Pet 2:6-8):
- ❑ **1:27 – God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong** (see Lk 16:15, 2 Cor 12:9-10, Col 2:8):

Practical exposition:

The “word of the cross” is essentially synonymous with the gospel of Christ. It includes not only the crucifixion itself, but also everything necessary to lead up to that event, the implications of Christ’s sacrificial death, and “every spiritual blessing...in Christ” (Eph 1:3).

This (1:18-31) is one of the best passages in the New Testament to highlight the paradoxical nature of the gospel. To the world, the message of a crucified Savior is pure nonsense; heavenly strength appears incapable of exerting itself through human weakness (i.e., the pathetic, bloodied image of Jesus on the cross). The world relies instead on its own wisdom, energies, resources, and conclusions, glossing over the fact that being capable of reason indicates that we are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Thus, the world denies the power of God yet relies upon that power all at once—a foolish, illegitimate, and contradictory position to maintain.

Nonetheless, to satisfy their desire for the supernatural, “Jews ask for signs”—i.e., they refuse to believe in God’s power unless they are provided a “sign” *worthy of their expectations*. Jesus, for example, provided numerous miraculous signs of His divine nature (John 10:37-38), yet the Jews continued to ask for more (Mt 12:38, Lk 11:16, John 6:30). Jesus rightly referred to them as “an evil and adulterous generation” (Mt 12:39), since their requests revealed their contradictory and godless hearts. Greeks [learned, cultured Gentiles], on the other hand, were convinced that

salvation (as they understood it) was obtained through human wisdom (*sophia*). This is the premise of Gnosticism and all of its modern re-packaging (i.e., New Age movement, humanism, existentialism, evolutionism, etc.). Having “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom 1:25), they were spiritually vacant and “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph 4:18). Thus, both Jews and Gentiles who clung to human desires or human wisdom found the “word of the cross” to be foolish and offensive.

“But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24). “The called” refers to those who have responded obediently to the gospel of Christ, those in fellowship with Him (1:9). God manifested His divine power and heavenly wisdom through seemingly weak elements: Christ opened the door to heaven with a wooden cross and three nails! But the reality is that it takes *great strength* and *perfect knowledge* to bring about salvation through a ministry filled with miracles, a planned crucifixion, and an unprecedented resurrection. The sincere, humble heart will accept this; the heart bent on self-preservation and human glory will reject it. Thus, what appears to be “weak” and “foolish” on God’s part is actually superior to anything man has ever produced by his own power or through his own thinking.

“For consider your calling, brethren” (1:26)—i.e., most of you (Corinthians) are not what the world would look upon as being intelligent or sophisticated enough to be more enlightened than the rest. In fact, the very descriptor “Corinthian” was a negative, disparaging stigma. Nonetheless, some Corinthian Christians boasted in themselves, were proud of their spiritual gifts, and esteemed themselves even above Paul himself—even though it was he who brought them the message of Christ (1 Cor 4:7-10). Paul thus chastised their haughtiness; he reminded them that, as far as the world was concerned, they were foolish, weak, and despised. Even the fact that they were able to stand before God was not because of any merit on their part. Rather, “by His [God’s] doing you are in Christ Jesus” (1:30, EM). Thus, they were made saints through the grace of God, not by their superior knowledge, ability, etc. Put another way: God did not choose them because they were important; rather, they were made important only because God chose them. Therefore, “no man may boast before God” because of his human effort (see also Rom 4:2-5), but instead the Christian should say, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10).

Paul’s own preaching did not rely on “superiority of speech or of wisdom” (2:1)—that is, he did not convince them of the truth through cultivated oratory skills or impressive human philosophy (cf. Col 2:8). Instead, he says that “I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling”—probably because he feared physical harm due to his preaching, as he had received in previous cities (Acts 18:9-10). The Corinthians needed to recognize that a salvation predicated upon men or any single man was hopeless. To divide into cliques that honored one man against another (as in 1:11-13) was to dishonor Christ and the heavenly source of His saving grace. Thus, the core of Paul’s preaching was “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”³—the *body* and *blood* which justified them—so that “your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (2:2,5). The

³ The “word of the cross” and “Christ crucified” are each an example of a synecdoche: a literary device in which a group of subjects is included in the mention of only one of those subjects. (Similarly, “circumcision” not only included the literal act of circumcision itself, but the entire Law which embraced it; compare Acts 15:1 with 15:5, for instance). Thus, when Paul refers to Christ’s crucifixion, he means everything necessarily *related* to that crucifixion as well: blood of atonement; sacrifice; forgiveness; drawing near to God; etc.

Holy Spirit's presence among them (in the form of spiritual gifts) was the revelation and demonstration of that "power" (1 Thess 1:5).

Questions:

- 1.) Why is God "well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1:21)? Is God "pleased" with foolishness? Did He take pleasure in humiliating His Son? Please explain what you understand this passage to mean.

- 2.) Jesus warned us not to become stumbling blocks to anyone (Mt 18:7, Rom 14:13). How then is God justified in allowing His gospel to be a stumbling block to the Jews—or anyone else (cf. 1:23)?

- 3.) Christ is the believer's "wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1:30). Why is it so critical that a Christian sees Christ in this way? What devastating harm does he incur by *refusing* to recognize these things about Him?

- 4.) Christians still fall victim to the Corinthians' error—that is, some still put more confidence in men (especially preachers) than they do in the power of God.
 - a. Why do they do this? What do they hope to gain from this?
 - b. What must these people do to avoid this—put *no* confidence in men at all? Recognize no leadership in the congregation? Get rid of all preachers? Disband all congregations? Please explain.