

Jesus Yes! The Church Yes!

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Introduction: Church life can be messy business, and the reason why is simple.

The church is filled with people, which means it is filled with sinners. There are no perfect people. Everyone has flaws, defects, weaknesses, and the list could go on and on. Perhaps no church exhibited this more clearly than the church in Corinth in the 1st century. Though its members had been sanctified, called to be saints, enriched in grace and gifts, and called into fellowship with the Son of God, Jesus Christ (1:1-9), they were a carnal sinful mess. They were a mess theologically, practically, and morally. They were divided as the “cult of personality” had taken over (1:10-17). Sexual immorality was being tolerated (5:1-13; 6:12-20). Believers were suing believers in civil court (6:1-11). There was confusion and questions about God’s design for marriage and singleness (7:1-40), Christian liberty (8:1-11:1) the role of women in worship (11:2-16), the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34), spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues (chs. 12-14), and the doctrine of bodily resurrection and its implications for the resurrection of Jesus (ch. 15). Wow! This is not the kind of church that testifies to the lost world the power and beauty of the gospel. No, as pastor and Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe well says, “the church at Corinth was a defiled church...a divided church...a

disgraced church” (*Be Wise*, 19). Paul was informed of this mess by a report from Chloe’s people (1:11) and a letter from the church asking for his counsel. This is understandable since Paul had evangelized Corinth on his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 15:36-18:22) as recorded in Acts 18:1-17. In fact, Paul had spent 18 months in Corinth (18:11). The only city Paul spent more time in was Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). So, why did Paul write 1 Corinthians? We might state his purpose this way: Paul, who planted the church at Corinth, wrote in response to a report from Chloe’s people, and possibly Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, and to a letter from the church in dealing with the specifics of divisions, disorders, and particular difficulties in the church (e.g., marriage, disputed issues, role of women, worship, spiritual gifts, and resurrection) in order to correct the worldly attitude and arrogance of the church, and to encourage them to pursue a godly lifestyle and doctrinal purity.

We know from the letter itself he wrote from Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey (16:8). The date of writing is c.A.D 53-55. Tom Schreiner says it was probably the spring of A.D. 54 (*1 Corinthians*, TNTC, 2018, 8).

In a day when the church is mocked and ridiculed, those of us who follow Jesus Christ need to ask, “why is this happening? Why has our witness to the gospel been compromised?” I can think of no better book in the Bible to help us answer that question than 1 Corinthians. In a day when people still seemed impressed with

Jesus (usually a Jesus of their own creation and not the Jesus of the Bible) but not the church, Paul writes a book that, if heeded, will show us the beauty and attractiveness of the Church and Christ, of the saints and the Savior. In spite of all the mess in the church at Corinth, Paul says “Jesus Yes! The Church Yes!” God has not given up on his people and neither should we! So let’s begin our journey and see how Paul, as John Piper writes; explains “the centrality of who we are in relation to God” (“Sustained by the Faithfulness of God,” 1-17-88).

Excursus

Paul’s relationship with Corinth is rather complex. A careful reading of the New Testament seems to indicate he actually wrote four letters to the church and also made three visits. This is widely held by most all New Testament scholars. The following chart, adapted from Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, is helpful in seeing the interactions between the apostle and the Corinthians.

Paul's Four Corinthian Letters and His Three Visits

Event	Scripture Reference
Founds the church on second missionary journey	Acts 18:1-17
Leaves Corinth and goes to Ephesus	Acts 18:18-21
(1) <u>Writes a letter now lost to us</u> "the previous letter"	1 Cor. 5:9-13
Receives a bad report from "Chloe's people" and also a letter from Corinth	1 Cor. 1:11; 7:1
(2) <u>Writes 1 Corinthians</u>	1 Corinthians
Sends Timothy and Erastus to Corinth	Acts 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10
Hears of a serious crisis in Corinth caused by Jewish troublemakers in which Paul's authority is questioned	2 Cor. 10:10; 11:23; 12:6-7
Makes a quick visit trip to Corinth ("painful visit")	2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1
(3) <u>Writes "severe letter" to Corinth</u> (now lost to us)	2 Cor. 2:3-9; 7:8-12
Looks for Titus in Troas and Macedonia	2 Cor. 2:12-13
Finds Titus, who brings a positive report about Corinth	2 Cor. 7:6-16
(4) <u>Writes 2 Corinthians</u>	2 Corinthians
Makes third visit to Corinth	Acts 19:21; 20:2-3; 2 Cor. 13:1

I. God builds His Church in a specific way 1:1-3

No matter what is going on in the life of a faithful New Testament church, we must never forget that church is God's church. Where the Word of God is preached, the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper administered, regenerate church membership is honored, church discipline is practiced, and the Great Commandments and Great Commission pursued, there you find the Lord's church, regardless of what else may be happening. God is still building faithful New Testament churches among the nations, imperfections and all. And, He does so in very specific ways. Paul highlights two in his opening greeting.

1) God calls out leaders to serve us 1:1

Paul is the author of this letter. He would write a total of 13 New Testament letters. Formerly known as Saul (see Acts 13:9), Paul was a devout Jew, Pharisee and persecutor of the Church (Acts 7:58-8:1-3; 9:1-2; Phil. 3:4-6). The Lord Jesus called him to be an apostle, specifically but not exclusively, to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15-17; Gal 1:16). He would conduct three missionary journey's that are recorded in the book of Acts. It is also likely he went on a 4th mission, parts of which can be reconstructed from the Pastoral epistles (1&2 Timothy and Titus). He would be imprisoned twice in Rome (Acts 28; 2 Tim.) and executed the 2nd time c. A.D. 65-68. New Testament scholar John

Polhill says, “a date in late 67 or early 68 seems more likely” (*Paul and His Letters*, 438).

Paul immediately calls attention to three things concerning himself: 1) he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus”; 2) he was “called” to this divine assignment; and 3) his calling was “God’s will.” An apostle is a sent one on behalf of another, and Paul was an Apostle with a capital “A.” He was endowed with divine, apostolic authority as an emissary of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul wants to be clear. His ministry as an apostle was of divine origin. He was supernaturally called by the sovereign will of God. He was seized! Arrested by God. As such, the Corinthians must understand, as Gordon Fee writes, he has a “position of authority in relationship to the church in Corinth” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. NICNT, 26).

Paul also notes that “Sosthenes our brother” is with him. It is highly likely that this is the same Sosthenes of Acts 18:17. There we are told he was “the leader of the synagogue” who was seized by the Jews and beaten in the context of Paul’s mission in Corinth. I believe the Christian church came to his aid, cared for him, and led him to faith in Jesus! Now he is a missionary serving alongside of Paul in Ephesus. It is possible he even served as Paul’s amanuensis, or secretary, for 1 Cor. Our wonderful God really does work in wonderful ways to call out leaders to serve his church.

2) God calls out sinners to be saints

1:2-3

Paul writes “to the church of God at Corinth” (v. 2). Corinth was strategically located as a sentry of the 4 ½ mile Isthmus of Corinth in Achaia (modern Greece). It was approximately 50 miles due west of Athens. It was on major land and sea travel routes. It was at the foot of the 1,886 feet high AcroCorinth, and was in charge of two harbors (Cenchreae leading to Asia and Lechaem leading to Italy).

From its beginning Corinth was prosperous due to its strategic location. It became famous for luxury and immorality. The city contained at least 26 sacred places, including one dedicated to Aphrodite (the goddess of love). At one time it has 1,000 temple prostitute slaves (not based on ethnicity).

The population of the city was about 200,000, though some estimate it to have been much larger. It was 5 to 8 times larger than Athens. Corinth was the New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans or San Francisco of the ancient world. Indeed *Korinthiazō* meant to commit immorality. Plato used the phrase “Corinthian girl” to refer to a prostitute (*The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 2nd ed., 547-49).

In 27 BC it became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, what is southern Greece today. The city was comprised of Jew and Greek, slave and free. It was proud of its Hellenistic culture, international Isthmian games (2nd

only to the Olympics in prestige), philosophical schools, and esoteric mystery religions. It was pluralistic, open-minded, religious, wealthy, progressive. It was a gospel strategic city.

Corinth was the geographical location of this church. But, it also had a spiritual location. It was “the church of God.” This church, like every church, is His church, His possession. And, the Lord’s church, regardless of location, has certain defining characteristics.

First, “they are those sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Normally when we see the word “sanctification” or “sanctified” we think of God’s work in us to make us holy and to conform us more and more into the image of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9). And, it is certainly used to mean this in the New Testament (see 1 Thess. 4:3). Here, however, Paul is not talking about “experiential sanctification” but “positional sanctification,” not something we are pursuing but something we already have from the moment of conversion. Tom Schreiner puts it well, “The participle word *sanctified* (*hēgiamonois*) is in the perfect tense in Greek (and here the focus is on the resultant state) and designates what is often called ‘positional’ or ‘definitive’ sanctification.... The Corinthians are God’s holy people in Christ!” (*1 Cor. TNTC*, 52-53).

Second, they are “called as saints.” Just as God had sovereignly called Paul to be an apostle He had sovereignly called (effectually) believers at Corinth to be saints (holy ones). Saints are not a football team in New Orleans (the first thing to pop up on Google!). Nor is a saint a unique holy person formally recognized by the Catholic or Orthodox Church. No, a saint is any and every person who “calls on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Third, saints are everywhere and in every place. They have one Lord but they are scattered among the nations. No one geographical country or location has a special claim on Christ! The church is “all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord – both their Lord and ours.” This is probably an allusion to Malachi 1:11 where the Lord says, “My name will be great among the nations.”

Fourth, believers are sovereignly called by God to salvation, but they must also be those “who call on the name of Jesus Christ.” Once again we see the beautiful biblical balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Fifth, the Lord builds His church and blesses his saints with two essential kindnesses: grace and peace (v. 3). “Grace” is God’s unmerited favor. It is God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. “Peace” draws upon the Hebrew idea of *shalom* which speaks of God’s total well-being and wholeness of blessing in

our lives. I love the way Gordon Fee addresses these twin Christian blessings: “In a sense this sums up the whole of Paul’s theological outlook. The sum total of all of God’s activity toward his human creatures is found in the word “grace”; God has given himself to them mercifully and bountifully in Christ. Nothing is deserved; nothing can be achieved: “’Tis mercy all, immense and free.” And the sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God’s grace is found in the word “peace,” meaning “well-being, wholeness, welfare.” The one flows out of the other, and both together flow from “God our Father” and were made effective in human history through our “Lord Jesus Christ.”” (Fee, 31).

And, don’t miss this important theological truth. Grace and peace flow equally from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ;” equal in deity and yet distinct in person. Curtis Vaughn is right, “These words by Paul are actually a prayer in which he urges the Corinthians to look again to the Father and the Son as the sources of full salvation” (*1 Cor.* BSC, 22). Charles Hodge would add, “All Christians regard God as their Father and Christ as their Lord. His person they love, his voice they obey, and his protection they trust” (*An Exp. of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Thornapple Commentaries, Baker; 1857, 1980, 6).

II. God gives gifts to His Church with nothing missing

1:4-7

Our God is a good and gracious God. He delights in showering his children with gifts. Psalm 84:11 says it beautifully, “For the LORD God is a sun and shield. The LORD grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity.” The Corinthians were not walking very well in integrity! They were divisive, idolatrous, prideful, sexually immoral and greedy. But, they were still God’s church and people. He still loved them and was committed to working with them and in them for their good and His glory. Paul emphasizes two things, in particular, that God does for His children.

1) We are rich in grace

1:4

Verse 3 is a prayer wish. Verse 4 begins a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s grace. Normally Paul will say something nice about the church he is writing to. The notable exception is Galatians. However, it is also the case here that he is silent in terms of praise for the Corinthians love, faith or works. Rather, he focuses where they need to focus: on God and His grace through Jesus Christ. “I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus.” God’s gracious activity towards the Corinthians and all believers is supremely revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a grace given not earned or merited. It is something they did not deserve. Its origin was the Father and its means is the Son. “Marvelous grace, infinite grace! Grace that will pardon and cleanse within. Grace, grace, God’s grace! Grace that is

greater than all our sin!” Mark Taylor is right, “Grace profoundly shaped Paul’s outlook in every way, and his gratitude for grace anticipates a major emphasis of the letter” (*1 Corinthians*, NAC, 42). Oh, how we need God’s grace. Oh, how we need to show that same grace to one another.

2) We are rich in gifts 1:5-7

One evidence of God’s grace in our lives is in his blessing of spiritual gifts (grace gifts). These are listed in four different places in the New Testament:

Romans 12:3-8

1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28-30

Ephesians 4:11

1 Peter 4:10-11

Paul will provide an extensive discussion of them in chapters 12-14, especially the gift of tongues in chapter 14. Here Paul lays the groundwork for what he will say later by simply noting that spiritual gifts, like every other blessing in the Christian life, have their source in God’s grace revealed in Jesus. Paul says he is thankful believers are enriched (GNT, “have become rich”) in him. And how, specifically, did they become rich in Christ? Well, “in every way!” Nothing is held back from their gracious Father. But specifically, Paul draws attention to the gifts of “all speech and all knowledge.” Schreiner notes, “We see a connection with 1 Corinthians 12:8,

where two spiritual gifts are named: a ‘message of wisdom’ (*logos sophia*) and a ‘message of knowledge’ (*logos gnōseōs*)” [p. 55]. As we will see later, all spiritual gifts basically fall under one of three categories: 1) knowledge, 2) speaking, and 3) service.

Paul is convinced the Corinthian church has been enriched in “all speech and all knowledge,” areas highly valued by the Corinthians. However, for all who are “in Christ,” there is no place for boasting or pride. God did this for you in Christ (v. 5). Indeed these gifts are simply the evidence of the power of the gospel in our lives. The activity of spiritual gifts demonstrate that “the testimony (*GNT*, “message,” *NLT*, “what I told you”) about Christ was confirmed among you.” Fee says, “God himself “guaranteed” the truth of the message by enriching them with every kind of spiritual gift” (p. 39).

The believing community “does not lack any spiritual gift” (v. 7). In Christ we get all that we will ever need to be pleasing to God and effective for God. This occurs the moment we are saved, not later in our Christian experience. Calvin says it is, “as if [Paul] had said, “The Lord has not merely honored you with the light of the gospel, but has eminently endowed you with all the graces that may be of service to the saints for helping them forward in the way of salvation” (*1 Corinthians*, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol XX, 57). Oh how rich

is the believer in Jesus. Nothing missing. Nothing lacking. He provides all I need.

III. God provides hope for His Church with powerful promises 1:7-9

Hope is a powerful word in any language. Google it and you get “about 2,230,000 results.” However, real hope is only as effective at the object it trusts, that it puts its faith in. The Bible does not teach a “well I hope so” way of thinking. It teaches a “I hope because I know so” way of thinking. We hope because we know Christ! We hope because we know the “too many to count” promises of God. Isaiah 40:31 tells us, “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength” (*NIV*). Here in verses 7-9 Paul identifies two specific promises of God that we can count on, that we can take to the bank: 1) the return of the Lord Jesus Christ and 2) the faithfulness of God.

1) We can expect Jesus to return 1:7-8

Paul makes an interesting connection between spiritual gifts and the 2nd coming of Jesus. Could it be that a waning passion for the Lord’s return had contributed to their abuse of spiritual gifts?! I think his argument goes something like this: to effectively and rightly exercise your abundance of spiritual gifts you must “eagerly wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). Otherwise you will get things out of spiritual balance and all sorts of mischief will ensure. C.K. Barrett puts it perfectly, “Christians are

what they are because through the Holy Spirit they have received gifts of grace, and they are what they are because, having been redeemed and called by the historic work of Christ they now look for his coming to consummate his achievement. They live in remembrance of what he has done, and in expectation of what he will do (cf. xi. 26). It was a characteristic Corinthian error (cf. iv. 8; note the *already*) to concentrate on the present with its religious excitement, and to overlook the cost at which the present was purchased.” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC, 39).

In other words, being heavenly minded will make you of earthly good! Never lose sight of the truth that what you have now is good, but the best is yet to come! Work and wait! Work and watch! Philippians 3:20 is a wonderful reminder, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18; 5:23-24; Rev. 19:11-21).

2) We can expect God to be faithful 1:8-9

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 parallels quite well the final two verses in this opening paragraph. There Paul writes, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. And may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who call you is faithful; and he will do it.”

Paul says there is both blessing and hope in longing for the coming of “our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). First, “He will also strengthen (*ESV*, “sustain”) you to the end” (v. 8). You will persevere because God will preserve you. The one who called you to salvation (v. 2) will keep you in salvation to the very end. This is another confirmation of what is called the doctrine of eternal security or perseverance of the saints (cf. John 10:27-29; Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:12; Jude 24-25). Christ will faithfully get us home. Second, we will arrive “blameless (*ESV*, “guiltless; *NLT*, “free from all blame”) in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Schreiner is again helpful when he writes, “It is quite remarkable that Paul speaks of the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Old Testament repeatedly speaks of ‘the day of the LORD’, that is, the day of Yahweh. (E.g Isa.13:6, 9; 24:21; Ezek. 13:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; Amos 5:18, 20; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5). Paul, however, conceives of that same day as the day of Christ (see also Rom. 2:16; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16). Relating that day to Christ demonstrates that Jesus Christ has divine status and exercises divine functions.” (36). He is our God!

The wonderful hope and security the Christian enjoys is grounded in a basic theological truth: “God is faithful” (v. 9). You can trust Him. You can count on Him. And, “You were called by him into fellowship” (*koinonia*), “a fellowship (*NLT*, “partnership”) with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” The

church at Corinth may be fragmenting and headed toward a split, but God still has a hold of them by his Son. He will not let them go, no matter what. He may have to exercise some tough love, but they are His now and they will remain His forever. You can count on it. He has promised, and God always keeps His word to His Son, and to us who are called and sanctified and made rich in Him.

Conclusion: These opening verses of 1 Corinthians are so important to me personally. They provide a biblical biography of Danny Akin. I was called to be a saint at the age of 10 at the Ben Hill Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. And, I can testify to God's faithfulness to sustain us in our call to salvation. I did not walk closely with the Lord during my teenage years. Honestly and shamefully, I was a Corinthian mess. But when I was 19, our perfect heavenly Father got my attention and brought me back to Himself (see Heb. 12:5-13). Then, in July 1977, on a mission trip to Sells, Arizona, to work among the Tohono O'odham Nation (meaning "desert people"), the Lord, by his will, called me into the gospel ministry. Like Paul, it was a seizing! I could not say no nor have I ever wanted to. And, in his grace, the Lord took a not very smart 20 year old (I made 870 and 910 on the S.A.T.) and graced him with His gift for the gospel assignment He had sovereignly given him. Ministry has not always been easy, but it has always been good! I could not imagine doing anything else. I don't want to do anything else. So, despite the mess that is

Danny Akin, and despite the mess that is the church this side of heaven, I say Jesus yes! The church yes! We all have been “called by God into fellowship with his Son” (v. 9) and with one another (v. 2). I don’t want to be anywhere else.