

1 Corinthians 1

Introduction: Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that the church in the days of the apostles was a perfect church. We picture them as committed, on fire, pure, holy and sold out for Jesus Christ. That was not always the case. The church in Corinth was divided into factions—diques that were focused on their favorite teacher—and had teachers that loved this kind of attention. There was doctrinal confusion, drunkenness and an array of sexual sins. The church in Corinth reflected the city of Corinth—where business was good and life was decadent. This made the people harder to please, more self-centered and self-indulgent, more degenerate than in some other places.

Paul spilled more ink responding to issues in Corinth than he did writing to any other church. Romans may have been his longest letter, but the two letters to Corinth combine to give us a lot more text than that one. In his weaker moments, Paul may have even wondered why: “Problems, confusion, difficulties, questions—why can’t they just get it?” Why do I have to keep writing and writing—not even knowing if they’ll listen to me in the end? What’s the point Lord? Why do I have to deal with all this?

If Paul ever wondered why he had to confront so many problems in Corinth, the answer may be that he did it for us. The church in our time is certainly more splintered than they were. Our heresies now have deeper roots and doctrinal hairsplitting has gotten more complex. Added to that, our world offers more chemicals to become dependent upon. Finally, with our culture’s love for pleasure, entertainment and the central role of sex in everything, we might easily compete with Corinth in those areas.

Paul’s letters to Corinth prove that God wants a strong church in a decadent, self-centered culture.

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| I. | God wants us to live up to our new identity in Christ—saints. | 1:1-3 |
| II. | God wants us to trust that Jesus will finish what he starts in our lives. | 1:4-9 |
| III. | God wants us to work towards unity and avoid factions within the church. | 1:10-17 |
| IV. | God wants us to trust in the wisdom and simplicity of the Gospel message. | 1:18-25 |
| V. | God wants us to realize that He works through humble people. | 1:26-31 |

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| I. | God wants us to live up to our new identity in Christ—saints. | 1:1-3 |
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- A. 1:1 *called to be an apostle* That is, “an apostle by calling”

Sosthenes is very possibly a brother from the Corinthian church. A Sosthenes is mentioned in Acts 18, who was the ruler of the synagogue. He took that position after the previous ruler, Crispus, became a Christian. Sosthenes led a group of Paul’s enemies in bringing Paul before the Roman proconsul Gallio—and was beat up by the Greeks as a result. He is now a Christian, a brother, and has joined Paul in his ongoing ministry.

- B. 1:2 *the church of God which is at Corinth*—The city was well off; its location as a seaport made it important both commercially and politically. Its popular reputation, however, arose from the extreme decadence of its citizens. The term “to Corinthianize” meant, to most hearers, “to be immoral or degenerate.” A “Corinthian girl” was a prostitute – perhaps the city’s key profession. Corinth was the Las Vegas or New Orleans of the ancient Mediterranean world. (See also *New Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Testament Volume*, © 1990, Tyndale House Publishers)

those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints As believers in Jesus we are set apart. Our identity is now “in Christ Jesus.” We are “saints by calling.” The word *saints* means “holy ones”. God wants us to be holy—even if we happen to live in Corinth.

- C. 1:3 *Grace ... and peace* “*Grace is favor, and peace its fruits.* The former includes all that is comprehended in the love of God as exercised towards sinners; and the latter all the benefits which flow from that love.” (Hodge)

II. God wants us to trust that Jesus will finish what he starts in our lives. 1:4-9

- A. Remember what we said about all the trouble in the Corinthian church. Yet, listen to how Paul begins what will turn out to be a very corrective letter.
- B. **Paul’s focus:** Count all the times he mentions God or the Lord Jesus Christ. He is looking first to God and not at the Corinthians.
- C. 1:4-7 **Helpful affirmation is important.** Paul says some strong words to this church in this letter, but he begins on a positive note. He affirms their privilege of being in God’s family, the power God has given them to speak out for him and understand his truth, and the presence of their spiritual gifts. Though his later tone may seem harsh, Paul begins in an affirming way. He states what he most appreciates about the Corinthians and the joy he has because of their faith in God. When we must correct others, it certainly helps to begin by affirming what God has already accomplished in them.
- D. 1:7-9 **We will fully experience the reality of our salvation only when Christ returns.** Paul guaranteed the Corinthian believers that God would consider them “blameless” at Christ’s coming. This guarantee was not because of their great gifts or their stellar performance, but because of what Jesus Christ accomplished for them through his death and resurrection. All who have faith in the Lord Jesus will be saved and considered blameless when He returns. If you have faith in Christ, you are and will be saved. (See also: *The Handbook of Bible Application, Second Edition*, © 1992 by Tyndale House Publishers, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.)

III. God wants us to work towards unity and avoid factions within the church. 1:10-17

- A. 1:10-12 **True ministry is always a team effort.** Paul wants them to know that it is completely counterproductive for the church to splinter off into groups based on excessive admiration of the leaders. Our information age has probably made this a bigger problem than ever. We can load up on podcasts, books and DVDs in ways that the Corinthians never imagined. (And you'll even be able to download this message later today!)
- B. 1:13-16 Paul downplays his role in their baptisms. This may be because some of the Corinthians were dividing into factions based upon who had baptized them.
- C. 1:17 **True ministry is focused on the cross of Jesus Christ.** Our bottom line must always be what Christ has done. Christian leaders are all secondary. Our obedience is even secondary—and only possible only because of Christ's finished work.

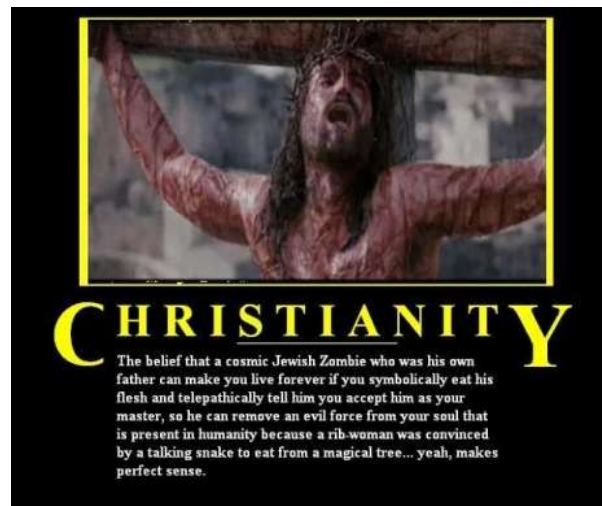
IV. God wants us to trust in the wisdom and simplicity of the Gospel message. 1:18-25

- A. This picture illustrates the truth of this section fairly well. I got it from the blog shaunphilly.wordpress.com, from a post on 6/17/09 entitled *Was the Crucifixion of Jesus a Sacrifice?*, which begins as follows:

“If Jesus was god, then the crucifixion was not a sacrifice.

“If Jesus was not god, then it was a sacrifice, but it has no ultimate significance beyond being one of thousands of possibly inspiring stories of others who have died for various reasons, both noble and otherwise.

“If Jesus never existed, then it's just a story. If you can be inspired by that, then I can be inspired by Superman (and you can stop making fun of me for dressing like him!)”



- B. 1:21 Highlight v.21 as a verse with a very important lesson in it.
- C. Paul emphasizes that the way to receive salvation is so simple that any person who wants to can understand it. It's all about Christ crucified. Our own wisdom is not enough—simple faith is. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation; we need only accept what Jesus has already done for us.

V. God wants us to realize that He works through humble people.

1:26-31

- A. I have a little cross stitch of v.26 in my office that Ginger made me years ago.
- B. **God uses ordinary people in significant ways.** Jesus selected *ordinary* men with a mixture of backgrounds and personalities to be his disciples. The church in Corinth was evidently a modest, motley bunch—it was not the *Who's Who* of Corinthian society. Today, God calls ordinary people together to build his church, teach salvation's message, and serve others out of love. Alone we may feel unqualified to serve Christ effectively, but together His Spirit empowers us to be a group strong enough to serve God in any way needed. You may have to ask for patience to accept the variety of people in your church, or to understand the variety of strengths represented in your group. That's OK. It's healthy to try to learn to get along with people who are very unlike ourselves.

Conclusions:

Paul's letters to Corinth prove that God wants a strong church in a decadent, self-centered culture.

- The first thing we need to do is begin living up to our new identity: We're saints, so we need to begin thinking and acting like it.
- But as we begin doing that, we'll see in our own lives and in the lives of other Christians around us, that complete change is never immediate. We can, however trust that Jesus will finish what He has started in us.

Phil 1:6 (NLT) And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

- Meanwhile we can focus on a few things:
 - We can work towards unity and avoid factions within the church.
 - We can trust in the wisdom and simplicity of the Gospel message.
 - We can remember that God works through humble people.

God wants a strong church in a decadent, self-centered culture. We can be that church with His help.