

“Who We Are”

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We are a community of crud called by Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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Missionary among red lights

Imagine you are a missionary to the red light district in Amsterdam, Holland. You live there for a year and a half, and surprisingly are able to establish a small church in the heart of the world’s most notorious center for commerce, education, prostitution, and sex trafficking. Feeling confident about the stability of the church, your missionary heart moves you to other urban centers.

Two years later, you receive an email with deeply disappointing news. The church you founded is in disarray. Worship services are chaotic. Church leaders are constantly bickering over doctrine – sometimes about critical issues, like whether Jesus is God or if he rose from the dead, sometimes over whether it’s OK for Christians to participate in the sex trade, and sometimes over honest but less important differences. Some people, for example, are saying Christians shouldn’t even eat in red light district restaurants – but that’s exactly what you did to build relationships with people.

The most hurtful part? You didn’t know about this at first, but apparently other missionaries followed you into Amsterdam, established their own authority as visionary and articulate leaders, and in the process disparaged you. Now many of the Christians in the church *you* established say they don’t respect you as a person, as a teacher, or as a worthy representative of Jesus.

You read the email, weep, pray, and wait a few days. When you sit down to write, what will you say? How will you begin?

Letter to the conflicted

That's a fair parallel with the situation when the Apostle Paul writes his first letter to the church at Corinth. I'll say more about the city and the first century church next week, but Paul clearly must be feeling slighted, awkward, and disheartened as he writes the introduction.

I have often said that 1 and 2 Corinthians are very significant New Testament books to this church because of our name. Here's the surprising part. In 26+ years of pastoral ministry at Corinth, I've never preached my way through 1 or 2 Corinthians! I've preached on certain passages, of course. It would be hard not to, as critical as these texts are to the Christian faith and life. Here are a few 1 Corinthians quotes you might recognize –

- “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (2:9).
- “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (6:19).
- “Do this in remembrance of me” (11:24).
- “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’” (12:21)
- “And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love” (13:13)
- “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (15:55)

I'm certainly familiar with much of this letter, and you may be too. But I have never walked front to back through its contents. Honestly, there's too much there to cover all of it extensively. But from now through early July, we're going to hit some of the key passages. If you're wondering what happened to the third article of the Apostles' Creed, that will dovetail nicely with our studies in 1 Corinthians.

We need to keep in mind as we read the first nine verses that Paul is writing to a church that is conflicted, confused, and even childish in more ways than one. In addition to their internal struggles, there is a deep divide between the Christian message and the widely accepted cultural norms in their city. Oh, and one more thing: many of them don't like Paul, don't respect him, and don't care what he has to say.

In light of all that, the way Paul begins this letter is rather remarkable. If you're like me, you tend to skip over the introductions and greetings in Paul's letter. Don't.

O my words!

The words in this passage are so fundamental to the Gospel. Let me point out one in each verse.

Apostle (1). The word “apostle” means envoy, ambassador, messenger. It is used two ways in the New Testament. Most often it refers to Jesus’ original Twelve, minus Judas, plus Matthias. It’s also used in a more general way of the gift of apostle (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11), and in Romans 16:7 Paul names two outstanding “apostles” (Andronicus and Junias) who are obviously not among the Twelve.

Paul stands between these groups – called by God to be an “apostle,” but not one of the original Twelve. However, he uses a good bit of ink in 1 and 2 Corinthians explaining and defending his apostleship. Right here in the beginning he insists his authority and his calling come from God.

Call (2). So much is packed into verse 2, and it’s hard to choose one word. But the word “call” appears three times in different forms. Paul’s readers in Corinth have been called to be holy, but they are only one local church in a universal, invisible family of those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul connects all of these together with the “church” of God located in Corinth.

The word “church” is interesting. It is used inside and outside the Bible for an “assembly” – much like the school assemblies you remember (everyone called out of their classroom to the gym or auditorium) or even a mass rally. In Acts 19:32 there’s a near-riot in Ephesus, and the gathering of angry protesters is described with this same word – the *ekklesia*, the “church,” the “called out ones.”

Why is that important? Because this is what it means to be church. It means that we are the ones God has called to be part of the holy catholic (universal) church, and to function in concern for one another in a place. Yes, you can worship on a golf course or on the lake, but you can’t have “church.” The basic idea is gathering together in person. In our case, we gather in this place – at Corinth, in Hickory. We didn’t create this thing called “church.” We didn’t initiate this “assembly.” We are called into it.

Peace (3). Again, Paul’s greeting sounds rather formal and routine. It’s common, but packed with significance. Paul wants these Corinthians to have “peace.” Paul’s understanding of peace had been shaped by Jewish thinking. “Peace” is *shalom* – well-being, all is well, God’s in charge, harmony with God and with each other.

Grace (4). You wouldn’t expect Paul to say to this church, “I *always* thank my God for you....” Not “occasionally” and not “in spite of” you. Always. How can he say that? Because he sees them through the lens of grace – God’s undeserved favor. There’s not a lot new I can say about grace, unless you didn’t know that the word “thank” comes from the same root. The most grateful people are those who grasp that all we are and have is a gift (another word with the same root that will come up in v. 7). What Paul is emphasizing is that he doesn’t have to analyze their worthiness to receive his visit or his letter or his encouragement. When he thinks of them, he doesn’t think of their flaws – or if he does, it’s only because it makes him even more grateful for grace.

Enriched (5). I've noticed through the years that almost no one likes to be called "rich" or "wealthy." Not only is there a certain stigma often attached to the idea, that you're automatically a snob or stingy, but the truth is that every human being except one (currently Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, whom I personally continue to enrich almost every week) can identify someone else who's richer. It's precisely in that "super-rich" sense that Paul is using this word for the Corinthians. It's not that the believers in Corinth were among the social and political elite – quite the opposite (1:26). But in Christ they are richer than anyone else in Corinth who has so-called wisdom or influence.

Confirming (6). And who says so? God himself. The words "testimony" and "confirming" in verse 6 are both from the courtroom. Paul wants them to imagine themselves in the dock, to use a British expression. When I was younger, we used to ask the question, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" The question was designed to provoke self-examination, but Paul doesn't encourage these Corinthians to examine themselves – at least not here in the opening paragraphs. God has ratified his own witness of who they are.

Eagerly (7). Again, there's so much theology in verse 7, especially about the coming of Jesus. But Paul's focus is not so much on the theology as it is on its impact on the Corinthians. They have every "spiritual gift," which is the closest Paul comes in this first section to speaking about the third person of the Trinity. (Later in the letter he will clearly say that when he speaks of "spiritual gifts" he means "gifts from the Spirit.") That's what they have now, but Paul affirms that this is a group *eagerly awaiting* (all one word in Greek) Jesus' return. This is a hallmark of Paul's teaching ministry and whatever else the Corinthians do not get, they get this. They patiently but confidently and zealously expect Jesus to come back soon. (How about you?)

Blameless (8). Paul turns to his confidence – not so much in them but in Jesus in them. He had taught them, loved them, shaped them, guided them, to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins but also for continuing his work in them. The word translated "keep you firm" (one word in Greek) is the same as verse 6 – "confirm." Literally it's terra firma – solid ground. He doesn't say he hopes they'll find solid ground. They're already on it, and he is confident God will keep them there.

In fact, God is going to declare them "blameless." The Greek word here means... blameless – blame-less, without blame. It's another courtroom word, and again, its root is "call." This time it's the idea that you're called into court to be accused, charged, blamed. And when you get there, there's no basis against you. Charges dropped. Accusers silenced. Record expunged. No debt outstanding. You're free, not guilty.

Fellowship (9). Nowhere in these verses does Paul suggest the Corinthians have earned all this by their behavior. That's what is remarkable about this passage. Again in verse 9 it's that God is faithful, and he's the one who called you into fellowship (koinonia, having commonality and connection) with his Son. You're in, and nobody can

take that away from you. Why? You didn't get there by your merit, so your de-merit can't remove it.

I didn't even point out the most important words: God (6x), Father, Lord (6x), Jesus (8x), Christ (9x), Son, and he/him/his (5x). That makes a total of 35 nouns and pronouns in nine verses that refer to the first and second person of the Trinity.

A community Christ calls

Curtis Blocker wrote me about a week ago and said that he felt our sermons in 1 Corinthians and our anniversary would be a great time to review the basics of who we are. "Refresh and reinforce us," he wrote in his email. I told him that's exactly what we had in mind.

The most common place I say that 1 Corinthians is our favorite New Testament book is in the Pastor's Class, when I'm introducing Corinth to guests and potential members. The very first class we wrestle with a definition of "church." I tell them about the word *ekklesia*, and I put 1 Corinthians 1:1-2 on the screen. Then I define the church this way: "a community Christ calls." There's a vertical element (Christ) and a horizontal element (community) and a connection between them (calls). That's what I mean by "who we are." We are people who are called by God to live in relationship with him and with one another.

The problem, of course, is how flawed we all are, just like the first readers of 1 Corinthians. We see one another's sins and blind spots. We hurt each other. It's hard to be in community with the broken. Except that's part of the plan. Maybe I need to expand my definition, keeping my alliteration: we are a community *of crud* Christ calls.

This very week I've seen some confused and conflicted and childish behavior. In my younger days as a pastor I felt I must immediately address and intervene in those kinds of situations. Now I think, "Great! Another sermon illustration." Not really, but I'm more willing to respond like a mom. Have you ever noticed that when there are irreparable family breaks, it's hardly ever mom of whom people say, "We haven't talked for years." Moms may scold and express disappointment, but they never say, "I'm done with you." Part of what it means to be in community of crud is that we don't have to fix everything immediately. Sometimes trying to do so is counterproductive.

How do we apply Paul's introduction to 1 Corinthians?

First, see yourself through the lens of grace. In Christ, you have been called, set apart, loved, forgiven. He has owned you and forgiven you. He will keep you to the end. He will declare you blameless. Stop beating yourself up for your spiritual failures. Jesus was beaten up enough for your sins and those of the whole world. This is who we are – a church that unashamedly preaches the gospel of grace.

Second, look down the pew and see that person through the lens of grace. Yes, that person who seems to you so far short of holiness. Choose to see them as holy. You say, "Well, what if I don't know for sure if they're true believers in their hearts?" My answer is, "Why is that your business? And how would you tell?" Treat them that way. Speak to them that way. This is who we are – a church that is never surprised by the misbehaviors among us. That's why we are here in community, so God can keep working in each of us through all of us.

And third, look at the church around the corner the same way. We do some things intentionally differently than Holy Trinity or St. Luke's or Viewmont Baptist or St. Al's or First Pres. But who's to say we do it right? Who's going to venture to brag that God's looking down from heaven saying, "I wish they were all more like Corinth"?

This is what's behind our Saturday night "tent revival" service this week. This is who we are. We were among the first organized churches in Hickory, but we noticed there are 150(!) other churches in Hickory. We're going to list them all in our program. We're going to celebrate them all.

In researching our history for the anniversary, I noticed that Claremont College (site of the current SALT Block) was founded to be Christ-centered but non-sectarian. Corinth was starting an institution to give equal opportunity to women for education, but this is what the Rev. A. S. Vaughan, the Corinth pastor who was called to Hickory in 1880 to found the school, wrote:

What is called sectarianism, an evil connected with modern forms of Christian activity, is to be forever excluded. Christ, and his precious Word, form the central principles of all nurture and instruction. Christ in the heart is the key that unlocks all the glories of the universe.

In other words, what we do is about Jesus, but he's not *our* Jesus. We don't own him. We want to share our heart and our efforts with others who follow him. That's been a hallmark of Corinth ever since, and we want Saturday night to celebrate what we have in common with believers in Jesus all across this town and area.

What we share is far more important than where we differ. What we share is the Lord, Jesus the Christ, Son of God the Father. Amen.