

PARTAKERS *of* GRACE

A COMMENTARY ON
1 CORINTHIANS



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INTRODUCTION



A commonplace among evangelical Christians is the expressed desire to find and join a “New Testament church.” For those who have spent any time studying what the conditions on the ground were actually like in the early church, it might be tempting to ask, “What on earth would you want that for?” The Galatians were on the verge of throwing all hope away, being on the edge of falling from grace (Gal. 5:4). The Ephesians had fallen from their first love (Rev. 2:4). Philippi had two of their leading women not on speaking terms (Phil. 4:2).

But Corinth was a special case. There were piles of challenges there. This commentary could even be called *The Basket Case Chronicles* (and in fact, it almost was). If you think that is a bit overstated, we should review some of

the issues Paul was having to deal with as he wrote this letter. Some at Corinth were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:21). There was a guy there who was having sex with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1). A number of the other men had to be reminded that the "new members' class" had gone over the necessity of staying away from the pagan prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:15–16). They were suing one another before unbelieving judges (1 Cor. 6:1–8). They were fighting one another over which Bible teacher was the best one (1 Cor. 3:1–7). Do we really want a New Testament church?

At the same time, the apostle Paul loved them deeply, thanking God for them constantly (1 Cor. 1:4). A visit from some of their representatives refreshed him in his spirit (1 Cor. 16:18). He could be greatly moved and affected by their stumbles, but he was no detached critic.

The way the letter is structured is interesting, and reading through it in one sitting is like listening to one half of a phone conversation. The Corinthians had various situations, and a number of questions, which they had sent to Paul. In this letter, Paul appears to be working through the list of questions, answering them methodically. For the most part, we are able to reconstruct what was likely going on in Corinth based on the answers that Paul gives. There are some puzzlers, like the situation in chapter 15 that gets into the baptism for the dead. But generally the letter stands alone in a coherent way without us having access to the original questions.

A review of the problems in Corinth can be disconcerting for modern Christians, ranging from ordinary to outlandish.

Some of their difficulties could be, as far as we are concerned, something that happened five weeks ago instead of two thousand years ago. Christians still sue fellow believers in unbelieving tribunals, for example, thinking nothing of it, but the practice of celibate marriages has not caught on anywhere in the modern church, not even in California.

But for all the problems, Paul had not given up on the Corinthians. And this should perhaps make us want to rethink our approach to “church shopping,” where the modern believer treats denominations as though they were malls, with his own role that of an ecclesiastical consumer.

The reason he had not given up on them can be seen when we get to his grand exposition of the resurrection in chapter 15. The message of the gospel is not a like a political campaign, or collecting signatures for a referendum, where if we can only enlist “enough people” then maybe we can get something to happen. Rather, the message we are to preach is that God has set certain inexorable forces in motion, and it is our assigned task to get as many people as prepared as possible before God’s great eucatastrophe hits. We are all living along the beach in our miserable little grass huts, and a great tsunami, a huge tidal wave of joy, is heading toward us. Our task is not that of trying to get the tidal wave to come. We cannot make it come any faster, and we most certainly cannot get it to slow down. We declare that it is coming—as the children say, ready or not—and that preparation matters a great deal.

Such preparation includes things like making sure your observances of the Lord’s Supper are not occasions of moral disorder. It includes disciplining the man who took his

CHAPTER 1



SAINTS AND SINNERS

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 1:1–3)

The letter commonly called 1 Corinthians was written by two men—Paul the apostle, and Sosthenes, here simply called “our brother.” How much of the letter comes from Sosthenes we don’t know, but it was enough to warrant

mention (v. 1). Paul identifies himself in accordance with his office as apostle, which was his common practice (v. 1). He was an apostle of Christ through the will of God, which Paul knew full well, recalling how God had called him on the Damascus road. It certainly had not been part of Paul's plans.

This letter was written to the church of God at Corinth (v. 2). This church was made up of those who were *sanctified* in Christ Jesus, and called to be *saints*. These saints had been called alongside everyone who called on the name of Jesus Christ. This Jesus was Lord of the Corinthians, as well as of anyone who called on Him in that same way (v. 2).

Paul pronounces a benediction upon them—grace and peace both, from the Father and from the Son. The Spirit is not mentioned expressly here, but that should not be a great concern. The Spirit *is* the grace and peace that rests upon them (v. 3). Paul has just finished saying that they are sanctified in Christ, and that they are called to be saints. The words used here (for sanctify and saint) are variations on the same word that makes up part of the Holy Spirit's name. So He is not absent at all.

Two other comments. First, Paul is called to be an apostle, and the Corinthians are called to be saints. They are summoned to different stations, but they are both summoned. That summoning occurs in an ongoing way as we call upon the Lord. As we call upon Him, it is revealed that He has indeed called us.

Second, we are going to learn in just a few pages that the Corinthian church had some appalling things going on

in it, such that Paul could not identify them as spiritual men, but rather as carnal (3:1–4). Nevertheless, knowing what he is going to say about the state of their sanctification, he still has some high words to say here about the reality of their sanctification. In the same way, we should always stand ready to receive the apostolic rebukes, but we will only be able to do this to the extent that we have heard the apostolic assurances.

GRACE AT CORINTH

I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:4–7)

The next portion of Paul's greeting to the Corinthians should make us think of some things we are going to learn later on in the epistle. Knowing what Paul knew, and knowing what he was going to admonish them for, what he says at the outset is striking. What he says here should not cause us to miss what he says later, but what he says later should not cause us to miss what he says here.

The first thing is that he always thanks God for the grace of God which they had been given (v. 4). The grace was *real*, and the apostle thanked God for it. That grace was also extensive—in *every* thing they were enriched by the Lord, and they had grace in their speech and in their

knowledge (v. 5). The testimony of Christ was confirmed in them, and this means that it was a *true* testimony (v. 6). In the matter of spiritual giftedness, they as a church came in second to no one, and they exercised these gifts as they were waiting for the coming of the Lord (v. 7).

There is a tendency among perfectionists to adopt an “all or nothing” approach to this kind of thing. This introductory material is glossed over as so much spiritual boilerplate, and the real status of the church is uncovered when we hear about the man who was living with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1), or about the certain members of the church who were getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:21), or about the ones who were taking others of them before unbelieving courts (1 Cor. 6:6). We are all familiar with these (and other) Corinthian failings, and this is why the phrase “basket case” seems to apply. But we should not be so familiar with them that we set aside what Paul says in his greeting here.

He could not address them as spiritual men, but as carnal (1 Cor. 3:1–4). And yet, even though he had to talk to them as though they were carnal, here at the start he assures us that they were anything but carnal. Paul was thankful for the grace of God that was in evidence at Corinth—and so should we be.

TIME WELL SPENT

Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God

is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:8–9)

Paul is convinced that God has gotten a good start with the Corinthians—they are equipped and called, and have a solid testimony. And if God begins something, He will finish it. The intent that God has for His people is that they might be blameless in the “day of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Corinthians will finish well because God will confirm them to the end.

Their faithfulness will be the direct result of God’s faithfulness. He does not hold onto us because we hold onto Him; it is the other way around. We hold onto Him because He holds onto us. It was “by God” that we were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and it is by God that we will be kept in that fellowship. Eternity is not a reward for time well-spent. Time well-spent is the intrusion of eternal grace into our lives here and now.

YOUR KNEES ARE BLIND

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. (1 Cor. 1:10–11)

One of the central problems at Corinth was their fractiousness, and so Paul begins his letter to them by pleading with them, in the name of Jesus Christ, that they drop their contentions. Some from the household of Chloe had told Paul about those contentions, and he saw immediately how destructive they would be (v. 11). He beseeches them, and what he says is quite striking. He asks them to speak the same thing, to avoid divisions in their midst, to be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and to be perfectly joined together in the same judgment (v. 10).

This exhortation is greatly needed in the American church today, not because we invented fractiousness, but because we have sought to make it into a virtue. On the flip side, we have tried to represent obedience to this as a vice. What would we say about a congregation that actually obeyed the apostle's exhortations here? The first thing that would come to mind is that they "had all drunk the Kool-Aid." We would charge the elder board with being a bunch of patsies and yes men.

Of course there *is* a sin associated with mindless conformity—a sin that Paul addresses later in this letter when he demands diversity in the body. The body needs to have different organs—knees, eyes, kidneys. The different organs all perform different functions, and it is not obedience to this passage to try to require the knees to see, or the kidneys to hear. But neither is it obedience to demand that every organ act in a spastic and contrarian way for the sake of the free exchange of ideas. All the organs do different things, but in a body with hand/eye coordination, they do different things *toward the same end*. They

should be perfectly joined, which is why Paul pleads for that here.

HOW TIGHT THE BAPTISMAL WAGONS ARE CIRCLED

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. (1 Cor. 1:12–17)

One of the great problems at Corinth was factionalism and sectarianism and, not surprisingly, false views of baptism were tangled up in the error.

The factionalism was seen in the primary identification that some Christians were putting in the wrong place—“I am of Paul,” and so forth (v. 12). Four names are mentioned—Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and *Christ*. It is interesting to note that the spirit of sectarianism does not vanish simply because the name of Christ is employed. Often that can be the indicator of a hyper-sectarianism—“I am of Christ. Not so sure about *you*.” So a Christian church can be just as sectarian as a Lutheran or Wesleyan one. Sectarianism is found in the heart and in how tight the

baptismal wagons are circled, not on the sign board in front of the church.

Such sectarianism is in evidence when Christ is treated as divided—when anyone who actually belongs to Him is treated as though he does *not* belong to Him. To divide the body is an attempt to divide the Head (v. 13). And if Paul did not die for your sins, still less did Calvin die for them (v. 13). And if no one was baptized in the name of Paul, still less were they baptized in the name of any of the church fathers or reformers. Paul then slides easily from the name into which people were baptized to the person administering at the baptism. He thanks God that he did not actually baptize more than a handful of the Corinthians—Crispus, Gaius (v. 14), and the household of Stephans (v. 16) to be exact. There might have been a few other strays (v. 16), but Paul has established his point. If he had baptized the whole church someone might point to that as evidence that Paul was baptizing in his own name, instead of baptizing Christians into the triune name (v. 15).

Rightly understood, water baptism is certainly a part of the biblical presentation of the gospel (Matt. 28:18–20). But water baptism has been wrongly understood from the very beginning, and so it is important for Paul to distinguish, and sharply, between the heart of what Christ sent him to do, and the external accoutrements of what he had been sent to do. If we get any of this wrong, then the cross of Christ is made of “none effect” (v. 17).

There are two ways this can happen that Paul mentions here. The first is through a wooden sacramentalism which

simply collapses baptism and the gospel together. The second is “wisdom of words.” If Catholics are prone to the first error, Protestants are to the second. The former have ornate baptismal fonts, the latter ornate pulpits. The human heart will slip off the gospel every chance it gets, and so Paul sets both priestly muttering and pulpiteering arabesques off to the side.

NO EMPTY CROSS

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:18)

We will have more to say about this glorious truth in the comments on the verses following, but let’s begin with a few observations about the core of this glorious truth.

First, it is not a sign of modern enlightenment for us to discover that “the preaching of the cross” is foolishness to the modern man. It is not foolishness to the new modern man; it is actually foolishness to the *old* man. When people say that preaching the death of Christ is outmoded, they are pretending that there was once a time, back in the day, when it wasn’t. But preaching the cross has always been unfashionable. All attempts to make the death of Jesus relevant to death’s understanding of life are bound to fail. The only way to make the cross relevant to our old man is to nail that old man to it—which can only be successfully done when the cross is already occupied by our substitute. No sinner was ever saved by an empty cross—an empty tomb, yes, but not an empty cross.

Second, it is foolishness to those who perish. The only way out is for this perishing to perish, for this death to die. This is gospel; this is what gospel *does*. This is its power and authority.

Third, this gospel is incomprehensible to those who need it. This means that in order for anyone to be converted, the efficacy must come from God alone. Sinners recoil from the only thing that can save them—and they have to be saved from that recoil first.

And so last, this passage shows us the absolute necessity of the new birth. There are ultimately two kinds of people in the world—those to whom the cross is foolishness and those to whom it is the power of God. This distinction, at the end of the day, trumps all others.

HIGH PHILOSOPHY ON THE CARPET

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (1 Cor. 1:19–20)

We should begin with the fact of the taunt, and then move on to the reasons for it. The reasons are given in the verses that follow, but the fact of it is something we too often want to skate around.

When Scripture says that there is a way that “seemeth right unto a man,” but “the end thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 14:12; Prov. 16:25), it is very easy for us to think that Scripture is talking about too much beer or too