

## **1 CORINTHIANS**

### **3) "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth"**

#### **Read Chapter 1: 1-9**

As we noticed in outlining the Epistle, Paul deals in Chapters 1-6 with things that he had heard, and in Chapters 7-16 with things that he had been asked. The order is significant. He deals firstly with things about which he had **not** been asked! So far as Chapters 1-6 are concerned, Paul addresses two reports which had reached him. See 1: 11 and 5: 1. Chapters 1-4 deal with the first report, and Chapters 5-6 with the second report.

But before this, the introduction. This occupies vv.1-9, which may be divided as follows: **(1)** the writer (v.1); **(2)** the readers (v.2); **(3)** the greeting (v.3); **(4)** the thanksgiving (vv.4-9).

#### **1) THE WRITER, v.1**

"Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother", or "Paul, a called apostle of Jesus Christ, by God's will, and Sosthenes the brother" (JND).

Paul describes himself as 'a called apostle' as opposed to "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11: 13). This emphasises both his authority and his humility:

- **His authority.** This was divinely-given. He was "an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God". He emphasises this particularly in writing to the Galatians: "Paul, an apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..." (Gal. 1: 1). The plural here ("neither of men") and the singular ("neither by man") are significant. In the first case, he emphasises that his apostleship was not by human appointment, and he is evidently referring to the apostles acting together as in the case of Matthias (Acts 1: 15-26). In the second, he emphasises that it was not by human mediation, and is evidently referring here to one prominent man, such as Peter. His apostleship was not human in origin, and no human channel was used in bestowing it upon him.

Amongst other things, this means that we must recognise that his teaching is nothing less than “the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14: 37).

But there is more: Paul was “an apostle of Jesus Christ **through the will of God**”. The will of God for Paul was certainly not a divine after-thought. Just listen to this: “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb (so his service was determined before his birth), and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen...” (Gal. 1: 15-16). Paul was clearly thinking of the commissioning of Jeremiah when he wrote this. See Jeremiah 1: 4-5. Jeremiah was a prophet and Paul was an apostle, but this does not mean that God only predetermines the service of prominent people. Each one of us are ‘key personnel’ in His service. Very clearly, both Jeremiah and Paul had no doubts about their calling, and neither should we, even though our work for God may seem so lowly and unpretentious. We too have been called (see v.9)

- **His humility.** Paul did not boast about his authority. He was deeply conscious that with others, he was simply a servant and completely dependent on God: “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers, by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?” (3: 5), or, putting Apollos first, “Who then is **Apollos**, and who is Paul? Ministering servants, through whom ye have believed, as the Lord has given to each” (JND). The RV goes further: “**What** then is Apollos? And **what** is Paul? Ministers through whom ye believed: and each as the Lord gave to him”. It is not **who** we are, but **what** we are that is important! Paul makes the point that no believer, and no assembly, has any right to self-congratulation: “What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” (4:7).

A deep sense of our calling will keep us walking humbly with God (Micah 6: 8). It certainly won’t make us aloof. Paul is happy to be associated with Sosthenes, a lesser-known brother! The description of Sosthenes - literally, “the brother” (JND) - could well be intended to distinguish him from “Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue” (Acts 18: 17). It would be nice to think that they were one and the same, but this cannot be proved.

Paul’s calling was particular in nature: he was “an apostle” (the word “called” is an adjective), whereas the following verse speaks about a calling common to all believers: “called...saints”, where the word “called” is also an adjective.

## **2) THE READERS, v.2**

"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 ('call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ', JND), both their's and our's". We should notice: **(a)** whose they were: "**the church of God**"; **(b)** where they were: "**at Corinth**"; **(c)** what they were: "**sanctified in Christ Jesus**".

### **a) Whose they were**

"**The church of God**". The word translated "church" (*ekklesia*) has two simple parts: *ek* meaning 'out of', and *klesis* meaning 'a calling'. We therefore learn, immediately, that in the New Testament, the word "church" cannot refer to the building in which people meet, but to the people themselves. In fact *ekklesia* is more accurately rendered 'assembly' or 'congregation'. It is also worth pointing out that the word 'assembly' is not a denominational title (we sometimes hear people say, 'churches and assemblies'), but a good Bible word. In simple terms, it describes people who have been gathered or called out **from** something, and gathered or called **to** something. As its usage in Acts ch.19 makes clear, the word was used generally in New Testament times. In this particular case, it was used to describe people who had been called out of their homes and from their workshops to attend a meeting in the theatre (Acts 19: 32, 41). How then is the word *ekklesia* used in the New Testament to describe Christians?

We can answer this by citing 1 Corinthians 1. 2, "the church of God which is at Corinth ...them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus". Corinth was a vile place (see 1 Cor. 6. 9-11), but there was a body of people in the city who were totally different. The words "the church of God which is at Corinth" describe men and women who had severed their association with the immorality and depravity of Corinth, and who had been brought into fellowship with God. In short, the church is a body of people **called out of the world** with its sin and immorality, with its pleasures and pursuits, and with its politics and religion, and **called into sacred fellowship with God** through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. They now belonged to God. They were "God's husbandry...God's building" (3: 9). They were "the temple of God" (3: 16). Even though there were disorders amongst the believers at Corinth, they were still "the church of God". It might be helpful to add that the expression "church of God" or "churches of God" generally (some say 'always') refers to a local church or local churches.

**b) Where they were**

The words, "***the church of God which is at Corinth***" are remarkable. The expression, "the church of God", indicates a sacred place: the words "at Corinth" indicate a profane place. As we noted in outlining the Epistle, Job asked the question, "who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" To which he answered, "not one" (Job 14: 4). But God did exactly that at Corinth! He had "much people in this city" (Acts 18: 10). Paul describes the change in the believers at Corinth as follows: "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (6: 9-11). This is in itself a splendid definition of "the church of God which is at Corinth". In summary, we have a holy people in a wicked environment, but although remaining in that environment, they were "called out" from it. It was "the church ***of*** God which is ***at*** Corinth". The assembly was located at Corinth, but it belonged to God.

**c) What they were**

The character of the local church is defined: "to them that are ***sanctified in Christ Jesus...called saints***". It is worth noticing that it is "sanctified in Christ Jesus", that is, in the Lord Jesus in His risen and ascended glory. There is a difference of emphasis in the the name "Jesus Christ" and "Christ Jesus". The former emphasises that He was here on earth but is now glorified in heaven: the latter emphasises that He is now glorified in heaven having been here on earth.

In the words of J. Hunter (*What the Bible Teaches - 1 Corinthians*), "'sanctified in Christ Jesus' means they are set apart to God by virtue of their faith-union with Christ. This is a divine act, the act of God. It is their standing before Him. We are then told that they are 'called saints' ('saints by divine calling', JND margin). They have not attained to be saints: this is the name God has bestowed upon them. In this sense every believer is a saint from the moment of conversion". With this in mind, we should notice, as above, that Paul does not say "called *to be* saints" (AV). Notice the italicised words. The word "saints" does not refer to a human attainment, but to a divine accomplishment. The fact that the "saints" at Corinth were not acting in a 'saintly' way did not in any way alter their position before God.

We should add that the expression "church of God" (singular) emphasises their collective responsibility, and that the word "saints" (plural) emphasises their individual responsibility. In passing, the very words "sanctified in Christ Jesus...called saints" must have been, perhaps 'should have been', a rebuke to their toleration of immorality. See 5: 1-13. It should also be said that in other passages, reference is made to practical and progressive sanctification. See, for example, 1 Thessalonians 4: 3-4. Our practice must correspond with our position.

As J.Hunter observes, the added words, 'with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord', "widens its teaching right down to the present time". It emphasises the calling of every believer, and we must not miss its application to every assembly. No local church can suit themselves when it comes to doctrine and practice. Hence we read, "as I teach everywhere in every church" (4: 17); "and so ordain I in all the churches" (7: 17); "we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" (11: 16); "as in all the churches of the saints" (14: 33). It is a contradiction in terms to use the expression "church of God", and not to recognise and obey the word of God. The expression "call upon" the name of our Lord Jesus Christ implies submission to His authority: it is "**Lord** Jesus Christ". We should note the five references to "Lord" in vv.1-9. See vv.2, 3, 7, 8, 9. The words, "both their's and our's" emphasise that "all...in every place" submit to the same authority. Had this been practised at Corinth, nobody would have said, "I am of Paul...Apolllos...Cephas...Christ" (1: 12).

### **3) THE GREETING, v.3**

"Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ". Note the order: "grace...peace". There could be no "peace" without "grace". The word "grace" (*charis*) was the Greek greeting, whereas "peace" (*shalom*) was the Hebrew greeting. It has been nicely said that "grace" is what the Lord Jesus brought (see Titus 2: 11) and "peace" is what He left (John 14: 27).

### **4) THE THANKSGIVING, vv.4-9**

Paul's thanksgiving entirely concerns God's provision for them. He does not mention any spiritual qualities in them as he does, for example, in giving thanks at the commencement of the Colossian, Philippian and Thessalonian epistles. None the less there is thanksgiving here, even though disorders were present in the assembly. Galatians commences without any giving of thanks at all,

for the simple reason that there was serious doctrinal error present in the assemblies in Galatia, and thanksgiving was not in order in those circumstances.

Although assembly disorders existed at Corinth, Paul did not lose sight of all that grace had accomplished: "I thank my God always on your behalf for the grace of God which is given (aorist tense: simply 'given', JND) by Jesus Christ ('in Christ Jesus', JND)" (v.4). We should notice the expressions "my God" (compare Phil. 4: 19) and "always" (Phil. 1: 4). Other things call for attention. Paul's reference to the "grace of God" here reminds us that it is not limited to salvation alone. The apostle continues by explaining in vv.5-7 what the "grace of God" had provided. The same word (*charis*) is translated "benefit" in 2 Corinthians 1: 15. Now that really is a good definition of "grace"! Every 'benefit' we receive, whether in salvation or otherwise, is "**in** Christ Jesus" (JND). All God's blessings are in Him. Moreover, they are "**in Christ** Jesus" (JND). That is, as already noted, in the glorified Christ at God's right hand. See Ephesians 4: 7-8.

This divine provision covers past, present, and future: **(a)** what has been accomplished (vv.5-6); **(b)** what was being accomplished (v.7); **(c)** what will be accomplished (vv.8-9).

**a) What has been accomplished, vv.5-6**

"I thank my God always...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 "the grace of God" here had enriched the believers at Corinth: "in everything ye have been enriched". We should carefully note that "all utterance" and "all knowledge" do not mean 'all spirituality' as this very epistle makes clear. The gifts of the Spirit **to** us are not the same as the work of the Spirit **in** us. The grace of God:

- **Meets all our needs.** Here, this is expressed corporately (the needs of the assembly) although, of course, it is equally true individually: "in **every thing** ye are enriched by him".

- **Makes us wealthy:** "in every thing ye are **enriched** by him". We have a rich God. Paul refers elsewhere to "the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1: 7) and "the riches of his mercy" (Eph. 2: 4). His wealth has become ours at infinite cost: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye though his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8: 9).

The assembly at Corinth had been enriched by him "in all utterance, and in all knowledge". "In all utterance (*logos*)", that is, they had been enriched outwardly. The word *logos* is used elsewhere in this way: see, for example 1 Corinthians 2: 13; 12: 8. "In all knowledge", that is, inwardly. Or, to put it differently, they had been enriched in ability to **communicate** ("in all utterance") the mind of God, and in their grasp of the **content** of God's word and God's will ("in all knowledge"). This has particular reference to the ministry of the prophets: see 14: 29-30. God, in Christ, had made adequate provision for the needs of his people, and for their spiritual enrichment.

The existence of these gifts in the assembly at Corinth was confirmation (or validation) that they had received the gospel message: "Even as the testimony of Christ (that is, the gospel - the testimony borne to Christ) was confirmed in you". The word "confirmed" (*bebaioo*), meaning 'to make firm, establish, make secure' (W.E.Vine), translates a term in Greek commercial law which denotes a guarantee of title. The bestowal of divinely-given gifts on the assembly at Corinth was evidence of their salvation. This is confirmed by the words which follow, "so that ye come behind in no gift...", which brings us to:

**b) What was being accomplished, v. 7**

"So that ye come behind in no gift, waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ", or "waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (RV). The word "coming" (*apokalupsis*) means 'unveiling' or 'uncovering'. The word "gift" (*charisma*) means 'a gift of grace'. All gifts are 'charismatic!' They are all 'gifts of grace'. The word "waiting" (*apekdechomai*) means 'to await or expect eagerly' (W.E.Vine). It occurs again, for example, in Philippians. 3: 20, "we look (*apekdechomai*) for the Saviour". How eagerly are **we** awaiting His coming?

While it is often said that "the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (RV) refers particularly to His public manifestation in glory on earth, it could simply refer here to that wonderful day when "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3: 2), which will take place **before** His public manifestation! We must also bear in mind that "waiting for the revelation ('coming', AV) of our Lord Jesus Christ" is far more than a technical reference to the order of future events: it is light from the future for present living. See, for example 1 John 3: 3; 2 Pet. 3: 11.

**c) What will be accomplished, vv.8-9**

"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".

In saying "Who shall also confirm you unto the end", Paul assures them that the Lord Jesus will continue to provide for them until He comes again. He will continue to attest the reality of their salvation by providing the gifts necessary for the assembly to function. More than that, those gifts are provided to ensure the spiritual preservation of His people so that they will be "blameless (*anankletos*, meaning 'unreproveable', or 'unimpeachable', 'cannot be called into account') in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ". So the gifts he imparts, including those of "utterance...knowledge", are bestowed with the spiritual welfare of His people in view.

"The day of our Lord Jesus Christ" must be carefully distinguished from "the day of the Lord". The latter refers to judgment and administration on earth: the former refers to assessment and reward at the judgment seat of Christ in heaven. In this connection we should notice the following: "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for **the day** shall declare it" (1 Cor. 3: 13); "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4: 5); "he that hath begun a good work in you, will perform it until the **day of Jesus Christ**" (Phil. 1: 6)); "that he may be sincere and without offence till the **day of Christ**" (Phil. 1: 10); "holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the **day of Christ**, that I have not run in vain" (Phil. 2: 16)). It is also called "that day" (2 Tim. 1: 12; 4: 9).

Having said, "who shall also confirm you unto the end" (v.8), Paul makes it clear that "this is not a vain boast. It is a sure confidence grounded on the fact that "God is faithful" (Leon Morris). God, who has called us "unto the fellowship of his Son", will not let us down! He will not withdraw His fellowship. We can rest on God's **faithfulness**, and we can rest in Christ's **fellowship**. The word translated "fellowship" (*koinonia*) first occurs in the New Testament as "partners" (Luke 5: 10). Within that fellowship, He supplies the needs of His people, here in particular, their assembly needs.

As Leon Morris points out, "Paul goes back to beginnings. This faithful God had called the Corinthian Christians 'unto the fellowship of his Son



Jesus Christ our Lord'. The opening words of this Epistle reminded us that Paul's position as an apostle was due to the divine call. Now we see that there is a call to every believer".

In saying, "called unto ('into', JND) the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord", Paul states some important things about our fellowship with the Lord Jesus:

- It is with "**his Son**", with God's Son. This emphasises the **dignity** of our fellowship. Compare Galatians 4: 6, "And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts..."

- It is with "**Jesus**". This emphasises the **sympathy** in our fellowship. He is "Jesus the Son of God" (Heb. 4: 14). As "Jesus", the perfect man, He is able to act as our "great high priest".

- It is with "**Christ**". This emphasises the **glory** of our fellowship. "God hath made that same Jesus...both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2: 36).

- It is with the "**Lord**". This emphasises the **authority** in our fellowship. Not our authority, but His authority. It is "the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ **our** Lord". Had the believers at Corinth fully recognised this, they would not have said, as already noted, "I am of Paul...Apollos...Cephas...Christ" (1: 12).

More of this in our next study, God willing.

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