

20260215 1 Corinthians 1:1 – A Call to Unity in Christ

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:1-9 ESV)

Background of Last Week

Last week, we learned that Paul had spent a year and a half in Corinth. He had won many people to Christ. He started out ministering to the Jews in the Temple, which, as our speaker said, was right near where the museum is today in Corinth. We learned that Corinth was worldly in every way imaginable. They had a booming economy, with all kinds of trades, including tent-making. That was the trade of the Apostle Paul and his friends, Priscilla and Aquilla, whom he had met there in Ephesus. They were tent-makers and Jewish converts to Christianity. They had been expelled from Rome by an edict of the Emperor Claudius, who had sent all Jews in the City of Rome into exile.

In Corinth, the converts had been primarily Gentiles. They had no prior knowledge of Scripture or of what it meant to live lives of holiness. Prior to coming to Christ, they were involved in temple prostitution in their worship of Athena, the goddess of fertility. They were also worshippers of Bacchus, the god of wine and beer. I am not sure how one worshipped Bacchus, but it most certainly involved getting drunk, and all that goes with that. They were also a people who followed mystic prophetic utterances. These were part of the worship of Apollo, the god of wisdom. This involved listening to seers like the Oracle of Delphi who would go into trances, and speak riddles in unknown languages. An interpreter was nearby to explain to the worshipper what was being said and, of course, to collect the money from the worshiper who had received a divine message.

The god Asclepius (a healer) was at the center of Corinthian worship. He is symbolized as a snake on a staff. This, of course, is the symbol used to this day for a physician's craft. There were craftsmen who would fashion molds of whatever body part was ailing a person, which were then left at the temple of Asclepius along with offerings for those desperate for physical healing. As these pagans received the gospel, they would bring their ideologies into the church. It is easy to imagine how these thoughts, ideas, and practices would creep into the simple worship of

Jesus. These are some of the background issues to the dysfunction that Paul heard of going on in the Corinthian church.

v.1-3 Paul now writes the people of this church that he loves so much. He says that the letter is from him and a person named Sostenes (meaning “saving strength”). We don’t know for certain who this Sostenes is, but Eusebius and other church fathers believed it was the same Sostenes who had been the leader of the synagogue in Corinth when Paul first arrived. Paul reminds them that he was called and sent (the meaning of the word apostle) by the very will of God to establish the church in Corinth. He addresses the congregation as “saints” who had been sanctified in Christ Jesus.

This should remind each of us that, as believers, we are also saints. We are made holy before the Lord, and we are called then to live out that holiness in our lives. We are those who “call upon the name of the Lord Jesus”. That’s another way of saying that we’ve accepted Christ as our Savior. Paul then blesses them with grace and peace. Once again, let us be reminded that it is by grace that we are saved, and it is not of ourselves lest any of us can boast about anything that we have done or not done. It is only by accepting the love of God that we are able to walk and live in peace. You might remember that peace in the Jewish mind is nothing less than *shalom*, which is a peace that passes all understanding. It is the peace we experience when nothing around us says we should be at peace. It is that state of mental well-being that comes into us and allows us to rest in Him. The operative word for *shalom* is rest indeed. Isaiah tells us, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee.” (Isaiah 26:3 KJV)

v. 4 Paul expresses his thanks for them. Reader, thanksgiving is a huge part of what brings us our joy. I have learned that when we feel we have lost our joy it is in part due to the fact that we can’t find anything for which we can be thankful. Paul tells us in many other passages, including the notable passage to the church in Thessalonika, that thanksgiving is tied to joy. *“Rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 KJV)*. Reader, if you’re having a deficit in your joy department today, begin thanking God for anything and everything that you can recall to mind. It is easy for us to get bogged down and overcome by the aches, pains, and hurts of this life. Gratitude will affect your spiritual altitude.

Paul adds that we are enriched by Him in every way. And we were given all the knowledge we need to trust Him. He reminds the Corinthians that they have received every gift that they need to remain faithful in Christ. The same goes for you and me. When we came to Christ, we were given all that we need to sustain us by His faithfulness unto the end. And each of us is called into the “fellowship” of His Son. Fellowship means much more than fried chicken and iced tea. It is the communion and participation that we have with Him and that we enjoy with one another. It is no mistake that Paul mentions *Koinonia* at this point, because disunity is the first problem that Paul addresses in this letter.

Koinonia, *κοινωνία* in Greek, is one of the most profound words used in the New Testament. It is commonly translated into English as “fellowship”, “communion”, “sharing”, “participation”, and “partnership”. But at its root is the word *koinos*, which means “common” or “shared”. It is being an active participant in God’s love and jointly sharing in His life, reality, purpose, and identity. My former pastor, Clyde Larabee, used to say, “Fellowship involves much

more than fried chicken and iced tea.” There are several dimensions in which we are to experience this community or this *koinonia*. First, we are to enjoy it vertically, enjoying a communion and participation in the things of God. John tells us, “Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:3) Paul will discuss baptism in a few moments, which is our means of publicly expressing our desire to participate in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. This is part of our vertical *koinonia*. Secondly, we can enjoy *koinonia* horizontally. This means that we experience it in our relationships with one another. Because we share the same Holy Spirit and identity in Christ, we can share life and a common purpose with one another. This bond should be deeper than any family ties or identity with any other human association. This is why we sometimes sing, “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.” The core, bottom-line, big idea of fellowship is that we share a mystical participation in a divine reality. That’s a big way of saying we participate together in the life, purpose, and mission of Jesus. In doing this, we enjoy mutual support, generosity, encouragement, and all that is our life in Christ. This is because we are each tied to Him vertically, enabling us to have a horizontal association with one another that is beyond any human association. In short, *koinonia* is a shared life in Jesus.

Divisions in the Church

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:10-17 ESV)

v.10-17 Paul heard about these divisions that had sprung up in Corinth in his absence, and didn’t like what he heard. He will show the kinds of things that can draw us away from the sweet fellowship for which we are intended. Apparently, factions had formed, and cliques had congregated around different personalities. They were attributing spiritual status according to who had baptized whom. Paul is shocked and dismayed by what he finds. He will delve into this more and more as we progress. Paul is going to argue that this division is ridiculous. He asks, “Is Christ divided? If He is not, then why are you?” We humans, tend to form cliques and groups. We want to be identified in a way that sets us apart from other people. It really is based in pride and is a carnal expression of our lives. Paul will tell them that he can’t even talk to them as mature Christians because they have not grown up.

He will make the point that we rally around humans that really have no more power than we do. We see this at election times like we’re in now, when every candidate is out there telling us they are the answer to all our problems. You can hear the frustration in Paul’s voice as he says, "I’m just glad that I didn’t baptize any of you, except for a few that he names." And the final

statement he makes is so powerful, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.”

Is Paul Minimizing the Importance of Baptism?

This doesn't diminish the importance of baptism, but the Bible nowhere declares that it is a requirement for salvation. People who promote that idea find it in Acts 2:38, where Peter is addressing the crowd, and the people are cut to the heart. They saw that they were horrible and needed saving. Peter goes on to say that they should repent, believe in the Lord Jesus, and be baptized. Some view this rigidly, as though Peter is offering a systematic formula for salvation. I believe he's giving the roadmap to going from a life of nonbelief to belief. One reason that the passage can't mean that baptism is because of what Paul says here. Otherwise, there would be an incongruency.

There are many other passages in the Bible that speak of salvation that make no mention of water baptism. For example, Ephesians 2:8-9 is a perfect outline of salvation with no mention whatsoever of water baptism. Was it unimportant? No. It's always been part of what we practice as Christians. I learned so much about this in my Church history seminary courses. There were many ways early Christians performed baptisms. The Bible isn't really clear on why we need to be baptized. It just says that when we come to Christ, that's part of our various acts of obedience. This past week, my niece asked me why Jesus needed to be baptized. John's baptism was a different kind of baptism. He told them they needed to confess their sins and come into the Jordan. Luke tells us that those baptized by John understood what Jesus was saying. So, why did Jesus get baptized? John the Baptist certainly wanted to know. He told Jesus, “No, I need to be baptized by you.” Jesus said, “We need to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” So if John's was a baptism of righteousness, why did he get into the waters? He came to identify with sinful man. That means you and me. And He identified with us all the way to the cross. He was identifying with those who needed to repent. In the same way, when we get baptized, we are identifying with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection. Next week we will have a baptism here in our church. So, let's review for a minute exactly what that means. In reality, it is a statement by the person being baptized.

We go into the water with someone who's already confessed their faith in Jesus and His work on the cross. Usually, I lean them back, representing them dying, and then we submerge them completely, signifying that they've been buried. The old man is being buried under the water. I then bring them up out of the water, signifying that they've risen in Christ. They became a new creation when they came to faith, and coming up out of the water signifies being raised up into a whole new life. It is a new life of following Jesus. Baptism doesn't save you. Jesus saves you. The baptism that goes on is a symbol of a spiritual reality that has occurred. This is also what Communion is all about. The bread symbolizes His body, and the wine symbolizes His blood. We must be careful not to elevate those symbols above the spiritual reality. They are not needed to save you anymore than baptism is needed to save you. The reality is what these symbols point to. The reality is Jesus' death on the cross for you and me, and His rising from the dead.

I want to encourage you with Paul's words at this point in his letter. He says, ***17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:17 ESV)***

Paul says that you and I have what it takes to share the gospel. You don't need eloquent wisdom. Paul says it is the cross that makes the gospel powerful. Reader, I want to encourage you to share the gospel message. When you share it with others, talk about it in the simplest terms that you can. Just tell people. You and I don't need words of eloquent wisdom. We just need to present Jesus and what He did for each of us. Tell others of how much He loves them and wants communion, *koinonia*, with them.

Christ the Wisdom and Power of God

18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

***"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."***

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

This is a beautiful dialogue in which Paul talks about the gospel message. He says that the gospel is complete nonsense to those who have never accepted Christ. It is foolishness. But once you've come to Christ, it is the only thing that has any real meaning. It is the power of God. Why would it be the "power of God?" It is the power of God because it is only through the operation of the Holy Spirit that you and I are able to love others with a supernatural kind of love. We are able to have peace beyond what the world can understand. This idea of the gospel being "folly" is consistent with the message throughout Scripture. The world never found God through wisdom and philosophies. The Jews can't get over the "stumbling block" of Jesus being God incarnate, who came to redeem us through the sacrifice of Himself on the cross. The Greeks can't get past their knowledge and philosophies. You see, none of it makes sense without the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "To those who are called, Messiah is the power and wisdom of God." My dad used to say, "God is calling out to each of us on KGOD, 24-7 360, saying, 'I love you and I want a relationship with you'." Paul adds that we as humans are no match for the wisdom and power of God. Now, in a call to unity, Paul says,

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the

strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”(1 Corinthians 1:26-31 ESV)

Paul restates grace in these few verses. He reminds the readers that none of us who came to Him were wise by the world’s standards. None of us was powerful, nor did we come from noble births. He adds that it is only through Jesus that we receive the righteousness and sanctification of God, and that we are redeemed. We were each redeemed, bought back, from the slave market of sin and self into a marvelous *koinonia* with Him and with each other. For this reason and for this alone, none of us can boast about anything of ourselves. Seven to ten years after this letter to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote the young pastor Titus.

4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.⁸ The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.⁹ But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.¹⁰ As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. (Titus 3:4-11 ESV)

Let us pray.

Notes: All Bible references are in the English Standard Version unless specified otherwise.