

Called To Fellowship *I Corinthians 1:1-9*

Imagine if we were the church at Corinth, hearing Paul's letter being read to us. What a remarkable thing. I want you to remember that this is a personal letter from Paul. It isn't a series of sermons, though it seems like it, and during this message series, it might feel like it.

After spending eighteen months in Corinth, establishing this new church, he returns to Jerusalem and then sets out again on what we call his third missionary journey. He comes to the city of Ephesus.



Perhaps early in his time in Ephesus, he writes a strong letter to the Corinthians about immorality in the church. Paul references it in chapter five of First Corinthians. That letter is lost to us.

Indications are that the church sends a letter back to Paul, probably delivered by those Paul mentions in chapter 16:

I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. – *I Corinthians 16:17-18*

The letter they bring from Corinth tells about things going on in the church as well as raising various doctrinal and practical questions. In response, Paul writes this letter, what we call First Corinthians, to deal with those questions as well as to rebuke them for their moral and spiritual failings.

It is a letter that, in many ways, could have been written to the 21st century church. The problems we will see in Corinth are similar to many in American churches today. Warren Wiersbe writes:

No letter in the New Testament deals so forcibly with local church problems, and perhaps no New Testament letter is more neglected today.

So we are going to venture on a journey through this letter and chew on some difficult and some controversial matters about church life and practice. I can't promise I know the right interpretation of everything, but I will give you my best understanding and hope that you will really wrestle with the text as we seek to understand first what Paul is saying to the Corinthians in their time and their place, and then seek to apply the principles to our time and our place.

Paul opens with a greeting: **I Corinthians 1:1-3**

Paul begins this letter, as he does in most of his letters, by identifying himself and the ministry he has from God. He says that he was "called." Paul didn't just come up with this idea of preaching and teaching. It wasn't something he set out to do.

In fact, we know from Paul's biography that exactly the opposite was true. He was a Pharisee extraordinaire, an intellectual educated under one of the greatest teachers of Israel. He was zealous for the Jewish faith and became a vicious persecutor of those called "followers of the Way."

When on the road to Damascus for the purpose of apprehending believers of this Jesus, Paul, then known as Saul, has a rendezvous with the One he sought to deny. He is converted to Christ. God spoke to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and told him to go to Saul with a message. God said:

Go, for he (that is, Saul) is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel – *Acts 9:15*

God called Paul to be his chosen witness. This calling was according to the will of God, not some man-made plan. Paul didn't choose this path because it would look good on his resume. He wasn't operating under the authority of any group of people or ecclesiastical body. It was God's calling on his life.

And notice what he was called to be: "an apostle of Christ Jesus." The word *apostle* simply means "one sent forth."

This was Paul's calling. In the very general sense of the word, we are all apostles – small “a.” We are “sent ones.” Every one of us as believers are called by the will of God to be a witness for Christ – by our lives and by our words.

Paul then speaks of those to whom he writes this letter. And he says several things about them:

1) They belong to God. He identifies them as the “church of God.” They don't exist for themselves; they are part of God's community.

2) They are set apart for God. That's the meaning of the word *sanctified*. When they believed the gospel – the good news of Jesus – God saved them and set them apart for his divine purposes. This is what God does even today for every person who becomes a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ.

In Acts, chapter 26, Paul is giving his testimony before King Agrippa. He tells how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and spoke to him about his calling not only to Jews but also to the Gentiles –

– to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.
– *Acts 26:17-18*

The third thing that Paul identifies about these believers in Corinth:

3) They are called to be holy. In verse three, Paul says that they were called to be saints, meaning “holy ones.” The words sanctification and saints are connected in meaning and come from the same Greek root word *hagios*. *Hagios* means “to be separate, hallowed, holy.”

W.E. Vine, writing about these two words says:

Since every believer is sanctified in Christ Jesus... a common N.T. designation of all believers is “saints,” i.e. “sanctified” or “holy ones.” Thus sainthood, or sanctification, is not an attainment, it is that state into which God, in grace, calls sinful (people), and in which they begin their course as Christians.

So, look at this. Paul begins this personal letter to relatively new believers, many if not most of whom have come to faith through his teaching, and is going to have to take them to the woodshed for the way they are behaving and for what is going on in the church. But, he begins by talking first about their identity in Christ.

Paul identifies them by their position in Christ. They belong to God; they have been set apart by God for his purposes; and they are, therefore, saints: “set apart ones,” “holy ones.”

Turn to chapter three. In many respects, these verses might be the key to the whole letter.

I Corinthians 3:21b-23

This speaks of their position in Christ. The verses bring to mind Paul’s statement to the Colossians in chapter three:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. – *Colossians 3:1-3*

To the Corinthians: “All things are yours...you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.” Here’s the deal. You are free, except that you belong to Christ and should live then according to Christ, obeying him, and Christ is of God the Father before whom he obeyed.

Before Paul ever begins to lower the boom because of how the believers in Corinth were living out their faith in Christ, he points to who they are in Christ. Oh, Paul isn’t going to hold back. But he does want to remind them of their identity as sanctified ones and who should, thus, be living in a way that their condition lines up with their position.

After his Greeting, Paul moves to his Gratitude. **I Corinthians 1:4-9a.**

At this point in so many of his letters, Paul praises his readers for things like their faith, their love, their endurance, and their labor for Christ. There isn’t any of that here. Paul doesn’t praise or commend the Corinthians. Rather, he delights in God and God’s work among the Corinthians.

The focus of Paul’s prayer is not on the Corinthians, but on God: what God has done for them, what he is doing for them, and what he will yet do for them. He revels in the grace of God given to them, that they were enriched in Christ, that God had given them spiritual gifts.

We will see in this letter how the Corinthians were abusing the grace of God, how they were misusing spiritual gifts, how they were violating the unity of the Spirit.

Paul is keen on the faithfulness of God. Though these believers were not living as they ought, Paul was confident that God would yet be faithful to his children, even though they were misbehaving. That's why he could say that God would sustain them to the end. This is the promise he mentions in his letter to the Philippians:

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. – *Philippians 1:6*

Here's the good news for us, folks. We don't always live as we ought to live. Our living doesn't accurately reflect our believing. If we are honest, we admit that though we are in Christ, others might not recognize that as they observe our lives.

The good news is that God is faithful. The work of salvation that he began in us when we believed the gospel and trusted in Jesus Christ will be brought to full completion. Not because of us, but because of him; not our faithfulness, but his.

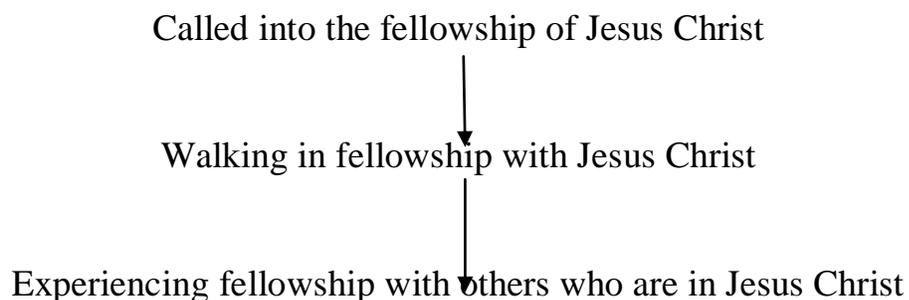
There is one more thing Paul calls attention to in the beginning of his letter. He points out their calling into the fellowship of God's Son.

I Corinthians 1:9

When we become God's child by grace through faith, we enter into the fellowship of Jesus. The word means "communion, fellowship, sharing in common." We are called into a state of fellowship with the expectation that we would enjoy the experience of fellowship. Do you see again, it involves both position and condition – positional truth and experiential truth?

The experience of fellowship flows out of the standing in grace that we have by virtue of our salvation. It begins with what happens when God saves us by his grace. The objective state precedes the subjective experience.

So let's line up the sequence:



Here, I think, is Paul's strategy in his approach to the Corinthians and the problems they are facing. He begins with positional truths – their identity in Christ, what God has declared to be true of them because of Christ.

Then he will begin to address where there is a disconnect and provide a prescription to get back to where they ought to be, where what they do lines up with who they are.

This is where Paul is going. The beginning of his letter sets the content of the whole within the context of God and his grace, his work, his faithfulness.

If Paul were to write a letter to the church of God at Burke, he would begin the same way – reminding us of who we are in Christ, what is true of us because of Christ, before talking to us about how we are living as followers of Christ.