



Have you ever struggled in a church family? Have you ever thought to yourself, “I wish we could just go back to the early church and do it the way they did it?” I’ve thought that before, but as I’ve grown in my study of the Word, I’ve thought to myself, “Why would I want to go there?!” The early church was *very* messy. And, in reality, it wasn’t much different then than it is today in many churches. Within Ventura, we have issues! And, if you’re saying, “Where?!” then maybe you aren’t engaging enough with people. All human beings have issues – and if we all have issues, we bring our issues to bear within the local church context.

But what do we do when we admit that even our church has issues? What do we do when we realize that left to ourselves, we’re a mess? The letter Paul wrote is a wonderful place to begin. This letter is written to a young church with many issues. And while some of us may not want to admit it, the church in America (including ours) may have more similarities with Corinth than even other churches in the New Testament. In addition, the counsel and challenge that Paul brings to the Corinthians are words that we need to hear even today because the culture of Corinth is so similar to ours. We struggle living in a society that is, in so many ways, very godless. So, we have questions. How do we live?

The letter that we call *1 Corinthians* addresses questions and beliefs of the Corinthian church. There were 11 basic issues that Paul addresses in this letter. Ten of those issues are behavioral – meaning, that they address how Christians are to live. Then, there’s one issue (the resurrection), which is theological. But even in that longer discourse of Paul, he gets to how the theology affects behavior. In all of the writing here, Paul puts on display how the gospel applies. He shows us that every part of our lives are to be seen through the lens of the gospel. Yes, the church is weak, but the Savior is strong!

But maybe you struggle with thinking a 2,000-year-old document can really apply to us in 2020 America. Let me give you a little backdrop on the society of Corinth. Corinth as an ancient city that was actually defeated and divested of power in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. One hundred years later, around 44 BC, Julius Caesar revived the city. He knew the power of the city’s placement. It was a port city. It would naturally thrive in commerce from both land and sea. So, the Roman Government revived it. Then, they sent many freedmen to live there. Freedmen were one step up slaves. They were free, but they didn’t have much. And, there were plenty of freemen in Rome; so, let’s send them to Corinth to see how they can make it. With Corinth’s land placement, they succeeded. Many other people came to the city as it thrived in many ways. Corinth, being in Greece, was Hellenistic in its culture, but it was under Roman control. It became an economic center, but it was a little different than other cities. The money came from “self-made” men. There was no aristocracy owning the money. They worked hard for it. So, there was a notable independent spirit among Corinthians. In addition to money, there was religious pluralism with a record of 26 sacred places in the ancient town. To add to this, Corinth was a center for the arts and for sports. They hosted games that were second only to the Olympics. Finally, we had a town that

was involved heavily in sexual immorality. There is at least one dig site for ancient Corinth that has found carvings of genitalia in a temple, which seemed to be used by the people to present to the gods – asking for healing of their venereal diseases.

As we put these things together, one commentator I read wrote the following: All of this evidence together suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world" (Fee, p. 3). Another one wrote, "The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, and the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types; in a word, the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires" (Um, p. 16). So, a man named Gordon Fee says, **"Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what this letter attempts to do" (Fee, p. 4).**

Can you resonate with some of this? Do you feel an inordinate amount of America is yet in you? Do you still wonder, "Lord, what am I blindly believing and embracing in my life? How do I live as a faithful Christian?" I think we can all relate, and 1 Corinthians comes to us with the skill of the Holy Spirit, through Paul, performing radical surgery that doesn't kill us, but revives us. I pray as we spend time in 1 Corinthians, the Spirit does just that – revives us all the more. So, with this basic backdrop, let's pray together [Lorraine Palmer; Bill Dodge & Ganges Baptist; the Gerth Family]

Please open your Bibles and we're going to read the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 1:

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*1 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. 1*

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This is called the "greeting" of the letter. Paul always starts his letter in similar ways, but each letter generally has certain differences between them. In this letter, knowing the backdrop of Corinth, and also what's to come in this letter, we will see how these three verses are like a seedbed for the issues that are going to come up. One major issue in this letter is something I haven't brought up yet. While Corinth was acting in various sinful ways and was by no means some glorious 1<sup>st</sup> century church that was the way things ought to be, this church (or a segment in it) was rejecting Paul himself. In this letter, you'll hear Paul defend himself and his ministry as an apostle – and the obvious reason was because they're denying him. Other preachers come in, and the churches like those other people's speaking abilities. Certain anti-gospel teachers come in, and the Corinthians seem to deny Paul's message of grace alone through faith alone.

But Paul isn't here to simply puff himself up. Instead, he recognizes his role that the Lord gave him, as an apostle. An apostle is someone Jesus gifted by the Spirit to give the foundation of the church in the gospel. Apostles were to teach and apply *how* Jesus (his life, death and resurrection) ought to shape our

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 1:1–3.

lives as Christians, our lives as the Church of Jesus. If the Corinthians reject Paul and his message, they're rejecting the gospel.

And, what a heartache for Paul. According to Acts 18, he started this church. He lived with them for a year and a half. And, over the course of only a few years, Corinth is turning from Paul and they're allowing the culture around them to merge with their beliefs in Jesus. But, as Jesus taught, you cannot serve God and money. You cannot serve God and the world. So, here we have the letter of 1 Corinthians. Which, is a response to a letter the Corinthian church sent to Paul.

Based on the tone of this letter, the Corinthian letter wasn't simply a letter asking questions. But it probably was also a letter that included disagreements or even attacks against Paul. The reason I say this is because of how Paul writes in 1 Corinthians. Sometimes (even many times), Paul is quite forceful in his tone. Yet, in all of Paul's writings, he makes it clear that what's on the line is the gospel – not him. In his actions, he's displayed self-sacrifice for Christ's glory and their good. So, here we have a man who dearly loves the Corinthians because of the love of the Savior for him. He wants reconciliation with them, and he wants the church to repent of the ways they've allowed their identity of being Corinthians to overshadow their identity of being Christians. This letter is full of love and correction. And, we can see seeds of this in this Greetings. The title of this sermon is *Saints Together by God's Calling*, and I believe the main idea of this greeting is that **The Church is united by God's calling, under his rule, in Christ Jesus**. What does this mean? Well, that's the rest of the sermon. So, let's start with point 1.

### 1. The church is united by God's calling.

The word "called" shows up twice in this greetings, and it's an interesting word. In verse 1, Paul says, ". . . called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup> In verse 2, Paul says of the Corinthian Christians, ". . . called to be saints. . ." What does this word "called" mean? Is it like what we mean when we say, "I called you on the phone?" Like God called up Paul and said, "Hi, apostle, how are you?" God didn't simply call Paul and say, "Hi, apostle." Paul was persecuting the Christian church when Jesus intervened in Paul's life. If God simply said, "Hi, apostle," Paul would have said, "Sorry, wrong number." Ok, so does the word mean that God cried out to Paul and said, "Apostle!" No, that's not it. When Paul says in verse one, "those who call." That's the idea of that Greek word for call. It's to cry out or call out for aid. God is not in need to aid.

The word "call" is stronger than that. The word has the idea of identity and vocation – like who you are and therefore, how you ought to live. Paul doesn't simply say, "Paul, an apostle," and "to the saints in Corinth." He talks like that in other letters. But here, he uses the term "called" to refer to his apostleship and to their sainthood. Why does this matter? Well, let me give an illustration. Let's say you were applying for a job. You send in your resume for a certain position – let's say you want to be a chef. You go through the interview process, and as they make it to the end, they say, "We hire you. You are now our chef." You haven't cooked anything, but you're the chef. Then, you show up on the first day, and you're still the chef even though you haven't cooked anything. But, being the chef means you are to act in line with your new identity, right? Yes.

Now, let's apply this to Paul's statement about himself and the Corinthians. Paul says he was *called* to be an apostle. This is not God saying, "try hard and you'll be an apostle someday." This is God saying, "You are an apostle." And, it's also a statement saying that because Paul is an apostle, he should live this

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 1:1.

way. The same is true for the Corinthian church. Some take a statement like, “called to be saints,” and think it’s Paul’s way of saying that God calls the Christians to work hard until someday they become saints. That’s not the idea of the word. They are saints, and therefore, they are to live like saints. This is their calling from God.

All of this is phenomenal because, as I said earlier, when Paul was called as an apostle, he was persecuting Christians. Did he deserve to be called to be an apostle? No! His resume did not qualify him. In fact, his resume show a whole list of things that would de-merit God’s approval. Yet, God in his mercy and grace in Jesus, gave Paul forgiveness and also granted Paul an amazing privilege. The same is true for the Corinthian church. In chapter 6 and verse 11, Paul says to the Corinthians that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,<sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”<sup>3</sup> And such were some of them? How could they inherit the Kingdom if they were living in these sins at the time God called them? How could God call them to be saints if they were sinners? I mean, think about it. The terms “saint” and “sanctified” are related phrases. They refer to being holy and set apart for God. How can you be set apart for God, holy, and inherit the Kingdom, if you were opposed to him? The answer is that God’s calling is not based in us. It’s based in Jesus. And, this is what Paul emphasizes when he says “sanctified in Christ Jesus.” We are made holy because of Jesus’ righteousness. The Bible says Jesus became sin so that he would take our punishment on the cross, and then, he gives his righteousness to us so that we can be holy ones of God! This is all of unearned kindness of God. So, Paul says he and the Corinthians are called. He’s called as an apostle. They’re called as saints. All of them have been given a love from God that has then given them a status of great glory!

Now, how does this apply to the situation in Corinth? As I said earlier, the Corinthians are questioning his leadership and message. They’re not living in line with the gospel. And, instead of Paul making this argument an “us” against “them” kind of thing, Paul points them to the reality of their calling by God. This letter is going to flesh out whether Paul is really living as the apostle he’s been called to be. This letter is going to reveal, confront and remind the Corinthians to be living as the saints they are. But what Paul does is he comes on common ground. I don’t think he’s saying, “I’m an apostle. So, listen to me!” But instead, he’s saying, “I’m called” and “You’re called.” Let’s evaluate if we’re living out our callings.

In saying they’re all called, Paul emphasizes the unity they have with one another. If God is the One in charge (and he is), then it’s not an “us” against “them” argument. Instead, this is a scenario where they need to come to terms with what it means to be called by God. This idea confronts the Corinthians tendency to a rugged individualism. Where some could also be saying “the Corinthian church is *my* church.” Paul makes obvious that it’s not the Corinthian’s church, and it’s not Paul’s church. The church at Corinth is God’s church.

In addition, Paul expands the idea of unity in verse 2, when he writes, “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. . . .”<sup>4</sup> The church at Corinth is not some isolated church that gets to make its own decisions, all by itself – and then separates from all other churches who don’t do things the way it does. By the way, the term “with all those who in every place” actually can be translated, “with all those who in every meeting-place.” It’s

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<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 6:9–11.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 1:2.

so intriguing that the early Christians could not see themselves without a connection with a local church. Yet, the Corinthians were more individualistic, and they seemed to think they could unify with the secular culture around them in various ways (either sexually, in business transactions, in legal matters). The local church was a place or a group they went to, but it did not seem to be part of their identity. That's why there were factions. But Paul says that the local church at Corinth is a part of the bigger church. And the bigger church is comprised of littler churches. Their unity is with Christ, in God, with the Church! Think about this. Do you see yourself as simply an individual, or a couple, or a family, who attends this place? Or, do you view it as integral to be part of this church, which is a part of the bigger church? If we saw this way, factions would die! If we saw things this way, then we wouldn't be so quick to make individualistic decisions without the help and aid of brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are saints *together* with all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Again, this emphasizes the grace of Jesus in our calling. The term "call" here refers to calling out for aid. What aid? This is a phrase referring to a prayer of desperation. A prayer of need. From Old through New Testament, it's a prayer of dependence on the Lord alone for answer. Only God can give the real help we need. And, the aid is referencing forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. We were born sinners. We have acted in sinful ways. We've made ourselves at the level of God and have used his gifts a tools to emphasize ourselves instead of him. This is all sinful. But we're bound to this sinfulness. Have you ever felt you *had* to sin? Have you ever felt you could never stop sinning? If you haven't trusted in Christ, that's true. Even if you modify behavior, you still don't want God to be praised and loved above all. You want yourself. The only one who can rescue you from your self-centeredness is Jesus.

And, Paul says that all who call on Jesus are rescued. Then Paul adds we don't simply call out to Jesus, but we call on the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is Master and King. That's what Lord means. He rules over all and you call to the Ruler, as Ruler, to rescue you. And he will rescue because he came in human flesh, and in human flesh, as the God-Man, he was the Messiah. Meaning, he is God's Rescuer!

Well, if Jesus is the Rescuer of all who call on him. If he is the Ruler of all who call on him; then that means we're unified with all who call on him! And, we can't function as though we're the only Christians in the world, making decisions all by ourselves. The Corinthians were functioning that way in certain ways. But if Jesus died for Paul and also has called Paul to be an apostle, the Corinthians can't say, "Well, we're our own church and we'll do our own thing." There's a testimony to uphold that points to Christ's glory. Our unity with other believers even is intended to show this!

But you could say, "What does this all have to do with us?" Is there application for us? Well, I want to pinpoint one thing on the outset. I have a question for you. **What calling do you view yourself with in the church (and in life)?** In Corinth, there were factions. There were those who liked this or that preacher. There were those who were married and single. There were those who were rich or poor. These people were treated in various ways because of the various positions. Maybe you come into Ventura thinking, "I'm wealthier so I should have more say." Or, maybe you try to dress yourself up a little and think that's going to change people's perceptions of you, and you want that. Others of you could say, "I'm married and therefore. . . ." Others of you see yourself primarily through the lens of being single. Still others want to be seen as more theologically astute, and it's shown by the preachers they quote and like. What if we all gathered together primarily with the identity of saint? What if we recognized the privilege of that, admitting we were all undeserving and also admitting at the same time that we are set apart for God?

Maybe you wouldn't always think your worth or lack of worth comes from other things. Some people beat themselves up or play the victim because they're not like so-and-so or they don't have money or privilege like so-and-so. I've had people say to me, "I know people see me this or that way," and I'm treated accordingly. And I think to myself, "What?! I don't see you that way?" And, I wonder if it's really that those people live thinking their identity is *that* thing.

Other people can think that because they have a struggling marriage, they're a lesser member of the church as opposed to those obviously spiritual church members. No. No. No! We're all saints *together* in our Lord Jesus Christ. And, we're not just all saints, but we are saints *together* in Christ Jesus. Since we're saints *together*, let's live out our unity. Paul goes on and says that Jesus is their Lord and *ours*. We are united in the faith. As saints *together*, let's live out our calling by knowing our identity, and knowing one another's identity and treating one another in light of that identity. I ought not to take offense and resent a fellow Christian when I know Jesus died for *you* and has united me with you. We're bound together. In a similar way, the Corinthians ought not resent Paul, fellow Church members or even Christians in other places – because we're one in Christ.

Not only this. Let's add another point.

## **2. The Church is united by God's calling, under his rule.**

I've essentially made this point in the previous one by emphasizing God's calling and the fact that Jesus is Lord. But let's simply take note "by the will of God," and "To the church of God. . . ." Then the terms "Lord," and "Father."

Who is over the church? God is – not Paul, not the Corinthian church. Who is over Ventura? Not us. Yet, I can understand the temptation to believe it's ours. We can talk to people and they can ask, "Where's your church?" And, we say, "It's in Holland. My church is Ventura Baptist." Now, the word "your" and "my" is used to describe the church we're a part of, but we can quickly turn "my church" into something we possess and we own. That's one reason why so many churches have died through the years. People take the rule and say, "It's my way or I'm leaving."

Or, I've heard people throughout the past years I've been at Ventura say, "This growth is because of you." Oh, may it never be! If you mean God worked through me to edify/build-up the believers here, then I agree. But if you mean the growth is *because/on the basis of* me, then I will be the first to repent and close the doors because then we're not pursuing Jesus together, we're pursuing Timothy together.

I hope instead that we would be a church that prays that all the glory would always be given to the Lord. I have often prayed that God would work in such ways that when we see things happen, that our only ultimate response could be, "Only God could do that!" Look at this building, look at people who are growing in the faith. Only God can do that!

Paul's wording emphasizes these ideas. While he's an apostle, and therefore has been given certain levels of authority, his apostleship is under God. The elder's roles here at Ventura are under God, and we are no better than anyone else here. All is of grace, and all of us are under his rule. As God, he rules. Jesus, as Lord, rules. God, as Father, rules. So, may we, as saints united, rule under his rule together in this church family of Ventura. Finally, let's emphasize one more truth.

## **3. The church is united by God's calling, under his rule, in Christ Jesus.**

Again, I've already commented some on this. We're sanctified *in Christ Jesus*. In John 17:19, Jesus prayed, "19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth."<sup>5</sup> Jesus gave his life on the cross so that we may be sanctified – made holy – in Truth. And, Jesus is the Truth!

Jesus is the center of our unity and our hope. Therefore, verse 3 shows up: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Our identity is that we are holy saints because of Christ.

Therefore, Christ must be the center of our local church. We are a people *pursuing Jesus together*. But how can we do this? I mean, think about the Corinthians and Paul. How is God going to actually unify them and reconcile them all again? How are the Corinthians going to repent of their sin and listen to Paul's warnings and charges? I've had many times where I've been afraid in talking with people because they could respond this or that way. Yet, the answer comes here in verse 3. Paul is hopeful. Paul is anticipating what God will do. In the reading of the letter, may the grace and peace of God the Father and Jesus, the Lord, fill them. Notice again the unity Paul communicates when he says "our" Father.

We're family! And not only that, as family, God will empower us to change where we need to. So, I love what a man named Gordon Fee wrote of this phrase: "The sum total of all of God's activity toward his human creatures is found in the word "grace" God has given himself to them mercifully and bountifully in Christ. Nothing is deserved; nothing can be achieved: 'Tis mercy all, immense and free.' And the sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God's grace is found in the word 'peace,' meaning 'well-being, wholeness, welfare.' The one flows out of the other, and both together flow from 'God our Father' and were made effective in human history through our 'Lord Jesus Christ'" (Fee, p. 31). Grace and peace go hand-in-hand. God's bountiful kindness leads to wholeness.

Therefore, the Corinthian church (and Paul) can be confident that God will continue his work in them. They'll grow in their calling as saints and as an apostle. And, Ventura, the same is true for us. May we experience (and be confident that we will) more grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ as we read this letter.

In just these three verses, I see how Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to see their **need for wholeness and not division. Their need for unity, not individualism. Their need for dependence on God, not self. Their need for grace and peace from God.** What about you? As we move to the Lord's supper, do you see certain sins in your life that you pray God's grace would overwhelm? I want to give you a few moments to think of how you can apply some thing in this sermon, and as we move to communion, let this be a time of confession and hope.

In this letter, Paul will emphasize that to partake of communion without recognizing our unity and need for one another is to betray the message of Christ's death. His body was broken so we would be one. If there are things you need to confess, please do so! And, even this isn't a work. Instead, recognize the freedom in the gospel and turn back! Make things right. God has made us sanctified saints in Jesus, by God's grace, let's live like it. We are united by God's calling, under his rule, in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 17:19.

<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 1:3.

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