

The Letter to the Corinthians: Getting started

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

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I'd like to begin with a few comments on floods and finances. This week was dominated by both. Our hearts certainly go out to many who have been impacted. Our church was affected by the rains. We had a little damage here. Some water actually came up through the cement! Our attendance and offering last week got slammed. We tasted it ourselves. These moments are too valuable not to ask helpful questions. What did the flood reveal? Stuff gets ruined. What did this week's financial news reveal? Money disappears. Did this just become true this week or is it always true that these things don't last?

Nearly 2,000 years ago this was written in 1 Timothy 6:17, *As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.* Stuff gets ruined and money disappears. This always has been and always will be true. We have times like these and suddenly we wake up to the truth. We realize that we are living for things that don't last. Too often, life settles down again and these lessons are lost on us and we go right back to living for things that don't last and wash away. Let's be wiser than that and do what Paul tells Timothy, set our hope on God who will meet our needs.

Today we begin a new teaching series here at Bethel. God's Word is the foundation of our church. Its proclamation guides and sets the agenda for so much of what we do and who we become. For this reason, I prayerfully agonize over what direction to take. I talk with our elders and pastors. It is an important decision. We have been considering this for a couple months now and we're pleased to begin today in an extremely important portion of the Bible, the Apostle Paul's letter we call 1 Corinthians. However, our *Journey with Jesus* [Pastor Steve's last series] never ends.

Why 1 Corinthians?

All Scripture is profitable

In a way, the decision of what to preach could be an easy one as all the Bible is spiritually profitable to us and all of it is worthy of careful study and teaching. This is best said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.* We could go anywhere in Scripture and there would be truth that God has put there for our good and spiritual profit.

The Corinthian/American culture

The more I read about life and culture in Corinth, the more it seems that I am reading from today's newspaper. Corinthian life was so similar to what our society is like; specifically in its materialism and hedonism. They loved sports. Corinth was the host of great athletic contests, second in ancient history only to the Olympic Games. Money, sex, and sports dominated Corinthian culture. Sound familiar? The similarities are so eerie that as we go through the book we will often feel like we are looking in the mirror.

The Corinthian/American Church

Equally ironic is how similar the American Church in the American culture resembles the Corinthian Church in the Corinthian culture. The Corinthian church was easily the most messed up church of all the local churches in the New Testament. They were struggling with disunity and factions, they followed different teachers and gurus, had lots of sin, marital and sexual issues, snobbishness, lack of love, the list goes on. The biggest problem in the Corinthian Church was Corinthian Christians living like the Corinthian culture. They had not separated themselves from the pagan priorities and values around them. It was one messed up church. I remember driving by a church south of here and seeing the name on the sign, Corinth Church. I thought, *Why would anybody name their church "Corinth"?*

If we were to list the biggest problems in the American Church our list would be nearly the same. There is chaos in categories of love and marriage and family and sexuality. There are divisions and people in the church not getting along. And certainly within the American Church there is a compromising spirit in which American Christians live like American non-Christians so that it's often hard to tell the difference.

There isn't anything new. We may be more sophisticated and have our little technological toys, but the human heart hasn't changed. The issues in a church haven't changed. The problems are always the same and we will see that the solutions are the same too.

The City and Culture of Corinth

Corinth was a major player in the ancient world. It was the most important city in all of Greece mostly because of its location. It was located on an isthmus, a little land bridge between two land masses with oceans on both sides. To the east is the Aegean Sea and to the west the Adriatic Sea. It was perfectly located on the most important trade route running from east to west in the entire Roman Empire. There was a port on each side and they would actually portage the ships over land and save 250 miles of sailing around the Peloponnese of Greece. The result of this was a constant flow of merchants and ships and commerce that enriched Corinth. It was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire and was famous for its sinful pleasures and corruption.

It would be fair to compare Corinth to a cross between New York and Las Vegas; it was a mix of the commerce of New York and the sexual debauchery of Las Vegas. I don't know for sure, but they may have had a saying there, *What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth.*

This is particularly true of the sexual license of the city. Here's how bad it was. Imagine a city where sex was the official god of the city. That was Corinth. Their god was the Greek god of sex and beauty, Aphrodite. To this day we pay tribute to her when we mention an "aphrodisiac." There was a huge temple honoring her and history says that there were 1,000 priestesses who worked there each night. They were essentially temple prostitutes and in their religion, being intimate with them was how you worshipped Aphrodite. Imagine the degradation this kind of lifestyle produced in the families and marriages and children of the city. It was quite a place.

The Church at Corinth

Turn with me to Acts 18. This is how the church at Corinth began. Paul preaches at Mars Hill, which is recorded in Acts 17.

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. (Acts 18:1-3)

We are introduced to the well-known friends of Paul, Aquila and Priscilla. They met and work together as tentmakers in Corinth.

And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. (Acts 18:4-5)

He was *occupied with the Word*. We all ought to be “occupied with the Word,” particularly our leaders. In Paul’s case, this meant first reaching out to the Jews but, as was often the case, this didn’t go well.

And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:7-8)

This was the beginning of the church at Corinth. It had quite an impressive lineup of leaders; it was a who’s who of the New Testament. Paul, Silas, Timothy, Aquilla, Priscilla, Apollos. Paul is there for a year and a half. Paul then ministers in Ephesus for a period of three years (Acts 19). While there he hears of the rancor and sin in the Corinthian Church and writes them a letter (1 Corinthians 5:9). We don’t have that letter. Apparently it had little effect and Paul writes them another one that we call 1 Corinthians. He ends up writing four letters. We know this because what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians both refer to other letters. So of the four letters, we have the second and fourth which we call 1 and 2. Clear? There are 16 chapters in 1 Corinthians and 433 verses. Let’s savor all of them as we go.

With that background, let’s get into the text. The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Chapter 1:1. These first three verses are known in Paul’s letters as the Salutation. If you read his other letters you will see they begin nearly identically. This doesn’t mean they aren’t filled with meaning. They are.

The Author (Verse 1)

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes.

The author of the letter is Paul. It is well-documented in the early Church that it was Paul who wrote this and few disagree. Paul begins by establishing his credibility and calling himself an Apostle of the Church. “Apostle” literally means “messenger.” The Apostles were originally Jesus’ disciples, but after His resurrection and ascension are sent as “messengers” and leaders of the church. Paul obviously wasn’t a disciple during Jesus’ three year ministry. His calling was different. Acts 9 tells the story of Paul’s conversion and vision of the risen Christ. He is later designated the ‘Apostle to the Gentiles’ (Acts 9:15; 22:21). Paul doesn’t get into all that here. He is simply reminding the Corinthians that he is writing with apostolic authority given to him by divine calling and will.

It’s kind of like when parents leave the house and put the oldest child in charge. They say to the other kids, *Your brother’s in charge and what he says goes*. Jesus left and deputized twelve disciples and Paul. What they say in their writing goes. The same is true today. The

Apostles' teachings, recorded in Scripture, are the authority for us today. What they say goes because what they say, the Holy Spirit inspired them to say, so that their words are the very words of God. Our church's doctrinal statement says it this way, *Therefore, the Bible is the final authority in all that it says. It must be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.* (Bethel Church Doctrinal Statement)

The Recipients (Verse 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...

The local church is God's church

One of the big problems in the Corinthian Church was a kind of snobbishness. They had an attitude that probably went along with being Corinthian, *We're better than others. We've got it more together than others.* They weren't Dutch [as I am] but they might as well have been since Hollanders' favorite saying is, *If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much.*

There were those in the Church who thought, *If you ain't Corinthian, you ain't much.* And that bled over into the Church as a haughty spirit that failed to see the big picture of the Church. So right away Paul points out that they are but one tile in the mosaic that is God's Church. The Church is the Church of God. It's God's Church. The Church at Corinth wasn't their church, it was God's church. He paid the ransom price for our salvation with the blood of his own Son. It really is hubris to view a local church as anyone's church but God's. Yet this happens all the time. *This is my church, our church, the pastor's church.* Not so. It's nice to belong, but bad to take ownership. Ownership means control. It's very dangerous to act like you are in control of something that belongs to God. Let's make it clear. Bethel Church isn't your church. It isn't my church. This is God's church. Period.

God's church is to reflect God's character

...to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints... (Verse 2)

"Sanctified" and "saints" come from the same Greek word which is difficult to translate into English. It means "set apart." Our word "holy" comes close. *To those made holy in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.* Why would we be called to be holy? Of course, God is holy. In salvation, God declares the sinner holy, not because we are in practice, but because by faith in Christ's work on the cross, God has a legal basis to declare us holy in moral and spiritual position before Him.

We are far from it in our day-to-day living. We could just think of our week and all the good we should have done and didn't and the bad we shouldn't have done and did. Yet, we are called to be saints or holy ones in our daily living. This is known as progressive sanctification as we strive to increasingly in our day-to-day lives live "set apart" from the world and unto God. Sanctified and saints. What we are and what we should be. We are going to see just how far the Corinthian Church was from this calling.

Everywhere the church is, it's all there

...with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours... (Verse 2)

Paul wants the Corinthians to get over themselves and see their role in the larger church. This is normally referred to as the "universal church." There are local churches that make up the universal church. The universal church is all Christians from all time who form one church. Local churches are local assemblies of the universal church; many churches, but one Church. In the New Testament, church is applied to a house church (Romans 16:5), an entire city (here), all the local churches in a region (Acts 9:31), and all Christians from all time (Ephesians 5:25). Wherever the Church is and whatever the size of the gathering, the true Church is there. There is nothing lacking.

This is one reason I don't like designations like megachurch or now gigachurch. I used the term last week as a description, but I don't like the term. Megachurch or gigachurch insinuates something that isn't true. It insinuates more importance or presence than a smaller church. I don't like the term and you'll rarely hear it around here. The question isn't how many are there, but if Jesus is there through the gospel, the Word, and the Spirit. He made this clear that where two or three have gathered, there He is (Matthew 18:20). This is an exciting thing to realize as we gather in our small groups and Bible studies and prayer groups. Everywhere Christians gather no matter how many, the Church is there because Christ is there.

The Starting Point (Verse 3)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Salutations like this were very common in the day, although in the Roman world they would say "Greetings!" In the Jewish world they would (and still do) say "Shalom!" (peace). In Paul's letters he Christianizes "Greetings and peace" and says, "*Grace and peace to you.*" This is significant. Grace and peace; this is often repeated in his letters. It is always grace first, then peace. Why? Because grace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the basis for peace with God.

I remember years ago going to call on a man in the hospital with my spiritual mentor. This man was dying of AIDS and I had to wait outside. When it was done I asked what happened. My mentor said, "The man wanted to know he was at peace with God." "What did you say?" I asked. "I told him objective peace always precedes subjective peace." In other words, you want to FEEL peace with God? It must begin with peace being established and this happens, not by our effort, but by God's grace to us. I receive this grace by faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Romans 5:1 says, *...since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* This reality gives me assurance within that I am right with God. This is the subjective peace we all crave. The Church and its message are all about grace and peace. We are saved by grace. We have peace with God and we enjoy peace with one another. The church is where real peace is found.

It has been a great joy of mine through our church's ministry to travel to various places in the world. One of the first things you learn in a new culture is how to say some basic words; first and foremost "Hello." For example, In India you say, *Onednamalou*. In Israel you say, *Shalom*. In Italy it's, *Bornjourneau*. You say the one word you know and the natives think you know their language and they start rattling off something you can't comprehend. You have to just look at them with that I-am-a-stupid-American-and-have-no-idea-what-you-are-saying look.

A few months ago I was in Romania with one of our missionaries Scott Staub. He taught us what to say as we greeted people at the church, *Pache*. It means "peace." I thought this

was the normal greeting in all of Italy and would have been “Paching” everybody on the sidewalk. “No, No,” Scott said, “Pache is only in the church.” Think of that. Peace is only appropriate in the church. Peace only makes sense in the church. Indeed it does. The world craves peace and searches for it, but on their own they can’t find it. Real peace comes from God, through Jesus, to us. It is permanent, eternal, and wonderful.

I can say today, Grace and peace to you, but I wonder if it is true for you. Have you received God’s grace by faith? Have you experienced peace with God? If you are unsure, why not pray in your heart and mind and receive God’s grace through His Son. Put your trust in who Paul calls “The Lord Jesus Christ.” The Lord. The Savior. The Messiah. Believe in Him and you will have peace with God. Pache to you.

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