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“He wanted the Corinthians to act as people united under Jesus Christ.”



THE SALUTATION

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-3

Every civilized letter begins by following a special formula which is customary for the times. When we write a business letter, we generally indicate who is sending the letter on the top right, followed by the date. Then we indicate on the left column who is being addressed. Then we begin: “Dear So and So...” When I receive a letter it’s always a “Dear John.” In Paul’s day, the formula for beginning a letter required the name of the sender, followed by the addressees, and finally a greeting. This customary introduction comprises the salutation of 1 Corinthians. And yet, Paul’s individuality is evident in every part.

Rather than just name himself “Paul,” the apostle refers to himself as “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...” Clearly, the apostle had a certain sense of being specially chosen for a particular mission. In the Old Testament, the idea of someone being “especially called” by God is associated with prophets such as Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8-9) or Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-5). As Paul begins his letter, he immediately asserts his authority as someone specially called to be an apostle, or messenger, of God, just as the prophets were “called” in the Old Testament. Paul’s claim was an important one, because there were many at Corinth doubting his word and authority.

Paul isn’t the only one sending greetings. “Our brother Sosthenes” is also included. Who is this Sosthenes? Perhaps it’s the Corinthian Jew whom we read about in Acts 18:17. After Paul had ministered in Corinth for some time, many of the Jews who felt threatened by Paul’s teachings conspired to drag Paul into court. But the Roman proconsul would have nothing to do with the case, declaring it to be an ecclesiastical rather than secular squabble. The Jews were maddened by the proconsul’s

apathy. They vented their wrath on the synagogue ruler, Sosthenes. Now, why would they be angry at the synagogue ruler unless he had already become a friend of Paul and a follower of Christ? So, the attack on the synagogue ruler in Acts probably tells us the identity of Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians.

To whom is the letter addressed? "The church at Corinth." The Christians in Corinth have been called to holiness in God's eyes by being washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, just as have all Christians.

And the greeting? "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The favor of God leads naturally to peace of mind. The enmity between God and man is over, and reconciliation has resulted.

THE THANKSGIVING PREAMBLE

1 CORINTHIANS 1:4-9

Very often Paul would follow his opening salutation with a section of thanksgiving and praise. We see that occur in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon. And, of course, in 1 Corinthians. In a way, the thanksgiving offered by Paul in 1 Corinthians is ironic. Sure, he praises them for their "speaking and knowledge," but later Paul will dismiss human knowledge as prideful and destructive. He praises the Corinthians for possessing spiritual gifts in abundance, but later he will have to admonish them for using their spiritual gifts in a destructive manner.

Of course, it's good psychology to begin a conversation on a positive note. Before Paul begins his admonitions, he wants them to know that no matter how egregious their guilt and shortcomings, the Lord has the power to keep them strong in the faith. And then Paul lets loose...

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DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

How many Christians have become disillusioned with God's Church because of divisions within the congregation? How many church workers have suffered as a result of "tribal warfare" between members? Nothing can more permanently destroy the effectiveness of a church than the emotional and spiritual destruction that arises in a congregational civil war.

Interestingly, these fratricidal struggles so common in our churches today are nothing new. They were already occurring two decades after Christ's ascension. Listen to the urgency of Paul's words: "I appeal to you brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." Why is this so important? Perhaps the biggest victory Satan can win is when a congregation self-destructs in a maelstrom of disagreement. When a congregation is in civil war, visitors are unwilling to join and learn the faith. Church workers are demoralized and often find other lines of work. Parishioners stop

coming to church. Offerings for missions dry up. The grace and mercy of Jesus Christ is displayed to the outside world as some sort of joke.

Sadly, Paul has heard that the Corinthian church is suffering from a number of quarreling cliques. Paul knows this because family members or slaves from one of his friends, named Chloe, have told him. Now, as Paul writes to the Corinthian church from his place in Ephesus, he exhorts them to grow united in Jesus Christ.

There were four main groups at war with one another. One group claimed as their leader Paul himself. Now, Paul's name would have tremendous authority because Paul was the founder of the Corinthian church. His followers would argue that they were merely maintaining the teachings of their first pastor. Another group claimed with equal authority their leader was Apollos. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria who, under Paul's instruction, had become a great pastor in the early Christian church.

Each Christian generation seems to be blessed by a particularly effective gospel preacher. Perhaps our generation will remember Billy Graham as that singular man who spoke with eloquence and authority. Apollos may have been the “Billy Graham” of the early church. We know that he was a “learned man with a thorough knowledge of Scripture” (Acts 18:24). He was probably Paul’s successor at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6; Acts 19:1). He was a “bold” and “fervent” speaker (Acts 18:25–26), and he was an excellent debater (Acts 18:28). Now, if we compare Apollos with the description some were using in Corinth about Paul, we can see how individuals would be tempted to place Apollos over Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 10:10, Paul records what some in Corinth were saying about him: “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” Paul was truly an apostle of the Lord, but he wasn’t particularly “charismatic.” Apollos, on the other hand, could hold his audience in the palm of his hand. And since Apollos was Paul’s successor at Corinth, it’s no wonder the newer members would be more loyal to Apollos.

There were still other contending groups. Some claimed neither Paul nor Apollos as their spiritual leader. They claimed Cephas, that is, Peter. Since Peter’s ministry occurred primarily among the Jews in Palestine, we can imagine that this group of his followers was comprised of Jews coming from the east and settling in Corinth. Their claim of authority would be powerful; too, considering Peter was one of the original twelve disciples

who actually witnessed Christ’s death and resurrection. That, they would claim, is more than could be said of Paul and Apollos.

And then there was the “Christ party.” So, what’s wrong about claiming to follow Christ rather than Paul, Peter, or Apollos? Since Paul also criticizes this faction, we can imagine their claim was both false and arrogant. We can imagine them espousing false doctrine while claiming their beliefs to be the only genuine interpretation of Christ’s life and ministry. A contemporary example might be found in some nondenominational churches which claim to preach the “true” word of Christ unimpeded by any particular denominational interpretation. Of course, if a congregation does not follow a denominational interpretation of Christ’s life and ministry, it will necessarily be following an individual’s interpretation. And that can result in some truly bizarre theology.

The apostle Paul is frustrated with all four groups, and calls on them to unite. As a matter of fact, Paul is so ashamed by the quarreling among the various factions that he expresses his relief at having baptized only a few of the Corinthian Christians. Otherwise, many of the Corinthians would be claiming their baptismal pastor as their sole spiritual leader. The only individuals baptized by Paul were Crispus (probably the ruler of the synagogue whose conversion is reported in Acts 18:8), Gaius (also known as Titius Justus, whose hospitality Paul enjoyed while in Corinth — see Acts 18:7) and Stephanas (Paul’s first convert in Achaia — see 1 Corinthians 16:15).



Division is the devil's work, and when we break down into groups and cliques, we hinder the work of God's kingdom.



When Paul reminds his readers he was not chosen by God to baptize, but to preach, he is not minimizing the importance of baptism. He is simply reminding them that his primary responsibility as an apostle is to preach. The baptizing would be left to those who followed him.

The thrust of Paul's first exhortation, then, was to remove the barriers between the various "tribes" within the church. He wanted the Corinthians to act as people united under Jesus Christ. It's an exhortation that every congregation must remember. Division is the devil's work, and when we break down into groups and cliques, we hinder the work of God's kingdom. Is your church divided today? Then it's time to swallow some pride, return to the Lord, and join hands with one another in renewed service to the Lord.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–2:16

Dear Lord Jesus, as I study Your Word given to me through Paul, I marvel at how Your divine wisdom surpasses all human wisdom. I pray that as one of Your ordinary children — without extraordinary abilities or magnetic personality — You would use me to spread the Good News of salvation to my family and friends. I pray in Your name. Amen.

1. Who is the smartest person you've ever known?

In what way did he or she demonstrate great intellect?

In what way did such “intellect” get in the way of practical living?

2. What does the Lord have a tendency to do towards the world’s “wisest”? (Job 5:13; Isaiah 29:14, 44:24–25; Jeremiah 8:9)
3. How does the message of the Gospel appear to unbelievers? (Luke 10:21; 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23, 2:14)
4. Where is true wisdom found? (Deuteronomy 4:5–8; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10, 119:97–98, 130; 1 Corinthians 1:30)

Where does this divine wisdom come from? (Daniel 2:20–21; Psalm 119:34; Colossians 1:9; 2 Timothy 3:15; James 1:5)

What will happen to those who are divinely wise? (Daniel 12:3; Matthew 13:43; John 8:32)

5. Why was it difficult for the Jews to believe in Jesus? (Matthew 12:22–24, 12:38–39, 16:1; 1 Corinthians 1:22–23)

Why was it so difficult for the Gentiles? (Acts 17:16–21; 1 Corinthians 1:22–23; Colossians 2:8)

Why do you think it is so difficult for people today to believe in Jesus? (1 Corinthians 2:14)

6. Describe the social status of many of the Corinthian Christians. (1 Corinthians 1:26)

How do they resemble the members of your congregation?

7. In the following passages, how does God choose “foolish” people for His exalted work?
Exodus 3:1–11

Judges 6:11–16

Isaiah 6:1–8

Jeremiah 1:4–8

Matthew 4:18–22

Luke 1:26–33

Acts 9:1–6

8. If God is the One who gives us true wisdom which leads to salvation, then where do our accomplishments fit in? (Romans 2:23–24; 1 Corinthians 1:31; Ephesians 2:8–10; 1 Timothy 1:8–9)

9. When and how was God’s “secret wisdom” finally revealed in its entirety? (Romans 16:25–27; Ephesians 1:9–10, 3:2–9; Colossians 1:25–27, 2:2)

10. Describe a moment when you felt you could almost read another person’s mind.

What was he or she thinking and how did you know?

How can we read God’s thoughts? (John 15:15; 1 Corinthians 2:11–12)