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BE WISE about...

The Christian's Calling

1 Corinthians 1

"Jesus, yes! The church, no!"

Remember when that slogan was popular among young people in the 60s? They certainly could have used it with sincerity in Corinth back in A.D. 56, because the local church there was in serious trouble. Sad to say, the problems did not stay within the church family; they were known by the unbelievers outside the church.

To begin with, the church at Corinth was a *defiled* church. Some of its members were guilty of sexual immorality; others got drunk; still others were using the grace of God to excuse worldly living. It was also a *divided* church, with at least four different groups competing for leadership (1:12). This meant it was a *disgraced* church. Instead of glorifying God, it was hindering the progress of the Gospel.

How did this happen? The members of the church permitted the sins of the city to get into the local assembly. Corinth was a polluted city, filled with every kind of vice and worldly pleasure. About the

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lowest accusation you could make against a man in that day would be to call him "a Corinthian." People would know what you were talking about.

Corinth was also a proud, philosophical city, with many itinerant teachers promoting their speculations. Unfortunately, this philosophical approach was applied to the Gospel by some members of the church, and this fostered division. The congregation was made up of different "schools of thought" instead of being united behind the Gospel message.

If you want to know what Corinth was like, read Romans 1:18-32. Paul wrote the Roman epistle while in Corinth, and he could have looked out the window and seen the very sins that he listed!

Of course, when you have proud people, depending on human wisdom, adopting the lifestyle of the world, you are going to have problems. In order to help them solve their problems, Paul opened his letter by reminding them of their *calling in Christ*. He pointed out three important aspects of this calling.

Called to Be Holy (1 Cor. 1:1-9)

Paul first attacked the serious problem of defilement in the church, yet he said nothing about the problem itself. Instead, he took the positive approach and reminded the believers of their high and holy position in Jesus Christ. In verses 1-9, he described the church that God sees; in verses 10-31, he described the church that men see. What we are in Jesus Christ *positionally* ought to be what we practice in daily life, but often we fail.

Note the characteristics of the church because of our holy calling in Jesus Christ.

SET APART BY GOD (1:1-3). The word *church* in the Greek language means "a called-out people." Each church has two addresses: a geographic address ("at

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Corinth") and a spiritual address ("in Christ Jesus"). The church is made up of saints, that is, people who have been "sanctified" or "set apart" by God. A saint is not a dead person who has been honored by men because of his holy life. No, Paul wrote to *living* saints, people who, through faith in Jesus Christ, had been set apart for God's special enjoyment and use.

In other words, every true believer is a saint because every true believer has been set apart by God and for God.

A Christian photographer friend told me about a lovely wedding that he "covered." The bride and groom came out of the church, heading for the limousine, when the bride suddenly left her husband and ran to a car parked across the street! The motor was running and a man was at the wheel, and off they drove, leaving the bridegroom speechless. The driver of the "get-away car" turned out to be an old boyfriend of the bride, a man who had boasted that "he could get her any time he wanted her." Needless to say, the husband had the marriage annulled.

When a man and woman pledge their love to each other, they are set apart for each other; and any other relationship outside of marriage is sinful. Just so, the Christian belongs completely to Jesus Christ; he is set apart for Him and Him alone. But he is also a part of a worldwide fellowship, the church, "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ" (v. 2). A defiled and unfaithful believer not only sins against the Lord, but he also sins against his fellow Christians.

ENRICHED BY GOD'S GRACE (1:4-6). Salvation is a gracious gift from God; but - when you are saved, you are also given spiritual gifts. (Paul explained this in detail in chapters 12—14.) The Greek word translated "enriched" gives us our English word *plutocrat*, "a very

wealthy person." The Corinthians were especially rich in spiritual gifts (2 Cor. 8:7), but were not using these gifts in a spiritual manner. The fact that God has called us, set us apart, and enriched us ought to encourage us to live holy lives.

EXPECTING JESUS TO RETURN (1:7). Paul Will have a great deal to say about this truth in chapter 15. Christians who are looking for their Saviour will want to keep their lives above reproach (1 John 2:28—3:3).

DEPENDING ON GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (1:8-9). The Work of God was confirmed *in* them (v. 6), but it was also confirmed *to* them in the Word. This is a legal term that refers to the guarantee that settles a transaction. We have the witness of the Spirit within us and the witness of the Word before us, guaranteeing that God will keep His "contract" with us and save us to the very end. This guarantee is certainly not an excuse for sin! Rather, it is the basis for a growing relationship of love, trust, and obedience.

Now, in the light of these great truths, how could the people in the Corinthian assembly get involved in the sins of the world and the flesh? They were an elect people, an enriched people, and an established people. They were saints, set apart for the glory of God! Alas, their practice was not in accord with their position.

When Paul mentioned the *wordfellowship* in verse 9, he introduced a second aspect of the Christian's calling.

Called into Fellowship (1 Cor. 1:10-25)

Having mentioned the problem of defilement in the church, now Paul turned to the matter of division in the church. Division has always been a problem among God's people, and almost every New Testament epistle deals with this topic or mentions it in

one way or another. Even the 12 Apostles did not always get along with each other.

To live above, with saints we love,
Will certainly be glory!

To live below, with saints we know,
Well, that's another story!

In verse 13, Paul asked his readers three important questions, and these three questions are the key to this long paragraph.

IS CHRIST DIVIDED? (1:10-13) The verb means, "Has Christ been divided and different parts handed out to different people?" The very idea is grotesque and must be rejected. Paul did not preach one Christ, Apollos another, and Peter another. There is but one Saviour and one Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). How, then, did the Corinthians create this four-way division? Why were there quarrels ("contentions") among them?

One answer is that they were looking at the Gospel from a philosophical point of view. Corinth was a city filled with teachers and philosophers, all of whom wanted to share their "wisdom."

Another answer is that human nature enjoys following human leaders. We tend to identify more with spiritual leaders who help us and whose ministry we understand and enjoy. Instead of emphasizing the *message* of the Word, the Corinthians emphasized the *messenger*. They got their eyes off the Lord and on the Lord's servants, and this led to competition.

Paul will point out in chapter 3 that there can be no competition among true servants of God. It is sinful for church members to compare pastors, or for believers to follow human leaders as disciples of men and not disciples of Jesus Christ. The "personality cults" in the church today are in direct disobedience to the Word of God. Only Jesus Christ should have the place of preeminence (Col. 1:18).

Paul used several key words in this section to emphasize the unity of the saints in Christ. He called his readers *brethren*, reminding them that they belonged to one family. The phrase "perfectly joined together" is a medical term that describes the unity of the human body *knit together*. So, they had a *loving* union as members of the body. They were also identified by the name of Jesus Christ. This was probably a reference to their baptism.

We do not know who the people were who belonged to "the house of Chloe," but we commend them for their courage and devotion. They did not try to hide the problems. They were burdened about them; they went to the right person with them; and they were not afraid to be mentioned by Paul. This was not the kind of "cloak and dagger" affair that we often see in churches—activities that usually make the problem worse and not better.

Paul was the minister -who founded the church, so most of the members would have been converted through his ministry. Apollos followed Paul (Acts 18:24-28) and had an effective ministry. We have no record that Peter (Cephas) ever visited Corinth, unless 1 Corinthians 9:5 records it. Each of these men had a different personality and a different approach to the ministry of the Word; *yet they were one* (3:3-8; 4:6).

WERE YOU BAPTIZED IN THE NAME OF PAUL? (1:13-17)
Keep in mind that baptism was an important matter in the New Testament church. When a sinner trusted Christ and was baptized, he cut himself off from his old life and often was rejected by his family and friends. It cost something to be baptized in that day.

Just as Jesus did not baptize people (John 4:1-2), so both Peter (Acts 10:48) and Paul allowed their associates to baptize the new converts. Until the church grew in Corinth, Paul did some of the baptizing; but

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that was not his main ministry. In this section, Paul was not minimizing baptism, but rather was putting it into its proper perspective, because the Corinthians were making too much of it. "I was baptized by Apollos!" one would boast, while another would say, "Oh, but I was baptized by Paul!"

It is wrong to identify any man's name with your baptism other than the name of Jesus Christ. To do so is to create division. I have read accounts about people who had to be baptized by a certain preacher, using special -water (usually from the Jordan River), on a special day, as though these are the matters that are important! Instead of honoring the Lord Jesus Christ and promoting the unity of the church, these people exalt men and create disunity.

Crispus had been the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:8); and Gaius was probably the man Paul lived with when he wrote Romans (Rom. 16:23). "The household of Stephanas" (1 Cor. 1:16) is probably described in part in 1 Corinthians 16:15-18. Apparently Paul did not carry with him a record of the names of all the people he baptized. It was sufficient that they were written in God's book.

WAS PAUL CRUCIFIED FOR YOU? (1:18-25) The mention of the cross in verse 17 introduced this long section on the power of the Gospel versus the weakness of man's wisdom. It is interesting to see how Paul approached this problem of division in the church. First, he pointed to the unity of Christ: there is one Saviour and one body. Then he reminded them of their baptism, a picture of their spiritual baptism into Christ's body (12:13). Now, he takes them to the cross.

Crucifixion was not only a horrible death; it was a shameful death. It was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen. Crucifixion was never mentioned in polite society, any more than we today would discuss over

dinner the gas chamber or the electric chair.

The key word in this paragraph is *wisdom*; it is used eight times. The key idea that Paul expressed is that we dare not mix man's wisdom -with God's revealed message. The entire section on wisdom (1:17—2:16) presents a number of contrasts between the revealed Word of God and the wisdom of men.

God's wisdom is revealed primarily in the cross of Jesus Christ, but not everybody sees this. Paul pointed out that there are three different attitudes toward the cross.

Some stumble at the cross. This was the attitude of the Jews, because their emphasis is on miraculous signs and the cross appears to be weakness. Jewish history is filled with miraculous events, from the Exodus out of Egypt to the days of Elijah and Elisha. When Jesus was ministering on earth, the Jewish leaders repeatedly asked Him to perform a sign from heaven; but He refused.

The Jewish nation did not understand their own sacred Scriptures. They looked for a Messiah who would come like a mighty conqueror and defeat all their enemies. He would then set up His kingdom and return the glory to Israel. The question of the apostles in Acts 1:6 shows how strong this hope was among the Jews.

At the same time, their scribes noticed in the Old Testament that the Messiah would suffer and die. Passages like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 pointed toward a different kind of Messiah, and the scholars could not reconcile these two seemingly contradictory prophetic images. They did not understand that their Messiah had to suffer and die before He could enter into His glory (see Luke 24:13-35), and that the future messianic kingdom was to be preceded by the age of the church.

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Because the Jews were looking for power and great glory, they stumbled at the weakness of the cross. How could anybody put faith in an unemployed carpenter from Nazareth who died the shameful death of a common criminal? But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Rather than a testimony of weakness, the cross is a tremendous instrument of power! After all, the "weakness of God [in the cross] is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:25).

Some laugh at the cross. This was the response of the Greeks. To them, the cross was foolishness. The Greeks emphasized wisdom; we still study the profound writings of the Greek philosophers. But they saw no wisdom in the cross, for they looked at the cross from a human point of view. Had they seen it from God's viewpoint, they would have discerned the wisdom of God's great plan of salvation.

Paul called on three men to bear witness: the wise (the expert), the scribe (the interpreter and writer), and the disputer (the philosopher and debater). He asked them one question: Through your studies into man's wisdom, have you come to know God in a personal way? They all must answer no! The fact that they laugh at the cross and consider it foolishness is evidence that they are perishing.

Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14 in verse 19, proving that God has written a big "0—Failure!" over the wisdom of men. In his address on Mars' Hill, Paul dared to tell the philosophers that Greek and Roman history were but "times of this ignorance" (Acts 17:30). He was not suggesting that they knew nothing, because Paul knew too well that the Greek thinkers had made some achievements. However, their wisdom did not enable them to find God and experience salvation.

Some believe and experience the power and the wis-

dom of the cross. Paul did not alter his message when he turned from a Jewish audience to a Greek one: he preached Christ crucified. "The foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21) does not mean that the *act* of preaching is foolish, but rather the content of the message. The *New International Version* states it "through the foolishness of what was preached," and this is correct.

Those who have been called by God's grace, and who have responded by faith (see 2 Thes. 2:13-14), realize that Christ is God's power and God's wisdom. Not the Christ of the manger, or the temple, or the marketplace—but the Christ of the cross. It is in the death of Christ that God has revealed the foolishness of man's wisdom and the weakness of man's power.

We are called into fellowship because of our union with Jesus Christ: He died for us; we were baptized in His name; we are identified with His cross. What a wonderful basis for spiritual unity!

Called to Glorify God (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

The Corinthians had a tendency to be "puffed up" with pride (4:6, 18-19; 5:2). But the Gospel of God's grace leaves no room for personal boasting. God is not impressed with our looks, our social position, our achievements, our natural heritage, or our financial status. Note that Paul wrote *many*, not *any*. In the New Testament, we do meet some believers with "high social standing," but there are not many of them. The description Paul gave of the converts was certainly not a flattering one (6:9-11).

PAUL REMINDED THEM OF WHAT THEY WERE (1:26). **They** were not wise, mighty, or noble. God called them, not *because* of what they were, but *in spite* of what they were! The Corinthian church was composed primarily of ordinary people who were terrible sinners. Be-

fore his conversion, Paul had been very self-righteous; he had to give up his religion in order to go to heaven! The Corinthians were at the other end of the spectrum, and yet they were not too sinful for God to reach and save them.

The saintly Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne one day gave a Gospel tract to a woman, and she was greatly offended. "You must not know who I am!" she said in an offended manner. "Madam," McCheyne replied, "there is coming a day of judgment, and on that day it will not matter who you are!"

PAUL REMINDED THE CORINTHIANS OF WHY GOD CALLED THEM (1:27-29). God chose the foolish, the weak, the base ("low born"), and the despised to show the proud world their need and His grace. The lost world admires birth, social status, financial success, power, and recognition. But none of these things can guarantee eternal life.

The message and miracle of God's grace in Jesus Christ utterly confounds ("puts to shame") the high and mighty people of this world. The wise of this world cannot understand how God changes sinners into saints, and the mighty of this world are helpless to duplicate the miracle. God's "foolishness" confounds the wise; God's "weakness" confounds the mighty!

The annals of church history are filled with the accounts of great sinners whose lives were transformed by the power of the Gospel. In my own ministry, as in the ministry of most pastors and preachers, I have seen amazing things take place that the lawyers and psychologists could not understand. We have seen delinquent teenagers become successful students and useful citizens. We have seen marriages restored and homes reclaimed, much to the amaze-

ment of the courts.

And why does God reveal the foolishness and the weakness of this present world system, even with its philosophy and religion? "That no flesh should glory in His presence" (v. 29). Salvation must be wholly of grace; otherwise, God cannot get the glory.

It is this truth that Paul wanted to get across to the Corinthians, because they were guilty of glorying in men (3:21). If we glory in men—even godly men like Peter and Paul and Apollos—we are robbing God of the glory that He alone deserves. It was this sinful attitude of pride that was helping to cause division in the church.

FINALLY, PAUL REMINDED THE CORINTHIANS OF ALL THEY HAD IN JESUS CHRIST (1:30-31). Since every believer is "in Christ," and he has all that he needs, why compete with each other or compare yourselves with each other? It is the Lord who has done it all! "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (v. 31, a quotation from Jer. 9:24, quoted again in 2 Cor. 10:17).

The spiritual blessings that we need are not abstractions that elude our grasp; they are all in a Person, Jesus Christ. He is our wisdom (Col. 2:3), our righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21), our sanctification (John 17:19), and our redemption (Rom. 3:24).

Actually, the emphasis here is that God shows His wisdom by means of the righteousness, sanctification, and redemption that we have in Christ. Each of these theological words carries a special meaning for Christians. *Righteousness* has to do with our standing before God. We are justified: God declares us righteous in Jesus Christ. But we are also *sanctified*, set apart to belong to God and to serve Him. *Redemption* emphasizes the fact that we are set free because Jesus Christ paid the price for us on the cross. This will lead to a complete redemption when Jesus Christ returns.

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So, in one sense, we have the three tenses of salvation given here: we *have been saved* from the penalty of sin (righteousness); we *are being saved* from the power of sin (sanctification); and we *shall be saved* from the presence of sin (redemption). And every believer has all of these blessings in Jesus Christ!

Therefore, why glory in men? What does Paul have that you do not have? Does Peter have more of Jesus Christ than you do? (It was likely that Jesus Christ had more of Peter, but that is another matter!) We should glory in the Lord and not in ourselves or our spiritual leaders.

As you review this chapter, you can see the mistakes that the Corinthians were making, mistakes that helped to create problems in their church. They were not living up to their holy calling, but were instead following the standards of the world. They ignored the fact that they were called into a wonderful spiritual fellowship with the Lord and with each other. Instead, they were identifying with human leaders and creating divisions in the church. Instead of glorifying God and His grace, they were pleasing themselves and boasting about men.

They were a defiled church, a divided church, a disgraced church!

But, before we pass judgment on them, we should examine our own churches and our own lives. Like them, we have been called to be holy, called into fellowship, and called to glorify God.

Are we living up to this calling?