

Table of Contents

7

Series Introduction

11

General Editor's Preface

13

Author's Preface

16

Abbreviations

17

Introduction

29

Outline

31

Annotated Bibliography of Commentaries

35

Text and Commentary

345

Scripture Index

1 Corinthians 1:1–9



PAUL, CALLED TO BE an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,
²To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—⁶because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Original Meaning

THE CONVENTIONAL LETTER in the ancient Greco-Roman world began with a salutation, in which the writer identified himself and his recipients and gave a brief greeting.¹ This letter is from Paul, the Pharisaic Jew converted to Christ (Acts 9:1–31), who became the first generation of Christianity's premier church-planter among the non-Jewish world (Acts 13–28).² He identifies himself as "called" (v. 1) or commissioned to be an "apostle," not in the sense Luke uses that term for one of the twelve disciples of Jesus (Acts 1:21–26), but as one divinely sent out on a mission of church-planting. Paul will later identify apostleship as a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:29). This calling was not of Paul's own choosing, as his Damascus road experience makes plain, but was due entirely to "the will of God." This letter is said also to come from "our brother," that is, fellow-Christian,

1. For an excellent analysis of ancient Greco-Roman letter writing and an assessment of the New Testament epistles in that light, see Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

2. An excellent brief overview is Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Sosthenes, possibly the synagogue ruler of Acts 18:17, if he was later converted. He does not seem to have been involved in the actual writing of the letter but was merely accompanying Paul at the time of its composition.³

The recipients of the letter are the Corinthian Christians. They probably comprise several house-congregations, but Paul addresses them as a collective whole, “the church” or assembly of those God has saved. “Sanctified” in verse 2 does not mean “made holy,” as often in Paul, but separated apart for God. It is virtually synonymous with the next phrase, “called to be holy.” Paul is reminding the Corinthians of their overarching purpose in the Christian life. He then generalizes to include all Christians everywhere, though obviously not all would immediately read his letter for themselves. “Their Lord and ours” stresses the spiritual unity that all believers share in Jesus Christ.

“Grace” (v. 3) reflects the conventional Greco-Roman form of greeting; “peace,” the typical Jewish salutation. But each suggests theological overtones too. Grace is a free gift; peace is wholeness in every aspect of life. Paul Christianizes these conventional greetings by adding a reference to the origin of grace and peace—the one, true, living God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The second section of an ancient Greco-Roman letter was a prayer or a word of thanks. One might typically thank God or the gods for learning that the recipient was in good health or that his or her family prospered. Paul adopts this convention in most of his letters as well but centers primarily on spiritual blessings.⁴ When Paul says he “always” thanks God (v. 4a), he means either “repeatedly,” or “whenever I pray.” His thankfulness for God’s “grace” (v. 4b; from the same root as “gift”) prepares the way for his references to spiritual gifts in verses 5–7. Paul is grateful that the Corinthian Christians have been enriched or “made wealthy” (v. 5), specifically with reference to the spiritual gifts of speaking and knowledge—most prominently words of knowledge and wisdom, prophecy, and tongues (12:8–10). This occurred as they responded to his preaching with faith and repentance and thus received the Spirit, who began to distribute his gifts among them. The truth of Paul’s message was thus confirmed (vv. 6–7). “You do not lack any spiritual gift” (v. 7) might also mean “you are not deficient in the exercise of any gift.”

3. So most commentators, since Paul’s use of the first person plural usually implies “I and other apostles” or “I and other Christians” or is simply an editorial “we.” Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Co-Authorship in the Corinthian Correspondence,” *RB* 100 (1993): 562–79, finds Sosthenes’ contribution behind the “we” forms in 1:18–31 and 2:6–16.

4. See esp. Peter T. O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); for incisive, popular exposition, cf. D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

How can Paul be so thankful and positive about a church rife with divisions and abuses even of these very gifts? Verses 8–9 supply the answer: God's character provides the guarantee. He will remain faithful to his promises ultimately to perfect his people, however immature they at times seem to be (vv. 8a, 9). When he returns, when the age of the fulfillment of all of the remaining biblical promises arrives, then believers will be made wholly blameless (v. 8b). Acquitted of their past sins, they will be fully prepared for the life to come. Even now, his people are in the process of being remolded, even if it is with fits and starts, as they enter into a personal relationship with Jesus.

Bridging Contexts

IN TRYING TO APPLY all of a biblical book, it is easy to milk relatively peripheral parts for more than they are worth. This temptation proves particularly strong at the beginning of a letter with preachers who want to start a series of sermons on a given letter with a "bang." The solution to this problem is to determine what a letter writer was stressing in a greeting and thanksgiving and what was merely conventional.

As we have already seen, the name of the author, recipients, and a brief salutation were conventional. So we must not read too much theology into "grace" and "peace" this early in the letter, any more than we assume today that people consciously mean "God be with you" when they say "good-bye," even though that is the etymology of the word. Nor should we make too much of Paul's greeting to "the church of God in Corinth," as if this demonstrated something about the completeness of the church in each of its local manifestations. Instead, we should look for ways in which Paul broke from convention and stress these aspects.

In doing this, we sense Paul's concern to stress his authority in verse 1, by the conjunction of the terms "called," "apostle," and "the will of God." It would not be conventional to add all these descriptions of an author's identity. But many of the Corinthians have rejected his authority (1:12), so immediately at the outset of his letter he begins to seek ways to reassert it. His use of the term "called" is relatively rare. Usually he applies it to what God does for all believers when they are saved—designating them as his own.⁵ There is no biblical evidence that all Christians are given a unique calling or commissioning upon conversion which they must seek to discover, though some, like Paul, may be given one. Rather Paul will outline in chapter 12 how

5. See esp. William W. Klein, "Paul's Use of *Kalein*: A Proposal," *JETS* 27 (1984): 53–64; idem, *The New Chosen People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 199–209.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

every believer is given at least one spiritual gift. Discovering our gifts is the appropriate way to determine our unique avenues of service or “niches” in the kingdom. Paul’s unique additions in verse 1 further stress his authority, but they do so gently, a strategy Paul follows with only occasional deviation throughout his letters.

Unusual in this greeting too are Paul’s declarations of the spiritual state of the Corinthians and of God’s purposes for them, particularly because when we learn more about them it will be clear that they seem far from holy or “sanctified” in the more traditional sense of that word. Paul hints here at part of the solution—recognizing that the church is “of God” (v. 2) and does not belong to a particular leader or congregation. The Corinthians must also recognize that they are not the center of their religious universe but merely one cog in a large wheel of “those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord.” The same Lord is Lord over all, which should inspire Christians in all times and places to seek unity and not factionalism.

Paul’s thanksgivings are typically lengthier and more theological than was customary in his day. They obviously provide an opportunity for him to praise God for his many blessings and to set the stage and tone for topics in the letter to come. As with his greetings, we must again look for the unconventional or unexpected to see where Paul’s emphases lie to see what we should stress in contemporary application.

Surely the most striking feature of this thanksgiving is how positive Paul can be about a church torn with strife and abuses of the very gifts he thanks God for having given its members. The surprises extend to the very words Paul employs. Being “enriched” (v. 5) will reappear in 4:8 in a passage dripping with sarcasm: “Already you have become rich!” There Paul lambastes their misguided views of their own maturity, yet here he genuinely praises God for their manifold enrichment. Chapters 12–14 make plain that gifts of speaking and knowledge form a central part of the Corinthians’ problem with spiritual gifts, but here he is grateful that they have received them. “Knowledge” is closely related to “wisdom,” which is being defined by some in the church in an elitist, esoteric fashion, anticipating the development of full-blown Gnosticism. Yet Paul can give thanks because spiritual gifts are the sign of the presence of the Spirit. This is not nominal Christianity—profession without reality. Neither is it lifeless orthodoxy. The Spirit is active amid the Corinthians, even if they are employing their gifts in a somewhat chaotic way.

Verse 7b is crucial in three respects. First, the overly realized eschatology in Corinth (see Introduction, p. 25) probably meant that most were not “eagerly awaiting” Christ’s return at all. Paul’s statement either reflects what a

minority were faithfully doing or refers to their objective state rather than their subjective behavior. So again Paul picks up on what they *should* be doing rather than what most *are* doing, to try to point them in a positive direction. Second, this clause strongly suggests that all the spiritual gifts will last until Jesus comes back. Faithful exercise of the gifts is what Christians are to be about until their Lord returns; they are believers' characteristic form of ministry for this age.⁶ Third, by reminding them of Christ's second coming, he prepares the way for what verse 8 implies even more clearly: the church in general is not yet perfected, and this one in particular has a long way to go.

Our focus on God's strength rather than human frailty and on what's going right more than on what's going wrong should lead us to outbursts of praise to God for his grace and faithfulness. This praise should take place privately but also publicly, so that the people we thank God for can be encouraged by hearing us and knowing that we are speaking well of them before the Lord. "To delight in God for his working in the lives of others, even in the lives of those with whom we feel compelled to disagree, is sure evidence of our own awareness of being the recipients of God's mercies."⁷ In so doing, we do not abdicate our responsibility to correct others gently (Gal. 6:1), particularly those over whom we are given positions of spiritual authority and responsibility. But we hopefully prepare the way for the best possible reception of our correction, though human freedom to reject our advances ensures that we can never be guaranteed success.

The primary cross-cultural principle that emerges from both Paul's greeting and his thanksgiving is to focus on what is going right in Christian circles before addressing problems that require attention. This is made possible by focusing on the faithfulness of God rather than the fickleness of humans, including Christians who still await perfection. Christian leaders in every age need to imitate Paul's combination of authority and tact (see his classic letter to Philemon), avoiding heavy-handed authoritarianism on the one hand and *laissez-faire* uninvolvedness on the other.



THE THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES of Paul's greeting (vv. 1–3) all recur more explicitly and pointedly as his letter unfolds, so detailed application is best reserved for subsequent commentary. But

6. E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 26–52.

7. Fee, *First Corinthians*, 37.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

we can make some general remarks here and comment on a few specific applications of the thanksgiving (vv. 4–9).

Paul's words in verse 7 offer important insights into the current debate about spiritual gifts. To begin with, since even the most immature believers are gifted in some way, every Christian is immediately useful to Christ and his church with a unique opportunity for ministry. We do not need to seek additional gifts or experiences, as many do today, though we may need training in the use of the gifts we already have. And God may graciously choose to grant us additional ones as we grow. But our primary task is to act in faithful obedience to God and service to his people with what we have already been given.

Second, what is true individually is true corporately. On the one hand, "as far as knowledge is concerned, the church as a body has access to all the wisdom, insight, discernment and truth which it needs; it needs no special gurus to bring it to them."⁸ On the other hand, if all the gifts are for the entire Christian age, serious questions must be asked of contemporary congregations that are closed to certain of the so-called sign gifts. It seems likely that they run the serious risk of missing out on blessings the Spirit would want to bring them. Such conclusions will, of course, remain controversial. Perhaps we can more readily agree that, charismatic or not, fellowships that err on the side of overexercise and misuse of their gifts and talents are less displeasing to God than those that err on the side of underuse. Immature but growing children delight their parents far more than those who simply refuse to mature in some area of their lives.⁹

At the same time we must vigilantly guard against false claims of maturity, of a sense of having arrived, or of achieving sinless perfection for any substantial length of time, as certain modern offspring of the Wesleyan and holiness movements periodically claim.¹⁰ This will occur only when Christ returns (v. 8b). For most of us, this reminder should actually provide great comfort and encouragement. In our complex and pressure-filled world, most Christians more commonly struggle with the awareness of persistent sin in their lives, with feelings of inadequacy and immaturity. Yet God remains

8. David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 24–25.

9. For a recent, reasonably well-balanced discussion of several of these themes, see Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

10. Indeed, such a claim virtually disproves itself, for as Dale Moody (*The Word of Truth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 324) puts it, "Perfect sanctification is good to pursue, but self-righteousness is sure to follow any claim that it has been achieved."

faithful: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

Verses 8–9 also have important implications for the so-called “eternal security” debate. Those whom the Spirit has genuinely indwelt will experience transformation. Those who begin this process can rest assured that God will be faithful to complete it. Of course, such verses provide no assurance for professing believers who have never shown any evidence of the gifts of the Spirit. Eternal security is not a doctrine to be applied glibly to all who have claimed to be Christian, however superficial their commitment has seemed to be.

It is also important to note that Paul speaks to the church collectively. In our day of so many “lone-ranger” Christians, it is important to recall that neither here nor elsewhere does Scripture envisage Christians apart from a local church. So God is also in the process of perfecting his people corporately as well as individually.

1 Corinthians 1:10–17



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. ¹¹My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹²What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? ¹⁴I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. ¹⁶(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Original Meaning

VERSE 10 BEGINS the actual body of the letter, which falls into two main parts—Paul's response to information about the Corinthians, which he has heard by word of mouth (1:10–6:20) and his reply to a letter the Corinthians sent him (7:1–16:4).

In the first half, Paul refers to four problems he has heard about that are plaguing the Corinthian church—factions (1:10–4:21), incest (5:1–13), lawsuits (6:1–11), and sexual immorality more generally (6:12–20). The members of Chloe's household, an otherwise anonymous but presumably Corinthian family, have brought him news of the first of these problems (1:11). These emissaries, possibly the same as Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17), probably also described the latter three problems, because in 7:1 Paul shifts to matters about which the Corinthians had written him.

Paul deals with the first of the four problems at greatest length, perhaps because the Corinthian divisiveness to varying degrees underlay all the other problems. First Corinthians 1:10–17 states the essential problem (rival factions) and Paul's essential solution (an appeal for unity). First Corinthians 1:18–4:21 will unpack why that unity is so crucial and how it can become