

# Introduction: The Kind of Church God Can Use

*To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.*

(1 Corinthians 1:2)

If you think that 1 and 2 Corinthians are somebody else's mail, you need to think again. Paul wrote them for you and he wrote them for me. Yes, I know he wrote to tackle very real issues in a specific local church, but right from the outset his goal was far bigger than the city walls of Corinth. He copied them to "*all the saints throughout Achaia*" and to "*all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*".<sup>1</sup> They are God's message to believers in any local church in any place at any time. They are a detailed description of the kind of church God can use.

A few weeks ago, I happened to be in the city where I lived as a toddler. On a whim, I went back to visit my old house, which I remembered as a sprawling mansion with a massive front garden. When I reached the address I had to double-check the number. It was a tiny house with an even tinier garden, but which years of fond nostalgia had made much larger in my memory. We can do the same with our view of the early Church, if we're not careful, which is why God has given us Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

The Lord preserved these two letters to remind us of *how bad* the early Church was. Many Christians assume that the unstoppable advance of the New Testament Church was due to her pure and unadulterated passion for Jesus. God tells

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1.

us in no uncertain terms that it wasn't. Parts of it were full of quarrelling, infighting, litigation and false teaching. Some of its members frequented prostitutes, committed incest and got drunk on communion wine. Some of its Sunday services were so disorderly that the apostle Paul concluded that "*Your meetings do more harm than good.*"<sup>2</sup> Nostalgic views of the early Church are not just false, but also self-defeating, so God gives us these letters to show us the reality. They remind us he has always advanced his Kingdom through struggling, sin-ridden churches like our own. No matter what problems may exist in our own churches today, these letters insist that they are still the kind that God can use.

The Lord also preserved these letters to remind us of *how fruitful* the early Church was. He wants to free us from the shallows of undersized ambition by showing us what happens when everyday people take his promises seriously. Corinth was the fourth-largest city in the Roman Empire, with a growing population of two thirds of a million. It was the capital city of the province of Achaia, and effortlessly rich through simple fact of geography. The rocky seas off the southern coast of Greece were treacherous, but sailors could bypass them by taking an overland shortcut across the Corinthian isthmus. They could transport their cargoes along its six-mile-long *diolkos*, a trackway that joined the Adriatic to the Aegean, and in doing so they turned Corinth into a wealthy world trade centre. It became a sailor's city, a peddler's paradise, a haven for vice, which was well-fed and arrogant. There was a reason why Paul arrived at the city in late 50 AD on his second missionary journey full of "*weakness and fear, and with much trembling*".<sup>3</sup> It was about as unpromising a location for a new Christian church plant as any other town in the whole Roman Empire.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17. Admittedly Corinth was a particularly bad example, but don't forget that there was also racial disharmony within the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1; 15:1), and a heated falling-out between two of the elders from the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3; 15:36-40).

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:3.

Yet, against all odds, Paul's mission was successful. When the Jews opposed him, he converted not just one synagogue-ruler but two, and one of them, Sosthenes, sat with Paul as he wrote 1 Corinthians.<sup>4</sup> When the sophisticated Gentiles scorned his message of the cross, he persisted until it won over thieves and drunkards and playboys and prostitutes. Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth until early 52 AD, by which time the Corinthian believers were reaching other cities too.<sup>5</sup> The very fact that Paul can copy his letter to "*all the saints throughout Achaia*" is a reminder that Corinth was a mighty success story. For all its faults and failings, it was still the kind of church God could use.

There was a reason why this church was so bad and yet so fruitful. The Lord also preserved these letters to remind us of *how much grace* he pours out on the Church through the Gospel. The early Church didn't conquer the ancient world because of its own inherent godliness or purity. It did so because grace turned sinful people into "*the church of God*", "*the field of God*", "*the building of God*" and "*the temple of God*".<sup>6</sup> It did so because grace made them "*the body of Christ*", "*the aroma of Christ*" and "*a letter from Christ*" which the world could not ignore.<sup>7</sup> Paul tries to capture this paradox here in verse 2 when he tells his readers that they are "*sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy*".<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> Paul does not specifically tell us that the Sosthenes of 1 Corinthians 1:1 is the same person as the Sosthenes of Acts 18:17, but it was not a common name and Luke tends not to name the minor players in Acts unless he has a specific reason for doing so. Sosthenes was a much more nominal co-sender of 1 Corinthians than Timothy was of 2 Corinthians. Paul often writes "we" in his second letter, but normally writes "I" in his first.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 18:11. The Delphi Inscription of 52 AD (now in the Delphi Archaeological Museum) tells us Gallio was proconsul of Achaia in 51 AD. This pinpoints Paul's time in Corinth to late 50 to early 52 AD. Paul spent as much time in Corinth as in all the other cities of his first and second missionary journeys put together.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:9, 16; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 6:16.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27; 2 Corinthians 2:15; 3:3.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek words Paul uses here are the verb *hagiazō* and its sister adjective *hagios*. One means *to make holy* and the other means *holy*. The church was

spite of their sin, God had declared them to be flawlessly holy through the death and resurrection of his Son. Now they must learn to live in the light of this fact by faith.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in early 55 AD in response to troubling news which was reaching him from Corinth.<sup>9</sup> He told his readers to *remember whose church it is* (chapters 1–4), and to live according to God’s teaching about *sex in the city* (chapters 5–7). He told them to *remember whose world it is* (chapters 8–10), and to live a holy lifestyle as God’s *church in the city* (chapters 11–16).

Sadly, the letter was not enough. He was forced to pay them an emergency visit shortly afterwards. He returned to Ephesus in tears, having stretched their relationship to breaking point, and he wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia that autumn to renew his appeal and repair their relationship. Once again, he urged them to *remember whose church it is* (chapters 1–7) and to demonstrate their faith in God through their generous use of *cash in the city* (chapters 8–9). He ended with a warning to *remember whose power it is* (chapters 10–13) because he never stopped believing they were the kind of church God could use. In the end, this second letter won over the Corinthians.

I have written this book to help you to see the early Church as it really was: a church full of failings but even more full of grace. I want to rid you of any spiritual nostalgia which glosses over the reality of the first-century Church. Because if God painted brushstrokes of grace on a cracked and dirty canvas like the church at Corinth, we have reasons to be confident despite the weaknesses which plague our own.

So let’s walk together through the message of 1 and 2 Corinthians. Let’s read Paul’s description of the kind of church God can use.

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therefore to become in practice what she already was in Christ.

<sup>9</sup> We can tell from 16:5–9, 19 and Acts 20:31 that he wrote 1 Corinthians at the end of his three years in Ephesus.

# 1 Corinthians

Part One:  
Remember  
Whose  
Church It Is

# Seeing God Amidst the Mess (1:1–9)

*I always thank God for you because of his grace  
given you in Christ Jesus.*

(1 Corinthians 1:4)

Two of my relatives are former church leaders who have stepped out of ministry and turned their backs on the Church. If you heard their stories, you probably wouldn't blame them. They saw church life at its worst, and the disappointment crushed their spirits. Someone once said, *"To dwell above with saints we love, well that will be such glory; but to dwell below with saints we know, now that's a different story!"* If you have ever found hurt instead of healing as part of a local church, you will know that it takes more than a sense of humour to survive.

That's why the first verses of 1 Corinthians are so surprising and so challenging. Paul doesn't begin his letter with complaint or rebuke or disappointed finger-pointing. Instead, he tells the wayward Corinthians that *"I always thank God for you."*

Hold on a minute. *Always thank God for you?! Always thank God for the sinful bunch of rebels who had betrayed his trust in Corinth? Thank God for the church that was riddled with division, pride and puffed-up human wisdom? Thank God for Christians who were suing one another in the law courts and shocking even their non-Christian neighbours with their acts of sexual perversion? Who were disorderly in worship, dishonouring the gifts of the Spirit, and drunk at the Lord's Supper? Who were led astray by false teachers and had started doubting the reality of Jesus' resurrection? How on earth can Paul begin his letter*

by telling the Corinthians that *"I always thank God for you?"* He explains in the second half of the verse: *"because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus"*.

I am not very good at Magic Eye pictures. Frankly, they look like a jumbled-up mess to me. My wife, on the other hand, can do strange things with her eyes and can always see a beautiful three-dimensional picture hidden behind all the mess. Paul did the same when he looked at the sinful church at Corinth. Instead of feeling angry and giving up in disillusion, Paul saw God's grace at work amidst the mess.

Paul wasn't just a wishful thinker. He didn't try to pretend that the Corinthians were doing better than they really were. *"I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches,"* he tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:28, and his intense concern is what makes these two letters so passionate. He looked sin full in the face within the messy church at Corinth, but then chose to focus his eyes upon God's gracious 3D picture. He learned to dwell on God's grace more than he did on human failure, and he let the truth of the Gospel save his heart from disappointment.

The Gospel reminded Paul of God's work in the *past*, and this more than offset the bitter pill of the present. Every single one of those believers had once been dead in their sins and enemies of God, until God's grace sought them out and raised them to life through his Spirit.<sup>1</sup> They had not become church members because Paul convinced them it might help them to pray a sinner's prayer, as Paul stresses by filling these opening nine verses with a series of passive verbs. They had been *called* by God's initiative, *sanctified* through the shed blood of Jesus and *given grace* in spite of their sin. They may look like a sorry bunch of washed-up, has-been Christians, but in truth they had been *enriched* through the Gospel. Paul had learned to focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Paul states categorically in Ephesians 2:1-10 that we are saved through the undeserved initiative of God, not through our own initiating activity.

God at work amidst the mess, and he refused to write off anyone whom the Lord had written in.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel also reminded Paul of God's promises for the *future*. He must have felt punch-drunk when he listened to Chloe, Stephanas and a long line of other visitors with bad news from Corinth,<sup>3</sup> but one great fact kept him buoyant through it all. "*God, who has called you... is faithful,*" he rejoices in verse 9, confident that this means "*he will keep you strong to the end*". The same God who had called the Corinthians to follow him in the past would also keep them following him right until the end, because human unfaithfulness does not nullify God's faithfulness.<sup>4</sup> That's what stopped Paul from giving up at the start of 55 AD, from giving up in the spring when his emergency visit ended in heartbreak, and from giving up in the autumn when he wrote to them again. Ultimately, it was because Paul kept sight of God's future grace for the Corinthians that he won them to repentance and helped them to see it too.

The Gospel also helped Paul to see God's work in the *present*. Fault-finding is easy but grace-spotting requires faith. Paul needed it to see God's fingerprints at Corinth, still at work amidst the mess. In spite of their sin, the Corinthians were still *calling on the name of the Lord Jesus*, and no one ever does that but for the working of God's grace.<sup>5</sup> Compared to their out-and-out paganism less than five years earlier, the changes to their speech and knowledge were living proof that the Gospel had saved them.<sup>6</sup> Even the disorderly way in which they exercised

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<sup>2</sup> Paul uses a play on words in Greek in vv. 8–9 between the words *klētos*, or *called*, and *aneklētos*, or *blameless*. Because of what God has already spoken for us, no one else can speak anything against us.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:11; 16:17.

<sup>4</sup> Paul draws hope from this fact again in 2 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:24 and 2 Thessalonians 3:3.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:3.

<sup>6</sup> Paul uses a play on words here in Greek with the two meanings of the verb *bebaioō*. He uses it in v. 6 to refer to Jesus *confirming* his testimony in them, and again in v. 8 to refer to Jesus *keeping them strong* to the end.

the gifts of the Spirit bore testimony to the fact that God was present in their midst and had not given up on them. It is easy to focus on the negatives and disappointments, but those who understand the Gospel can see God at work in the midst of the mess.

Magic Eye pictures may not come naturally to you, but make sure that you see the 3D picture of God's grace in the Church. If you don't, you will find yourself complaining, church-hopping and falling out of love with the Bride for whom Christ died. Your heart will eventually grow cold towards God's People, and your joy in Christian ministry will begin to falter and die.

But if seeing God at work could give Paul strength to love, persevere and give thanks for the troublesome Corinthians in 55 AD, it is more than able to give us strength to cope with our own setbacks and disappointments today. I am amazed at how Paul won back the church at Corinth when they realized that he was more aware of God's grace than he was of their failure. I am still amazed at the potential released in churches today whenever people learn to see God at work amidst the mess.