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1 Corinthians

Paul, called *to be* an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes *our* brother...1 Corinthians 1:1

1 Corinthians is comprised of 437 verses in 16 chapters. This makes it four verses longer than the epistle to the Romans. A few things should be noted about the letter: Its composition is dated at AD59. It is generally directed toward proper Christian conduct and the avoidance of heresy and division within the church. Paul established the church in Corinth during his missionary travels, but it continued to have many problems with adjusting to proper conduct, especially because of being in a pagan environment. This letter is then written to address these problems and to give guidance in these and other church-related issues.

Paul begins with an introduction to confirm the letters authenticity. In it, he identifies himself and his position, and from whence his authority arises - "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ." As Paul established the church, they would know him and hopefully take heed to whatever issues he would address. To ensure they hadn't forgotten, he identifies his title. He was "called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ."

The title "apostle" is something which is incorrectly applied in the church today. The apostles were only those who personally witnessed the work of Jesus Christ. Paul was called as an exception to this because he only came to know Christ after His ascension. He will specifically note this calling in 1 Corinthians 15:8. The

apostolic age ended with the completion of the Bible and the death of the last apostle. Being an apostle then had a special significance and only came about by a specific calling by Christ himself (see 1 Corinthians 15:7).

Next he identifies from where his calling was derived. It was "through the will of God." The story of Paul's conversion is recorded in the book of Acts and it would have been widely known among the churches that he established. His authority was obvious, but he is calling it again to mind in order to establish the basis for the bold statements and directions that he would make throughout the letter.

God's will is something that occurs in His eternal state, outside of time itself. Paul was specifically chosen to carry the message of Christ to the gentile people of the world. It is his letters which establish church-age doctrine and they are prescriptive in nature. Ignoring, diminishing the importance of, or mishandling Paul's letters will inevitably lead to unsound doctrine and even heresy. Paul is such an important figure that hidden pictures of him and his ministry are actually seen in the book of Genesis. God's calling upon his life and ministry carry the authority of God; what Paul writes is divinely inspired.

Finally in this first verse, Paul states that the letter is from him "and Sosthenes our brother." Sosthenes is mentioned in Acts 18:17 - "Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat *him* before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things." Once the "ruler of the synagogue" in Corinth, he became a disciple of Christ through Paul's ministry. Paul mentions him to add weight to the letter. He would have been one of the first converts in Corinth and being the synagogue's ruler, he would have been well-versed in Old Testament theology. For this reason, he was an excellent person to cite in the introduction.

It is also possible that Sosthenes was acting as Paul's scribe. Just as in Romans with Tertius, who is mentioned in Romans 16:22, Paul probably had a scribe write

as he dictated the letter. As a synagogue ruler, Sosthenes would have certainly been a competent person to act as a scribe. He would be familiar with how to carefully handle the pen in important matters such as this.

Life application: In the church, we have things that we "feel" are right or wrong and we often speak out or act on those issues in a prescriptive manner. But what we "feel" is irrelevant. The only thing that matters in the conduct of the church is what God has prescribed for us. And the doctrine of the church during this dispensation is what Paul has laid out in his epistles. The book of 1 Corinthians is a carefully detailed letter which addresses many important issues. Make sure to study, contemplate, and apply his directives to your church and personal life.

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be* saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: 1 Corinthians 1:2

After his introduction, Paul makes his addressees known by starting with, "To the church of God which is at Corinth." Corinth is on an isthmus and its location was on a very narrow portion of it. Because of this, a "highway" was forged from one side of it to another and boats were literally dragged across it to save them the time of sailing all the way around the land. Because of this strategic location, Corinth became a well-known and valuable city in the Roman empire.

"The church of God" is a term which implies that this was an established church, founded on God's working in and through the Person of Jesus Christ. It was Paul who established the church as is noted beginning in Acts 18:1. He preached his message and those who received it are "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus." This means that they were set apart from those around them as holy. Being "sanctified" in this way means that they are secure in Christ and have received their heavenly position. Ephesians 2:4-6 explains this -

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus..."

Regardless of our earthly walk after salvation, we have been set apart by God because of our simple and heartfelt faith in the work of Christ Jesus. Our heavenly position is settled. Because of this, we have been "called to be saints." Being called "saints" is tied directly to "sanctified." It is the work of Jesus Christ which grants sainthood; not a church or denomination. The abuse of using this title for some people within the church while not using it for all is certainly to be condemned. If a person is a true believer in Jesus Christ, they are a saint. The "litany of the saints" is a long and wonderful list which includes all who have called on Him, not a select portion who are then elevated above the rest. Paul explains this again many times, such as in these words in 2 Timothy 1:9 -

"...who has saved us and called *us* with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began."

As Paul notes to Timothy, it is "not according to works." Instead it is exactly as he states both to Timothy and to those in Corinth. It is an honor for "all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." To "call on the name" means to invoke the name for the purpose of worship. One doesn't "call on the name of Jesus" and then revert back to the name of "Jehovah" of the Old Testament (as the Jehovah's Witnesses and other aberrant cults do). It is the recognition that Jesus is, in fact, the Lord Jehovah who was manifest in the flesh. It is His name alone by which men must be saved (Acts 4:12).

In finishing up this verse, the words "both theirs and ours" is given to imply that sainthood and acceptance of Jesus Christ isn't limited to a location (such as

Corinth) nor a denomination (such as Roman Catholicism). Nor is it limited in any other way except in the calling on of Jesus Christ as Lord. Anyone, of any race, place, culture, or individual church who calls on Him is a saint and his name is written in heaven - Jew or Gentile, male or female, all are one in Him.

Whether this letter was intended as an encyclical or not, it is a timeless letter. Because it is in the Bible, it wasn't just intended to be read by one (or all) the churches in the area and then stored away. Rather God has used it to provide doctrine to all churches in all ages. However, the contents of the letter seem so targeted to Corinth and their many flaws that it would seem they wouldn't want the letter circulated, thus embarrassing them. But when thoughtfully considered, the same problems arise again and again in all churches at one time or another. This is why reading and contemplating the words of Scripture are so very important.

Life application: The Bible and its books, especially Paul's letters, give us direct guidance for the many issues which are bound to arise within the church. Church tradition, although welcoming and comforting to congregants, is never to be used as a substitute for adherence to the Bible. If your church has more tradition than Bible... time to move from your church. Stick to the Bible and be instructed by God.