

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

May 11, 2025

Dave Smith

## **HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!!**

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress**

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

**“Who?” before “What?”; “Wow!” before “How?”** Study #1  
(1 Corinthians 1:1-9; background from Acts)

#### **Introduction: First things first...**

When we're putting together a child's toy or a new piece of IKEA furniture, we ignore manufacturer's directions at our peril. We don't start at Step 5. We start at Step 1. First things first.

When you start a project of any kind, you follow steps, because process matters. Order counts.

Builders lay a foundation before laying bricks. Farmers plow a field before sowing seed. Auto mechanics diagnose before tearing into an engine. Electricians turn off power before touching wires. Plumbers turn off water before cutting pipes. First things first.

I've learned this the hard way, and repeatedly. And I am encouraged to note that the Apostle Paul understood process and sequencing.

He shows his mastery of the art of method in his first letter to the church at Corinth, a letter we're opening together today.

I'm eager for us to mine the truths of First Corinthians together, and I'm confident that God is going to use this two-thousand year old

letter written to a Greek-speaking church in the city of Corinth to move us toward maturity.

It's all great stuff. Paul addresses so many themes that are crucial to life in Jesus and to life in Jesus' church. And with all the ground he's covering, it is instructive to see what he addresses first.

Like a master builder who is careful to lay a foundation first, he points his readers - then and now - NOT to the many “*Whats*” that make up the bulk of the letter, but to “*Who*” his readers are.

He reminds us of our identity in Jesus.

Now, in typical first century writing style, Paul started with himself. He identified himself, first.

#### **Calling to Mind Our IDENTITY in Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)**

##### **Greetings! (vv. 1-3)**

*From Paul and Sosthenes (v. 1)*

***[1] Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes***

That opening told the Corinthians that the letter they were reading was exactly what they wanted. It was a message from their dear friend, Paul.<sup>1</sup>

He reminded them that he was Jesus' “*apostle*” - not that they needed any convincing or reminding about that. They knew from their experience that Paul was Jesus' apostle.<sup>2</sup>

And who was Sosthenes?

<sup>1</sup> As we'll see, Paul and the Corinthians knew each other well and loved each other.

<sup>2</sup> As Paul makes clear (1 Corinthians 15:8), he was every bit the apostle that the original apostles were, even though he was pressed into service some years later.

Well, he was a Corinthian, so he would have been well-known to the Corinthian church. And he was evidently right there with Paul while he was writing the letter from the city of Ephesus. I believe that Sosthenes was the courier who carried this letter from Paul to Corinth.

*To the church of God in Corinth (v. 2)*

***[2] to the church<sup>3</sup> of God which is in Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ<sup>4</sup>, their Lord and ours;***

Paul wrote to the whole congregation. This letter wasn't sent to a subset of leaders. It was addressed to ***"the church of God."***

So that there would be no confusion, he clarified. By ***"the church of God"*** he meant those who have been ***"sanctified,"*** those who are ***"saints"*** in Christ Jesus.

Those two words come from the same Greek root word. The root means *"holy."* More down to earth, it refers to anything that is *"set apart for a special purpose."*

We all have items at home that are set aside for special purposes. Yard tools for gardening, kitchen tools for slicing and dicing, items for decorating for special occasions.

These items aren't religious, but they are "set apart." So, using the word Paul used here, we could say that the shovel and the knife and the special birthday plate are all ***"holy"*** or ***"sanctified."***

---

<sup>3</sup> "Church" in Greek is *ἐκκλησία*. The word occurs twenty-two times in 1 Corinthians. But *"ἐκκλησία"* could refer to any assembly, secular or religious. It was used of the rioting Ephesians (Acts 19:32, 41) and in the Septuagint of the Israelites.

<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament, men called on the name of YHWH (Joel 2:32) for salvation. Christians call upon the name of Jesus. This equates Jesus with YHWH, gives to Jesus the highest place imaginable.

Here in 1 Corinthians, by referring to his friends in the church as ***"sanctified in Christ Jesus"*** and as ***"saints by calling"*** he means to say that the Corinthian Christians are set apart for God's purposes.<sup>5</sup>

Paul doesn't call them ***"saints"*** to affirm their character. He calls them ***"saints"*** to affirm their identity and their purpose.

When they believed in Jesus, they became ***"saints."***

Prior to believing in Jesus, they did not have a transcendent life purpose, now they do.

Their eternal destiny, their internal reality, and their earthly reason for being has changed. They now belong to God. They are His. That's who they are.

Then, Paul prays.

*Grace and peace to you!*

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

Paul included this line in many of the letters he wrote to individual friends and to churches because grace and peace are central to life in Jesus.

***Grace*** was what brought them together as a church. Grace is what has brought us together this morning.

God lavished His grace on them when they believed; on us when we believed. He prayed that they would keep on experiencing God's grace. Every. Single. Day.

He also prayed for their ***"peace."*** They had received the gift of peace with God by faith in Jesus. Paul prayed that they would enter into the peace of God as they walked through life, believing in Jesus.

---

<sup>5</sup> In that sense, we, have also been sanctified in Christ Jesus. In that sense, the Jews of the Old Testament were God's chosen people, even when they rebelled.

Paul wanted nothing more than that his friends in Corinth would experience God's grace and God's peace to the full. This is also his prayer for us, today.

He follows that prayer with words of affirmation.

### **Paul Affirms the Beginning of God's Work (vv. 4-7)**

*A fully-equipped church with a solid testimony (vv. 4-7a)*

***[4] I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, [5] that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, [6] just as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, [7a] so that you are not lacking in any gift***

These Corinthians had received the particular "**grace**" of special talents and abilities from the Holy Spirit when they believed.

With what we read here, we think of teaching and preaching, wisdom and knowledge, encouragement and exhortation, and other talents and abilities.

Every church needs these "**graces**" to carry out its mission, and we call these graces "spiritual gifts."

The church in Corinth had all of these. They lacked nothing that they needed to lead a God-honoring life and witness.

And one more thing. They were filled with hope.

*A church filled with hope (v. 7b)*

***[7b]...as you eagerly await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ***

The church in Corinth was future-looking. They knew that this life was not the end of the story.

They knew - because Paul had told them this when he had been with them! - that Jesus was returning, that He would usher in a new kingdom, and that He would be revealed to the world as KING of kings and LORD of lords.<sup>6</sup>

The Corinthian Christians lived with an eagerness and with a hope that they would see that day.

Because of all that was true about the church in Corinth, Paul ended this first part of his letter by expressing his own confidence about them.

### **God's Faithfulness to Complete the Work He Has Begun (vv. 8-9)**

***[8]...who will also confirm you to the end, blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

This is Paul, stating his confidence that God will bring the Corinthians safely home to glory.

Christians have been "**sanctified**" without regard to any works or deeds they have done.

And so, because ***[9] God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.***<sup>7</sup>, these same Christians will be "**blameless**" - no condemnation, full justification, redeemed - on the day that Jesus appears.

That is the introduction to Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, and it is an amazingly positive beginning to the letter.

There wasn't a single reproof or rebuke. Not an exhortation or a correction. Paul didn't even give an instruction or a suggestion.

He focused exclusively on what was true about the identify and purpose of the Christians who made up the church. He spoke only

<sup>6</sup> See Revelation 19:11-16.

<sup>7</sup> Nine times in nine verses Paul references Jesus, by one name or another. Christ is absolutely essential to Paul's life and to this epistle.

about what God had done for and in them. He identified who they were in Jesus.

But...Paul did write the letter for a reason. Actually, he wrote this letter for many reasons.

Scholars often refer to 1 Corinthians as an “occasional” letter, because it was “occasioned” by something. Something prompted Paul to write what is, by word count, the second longest of all of his letters.<sup>8</sup>

So, I think it’s only right, on this first Sunday of studying this letter, that we should get a sense of why Paul wrote and sent it.

And we will. But before we do that we are first going to back up and get the backstory.

We’ll back way up to where we were three Sundays ago when we remembered the historical heart of our faith on Easter weekend.

I hope that you’ll enjoy this quick re-telling of the “Wow!” story of what God did - and He did it quickly! - in a few short years, using a small group of Christians to expand the reach of Jesus’ church from Jerusalem all the way to Corinth.

### **Backstory: The Initial Expansion of the Church (Acts 1:1--17:34)**

#### **The Early Growth of the Church of Jesus Christ (Acts 1-12)**

*Growth, powered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1--7:53)*

Two thousand years ago, Jesus died and rose again on a Spring weekend in Jerusalem.

After His resurrection, He appeared off and on to His disciples for forty days before ascending into heaven.

Right before that ascension, Jesus told His followers, **[Acts 1:8] “but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon**

***you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth.”***

Ten days later - on the Day of Pentecost - the power of the Holy Spirit fell on them while they were all gathered together in Jerusalem. This is what happened.

***[Acts 2:2] And suddenly a noise like a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3] And tongues that looked like fire appeared to them, distributing themselves, and a tongue rested on each one of them. [4] And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with different tongues, as the Spirit was giving them the ability to speak out.***

THAT was the birth of Jesus’ church. THAT was the outpouring of power that Jesus promised.

The church grew by thousands of people on that day and to many more thousands over the next few weeks as the first Christians gave themselves to **[Acts 2:42] the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**

Very quickly, those Christians felt the sting of persecution.

*Expansion, fueled by the Spirit +persecution (Acts 7:54--12:25)*

Because of that persecution, they were forced to flee Jerusalem and Judea. As they fled, they took the message into Samaria. And it wasn’t long before they took the message to some of **“the remotest part[s] of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8)

During the time of the church’s initial expansion, one of the chief Jewish persecutors of the church, Saul of Tarsus (Saul became the Apostle Paul), was saved.

Saul / Paul became a leader in the church in the city of Antioch, located in what is now Syria.

<sup>8</sup> Romans is the longest by a margin of about three hundred words.

Paul was an integral part of the first, intentional movement forward into these *“remotest part(s)”* when he and another man, Barnabas, took what we call the church’s First Missionary Journey.

### **The Church’s FIRST Missionary Journey (Acts 13-14)**

This Journey was launched at a prayer meeting (Acts 13:1-3) of some of the Antioch church’s leaders.

These leaders had come together to worship. While worshipping, the Holy Spirit indicated that He wanted Barnabas and Paul to take the message of Jesus from Antioch west into Asia Minor - and off they went.

They went to four cities: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, all of which were in the region of Galatia.<sup>9</sup>

They preached and taught about Jesus, saw lots of people saved, were opposed and persecuted (Paul was stoned nearly to death!) and established churches in each of these cities.

They then returned to Antioch for some R&R. Their passion for Jesus was so great that very quickly Paul and Barnabas wanted to go on another missions trip.

But they disagreed about whether or not to take Barnabas’ nephew, John Mark, because John Mark had deserted them on their first trip. They resolved the disagreement by splitting up.

Barnabas took John Mark with him to the island of Cyprus. And Paul chose Silas to be his ministry partner, traveling north and west through Syria on what we call the church’s Second Missionary Journey.  
**The Church’s Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:36--18:22)**

Early on, Paul and Silas picked up a young Jesus-follower named Timothy in Lystra, so the two became three. And off they went to share the message of Jesus with those who had never heard.

We won’t go into much detail about this missions trip here.<sup>10</sup> But it is true to say that these three missionaries had some remarkable and many hard experiences.<sup>11</sup>

They went to the city of Philippi. There, they proclaimed Christ and watched as God changed lives. They cast out demons.

They were beaten and thrown into prison. While they were singing songs of praise to God, they survived a midnight earthquake that opened the prison’s doors.

And when the terrified Philippian jailer asked them, *[Acts 16:30] “What must I do to be saved?”* they told him, *[31] “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”*

He and his household believed, were saved, and were baptized. And Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Philippi and kept traveling.

They went to Thessalonica, where they, again, faced hard opposition. (Acts 17:1-9) They went to Berea and were opposed again when angry Thessalonians followed them to, again, oppose. (17:10-15)

Then, Paul went - alone - to the city of Athens (17:16-31). Paul poured his heart out to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill. Their response was very “ho-hum. Meh.” A small handful of people believed while most scoffed at what Paul had to say about Jesus.

After all of that, Paul left Athens, still without his traveling buddies (Silas and Timothy were still in Berea) to the city of Corinth. Now, what would Paul have found when he entered Corinth?

### **Calling to Mind the AMAZING (Wow!) Work of God (Acts 18:1-17)**

#### **The Kind of a City Corinth Was**

<sup>10</sup> You can read about it in Acts 15:39--18:22.

<sup>11</sup> They knew to cross over into Macedonian because Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come over and help. (16:6-10). He and Silas and Timothy promptly sailed across the northern part of the Aegean Sea and came to Philippi.

<sup>9</sup> Modern-day Turkey.

### *History and geography*

Located in present-day Greece, Corinth occupied one of the most beautiful and commercially- and militarily-strategic physical sites in the ancient world.<sup>12</sup>

The city was built on a hill overlooking the Gulf of Corinth. So, it was safe from enemy attack. And with good harbors and good roads, the city was a major hub for commerce.

### *Political and economic significance*

The population of Corinth was diverse, made up of a small number of Jews, some from East Asia, mostly local Greeks, and many businessmen and government officials from Rome.

We estimate that Corinth had about two hundred thousand citizens...plus as many as five hundred thousand slaves.

When Paul and his team arrived in Corinth, it was famous for commercialized pleasure.

### *Corinthianisms*

Corinth was a favorite recreation and vacation spot for the rich and famous.

Emperor Nero partied in Corinth.<sup>13</sup> To live “*as a corinthian*” meant to live in debauchery. Corinth had a reputation for vulgarity.

When the philosopher, Plato, referred to a prostitute, he used the expression, “*a Corinthian girl*.”<sup>14</sup> (I could say much more about Corinth’s vices, but won’t.)

---

<sup>12</sup> Situated on a high plateau, it was a virtually unassailable fortress and was never taken by an invading force until the invention of gunpowder.

<sup>13</sup> Once, while partying in Corinth, Nero declared the city free from taxation.

That is the city into which the Apostle Paul walked, all alone, in the Spring of AD 51. His purpose there was to establish, in, of all places, Corinth (!), a church.

### **A Church - in Corinth! (18:1-17)**

The story of the start of the church in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18. Luke tells us that Paul found lodging with a Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila.<sup>15</sup> They were all three tent-makers.

Paul would make enough money to support himself making and mending tents.<sup>16</sup> He would then devote himself to spreading the Gospel in the city, after work hours.

It wasn’t long, though, before his friends, Silas and Timothy arrived. And they supported Paul so that he could devote himself exclusively to spreading the message of Jesus in Corinth.

As was his normal practice, Paul began reaching out to the Jewish population in the city. But they mostly rejected him and Jesus, so he turned to the Gentiles. (Acts 18:6)

He set up his ministry headquarters at the home of a man who lived next door to the Jewish synagogue. (How’s that for “*in your face*” evangelism?)

The Lord blessed Paul’s boldness, though, because Crispus, the leader of the Jewish synagogue, believed in Jesus, as did many others - Jews and Gentiles - who were both believing and being baptized. That’s the beginning of the church.

---

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word (coined by Aristophanes) “*korinthiazomai*” means “to fornicate.” The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth was unique in Greece in that its thousand female priestesses were nothing more than religious prostitutes.

<sup>15</sup> Priscilla and Aquila had recently been expelled from Rome because of persecution against Jews. (Acts 18:2)

<sup>16</sup> In some cases, Paul continued to work even after a church was established in a certain city (most notably in Corinth!), so that his motives would not be impugned for being a preacher (“*He’s in it for the money.*”).

(As an aside, Crispus was replaced by another man as leader of the synagogue. That man was Sosthenes, who also became a Christian. And you'll remember that Sosthenes was there with Paul when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians and hand-delivered the letter to Corinth.)

And there in Corinth, God gave Paul a great gift. And we won't appreciate what a great gift it was unless we remember what he had experienced thus far on this Second Missionary Journey.

He had suffered:

- A severe beating and imprisonment in Philippi.
- persecution in Thessalonica.
- persecution in Berea.
- isolation, contempt, and a very small harvest in Athens.
- repeated rejection by his fellow Jews in Corinth.

I suspect Paul might have been a bit discouraged. After all, if Jesus got tired and hungry and sad (and He did!), then I have no problem believing that after all he had been through, Paul was at a low point in his life and in his ministry.

In fact, we know that he was frightened because of what the Lord said to him in a night vision while he was there in Corinth.

***[Acts 18:9] "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many people in this city."***

Given that encouragement from God, Paul settled down in Corinth for what was for him, a long time.

He spent a year and a half evangelizing, teaching, discipling, loving, serving, and leading.

- Eighteen months is enough time to get to know people. Paul and the people in the Corinthian church got to know each other well.
- Eighteen months is enough time to learn to love people. The Corinthians and Paul learned to love each other.

- Eighteen months spent with the Apostle Paul, listening to him teach, watching him live, hearing him pray, is enough time to become a well-grounded disciple.

The church in Corinth was firmly established during those eighteen months.

But after that year and a half of fruitful, rich, loving ministry, fierce persecution fell upon the church, forcing Paul to flee Corinth. He eventually made his way back to Antioch, his home / sending church.<sup>17</sup>

It was while Paul was on his next missions trip<sup>18</sup> that he heard rumblings about problems in the church at Corinth.

While on a return stay in Ephesus,<sup>19</sup> he received a report that the church was not doing well at all.

There were reports of all kinds of trouble. Factions and disunity, fundamental errors of theology, sexual immorality, misuse of spiritual gifts, judging of others' opinions, getting drunk while taking Communion, and Christian taking fellow Christian to court.

It was those reports that prompted him to write the letter we call First Corinthians. Paul wrote this letter to a church that was struggling, to a church many have called, "Paul's 'problem' church."

### **Conclusion: "WHO?" before "WHAT?"; "WOW!" before "HOW?"**

The church at Corinth was a definite "work in progress," and Paul's letter addressed lots of the problems they were facing - and we would never know that from the first nine verses of the letter.

<sup>17</sup> Paul's full itinerary consisted of going from Corinth back to Ephesus to Caesarea to Jerusalem and then to Antioch. (Acts 18:22)

<sup>18</sup> The Third Missionary Journey; Acts 18:23--21:16.

<sup>19</sup> While Paul was at Ephesus, he also evidently wrote an earlier letter to Corinth which has not been preserved, referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9.

Paul didn't begin with, "*What are we going to do about all of these problems?!?*" He began by reminding the believers who made up that church who they were in Jesus. First things first.

And we have seen the amazing work of God in establishing that church. We have taken time to say, "*Wow - look at what God did!*" before asking, "*How are they going to deal with all of these problems?*" Again, first things first.

Friends, we, too, are also, each, "*works in progress.*" Our church isn't perfectly mature. We aren't going to live in denial. Northwest is a "*work in progress.*"

But, today, we will take our cue from Paul's lead.

We'll first focus on our identity in Jesus. We are "sanctified saints" who have been set apart for God's purposes. We are His and He has given us transcendent meaning and purpose and destiny. We'll first remember all of this and rely on a faithful God.

And we'll walk in amazement at what He has done in and through us. We'll learn to say "Thanks!" continually for His life-changing power while continuing to ask Him to do - in us and through us - what only He can do.