

Called to Holiness and Community

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (January 19, 2020)

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1Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— 6just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— 7so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Historical Context

Corinth was a city strategically located on a high plateau at the western end of the Isthmus of Corinth, a four-mile wide strip of land that joined the mainland of Greece to the Peloponnesus, a big bulge of land that sticks out into the Mediterranean Sea. In Paul's day, it controlled trade conducted both on the road and (especially) via sea at its two sea ports (one to its north and one to its south). It was a thriving economic center inhabited by people from all over the Mediterranean world. Like port cities throughout history, the city also had a reputation for vice.

Theme: Called to Holiness and Community

At the beginning of what will turn out to be, in part, a difficult letter that deeply challenges his Corinthian audience, Paul reminds the church of things that God has done for them. First, God has called them. They have been "sanctified [by God] in Christ Jesus, called [by God] to be saints." The words "sanctified" and "saints" (or "holy ones") are related words in Greek, both of which refer to the theme of holiness. To be "holy" is to be set apart from worldly things for a special, divine purpose. Holiness is practical, and shapes all aspects of the way "saints" live. Throughout the Old Testament, God desires that Israel be different from the peoples around them and engage in practices and locate themselves within a narrative that marks that difference. It's the same in the New Testament, in which the church is called to be different from the culture that surrounds us. Later in the passage, Paul notes that the church at Corinth is called not only "out" of the world, but "into" community: they were "called into the fellowship of [God's] son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:9). Faithfulness, is a team sport that requires the unity of the church.

Not only have the Corinthians been called to holiness and community, they have also been equipped extravagantly for the task. They have been given the grace of God (1:4). They have been enriched in Christ (1:5). The testimony of Christ has been strengthened among them (1:6). They are not lacking in spiritual gifts (1:7, an ironic claim, given the problems Paul points out in their experience of the gifts in chapter 12). As can be seen in even a cursory reading of 1 Corinthians, being set apart for God and toward each other has been and remains difficult for the Corinthians. But God has given them the means to those ends. And Paul expects them to use those means.