Saints Before the Scalpel

1Cor 1:1 Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,
2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:
3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
10 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

The Proud Corinthian

You are a proud, Greek Corinthian living in the First Century AD. Granted, this isn't as chic as being an Athenian, nor as awe-inspiring as being a Spartan. In fact, you are well aware that "Corinthian" was used in several contexts as a

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curse word for sexual perversion.[1] It comes with the territory of being one of the great port-cities of the ancient world. Fact is, this doesn't particularly bother you. Rather, you look at it as a distinctive badge of honor.[2]

For just a half-mile southwest and some 1500 ft. up the astounding mountain called Acrocorinth ("Upper Corinth") that juts straight up out of the plains where your ancient city was erected a 1000 years earlier sits, from a cosmic mountain perspective, the grandest of all Greek temples to Aphrodite, otherwise known to the Romans as Venus. "I'm your Venus,



Acrocorinth Summit as seen from the Temple of Apollo (*Wikimedia*)

[1] "To act the Corinthian" (*korinthiazomai*, which means practicing fornication); "Corinthian companions" (*korinthiai hetairai*) and "Corinthian girls" (*korinthiai kori*, who were prostitutes.

[2] Much of the following comes from Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: John, Acts., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 394ff; the *Wikipedia* on "Ancient Corinth," and relevant ancient writings found at theoi.com.

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I'm your fire, at your desire." That's the chorus to the Shocking Blue's 60s psychedelic song "Venus." "A goddess on a mountain top, Was burning like a silver flame, The summit of beauty and love, and Venus was her name." That's how the song begins. It's a play on both her aspects as sexual goddess and the cosmic mountain and it is the perfect representation of how the goddess is viewed by you, her proud servant.

Constructed in the 5th century BC, the cult of Aphrodite dominated everything about life in the city below. Strabo (65 BC – 24 AD) claimed that the temple was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple-slaves (for a city of between 50,000-100,000 people!), courtesans, both men and women, who were dedicated to the goddess. You personally know many of them. It was on account of these women that the city was crowded with people and grew rich as ship-captains and others freely squandered their money on prostitutes giving rise to the proverb, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth" (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20).

As a Corinthian, you are proud of your history, for it has made you who you are. While archeology has found that the site was continually occupied for thousands of years, it was not until around 900 BC, or just after the split of Rehoboam

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and Jeroboam in Israel, that the Dorians, one of the four ethnic groups making up the Greeks (Hellenes), settled there. The Dorians come from Dorus, son of Hellen, who in some sources was himself the son of Zeus. Pausanias (110 – 180 AD) said that the city was named after Corinthos, another descendant of Zeus, but its earlier name was Ephyra (Ἐφύρα) after the daughter of the Titan Oceanus who founded it (*Description of Greece* 2.2.1). Quite the supernatural lineage!

The descendants of the gods not only founded your city, the gods themselves fought over it and this does your heart proud. Two gods fighting over your city! An ancient dispute between Poseidon and Helios, gods of the sea and the sun, saw them squabbling over which part of this area belonged to whom. Briareus, the arbitrator of the legal dispute concluded that the land upon which the city sat belonged to Poseidon since it was closest to the sea, while the mountain and its acropolis belonged to Helios because it was closest to the sky (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* ii. 1.6 and 4.7).

Corinth as a city has always been well positioned to be a strategic center for trade between east and west, north and south. It has two ports, one that feeds into the Aegean Sea separating Greece from Asia, the other into the Adriatic which separates Greece from Italy. It is also positioned on the

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only land bridge that connects the main northern peninsula to the southern Island of Greece. As such a vital trade hinge, your city is full of people on the make – merchants, freedmen, and travelers. This social mobility and the constant influx of new ideas and new teachers helps explain both your openness to different leaders and the longstanding instability of your cities authories.

Bacchis, the founder of "the Bacchiadae, who called themselves direct descendants of Dionysus,"[3] and who share the same name with the Bacchae or cult of Dionysus consisting entirely of women (called Maenads) known for their ecstatic frenzied worship, and liberation from normal social boundaries (such as abandoning their roles as wives and mothers, letting their hair loose, handling snakes), overthrew the traditional kingship around 750 BC and ruled as an oligarchy of males who intermarried only among themselves, until they were overthrown in 657 BC. After them came the tyrants: Cypselus and Periander and then more and more political upheavals. Corinth has always had a deep cultural memory of competing elite groups claiming superior pedigree and influence.

[3] Translated from the German, "der Bakchiaden, die sich unmittelbare Nachkommen des Dionysos" in Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (New York: de Gruyter, 1997), 222.

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One of these Bacchiad, a lawgiver named Philolaus of Corinth, became the paiderastic lover of Diocles, the winner of the Olympic games, showing just how entrenched queer sexual behavior is in this city. Corinth itself controlled the Isthmian Games, one of the major Pan-Hellenic athletic festivals. It has always been a city that lives and breathes competitive honor, crowns, and public display. It's about showing how great you are to the world, as your famed Corinthian columns embody.

"The Catalogue of Ships" in the *Iliad* lists the Corinthians amongst the host of warriors fighting in the Trojan War under the leadership of Agamemnon. You later aligned with the Spartans in the Peloponnesian Wars. Proudly, it was your ancestors from this city who developed the famed trireme which became the standard warship of the Mediterranean until the late Roman period. It was Corinth which fought the first naval battle on record (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1:13). Yours is an honored fighting culture.

Some of your more colorful history includes Sisyphus, the guy condemned by Zeus to eternally roll an immense boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down just before it gets to the top in Hades, who became the founder of a race of

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ancient kings who ruled over Corinth. Jason, leader of the Argonauts, abandoned Medea the sorceress and granddaughter of Helios in Corinth long ago.

Around 146 BC, Corinth was capture and destroyed by the Romans where it lay largely desolate for the next hundred years. Then, in 44 BC, Julius Caesar had it rebuilt. While still a Greek city, it would become a Roman colony that would soon become the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. The city began to have a mixture of Greek and Roman citizens, which has led to cultural tensions over wardrobe, hairstyles, and worship.

Like all Greek cities, yours is filled with the worship of gods. It has a huge temple to Apollo in the lower city which stands as a visible symbol of ordered, civic, "rational" Greek religion over against the more ecstatic or sexual cults such as Dionysus and Aphrodite and Isis and Demeter which are also found throughout and up on the mountain. Some of these have strong associations with the underworld and heroic cults, while others teach the immortality of the soul and shadowy existence in Hades.

These are the things that make you who you are. And you love Corinth because of them.

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Then it happened. It began the way most things begin in this city—through work and conversation. A man named Paul arrived not long after the Jews were expelled from Rome. He found Aquila and Priscilla, fellow tentmakers, and settled in with them. Week after week he reasoned in your cities synagogue, first with the Jews, then with Greeks who listened. When Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, the pace intensified. The message was strange and sharp: a crucified Messiah, risen from the underworld, the wisdom of God that looked like foolishness to both Greek and Roman ears. Some of you mocked. Others believed. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed with his whole household. Then more. *You* were among them. You were baptized, but not by Paul. The Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him to stay—God had many people in this city. So Paul stayed a year and a half, teaching the word of God among you (all taken from Acts 18).

The church took shape in houses and workshops. Jews and Greeks, freedmen and citizens, men and women who had once belonged to different gods and different social worlds now called one another *brother*? It was astonishing, *at*

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first. You ate together. You prayed. You waited for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ. For a time it felt like the old rivalries and hungers had been left behind.

They had not.

It started with the teachers. Paul left. Then came Apollos—eloquent much unlike Paul, powerful in the Scriptures, refined in the way Greeks admire. Some of you preferred his style. Others clung to Paul as the one who had first brought the gospel. A few claimed Cephas, the great apostle from Jerusalem, the first witness of the risen Lord—as their preferred authority, whether or not he had ever set foot in your city. A few of you claimed only Christ, but then used that claim to stand above the rest. The old habit of attaching yourself to a superior name, of measuring worth by whose party you belonged to, simply put on new clothes. Quarrels followed. Pride followed. You began to hear the same competitive edge you once knew in the games and the law courts, only now it was spoken in the name of the Lord.

Then the darker things began to surface. A man among you was living with his father's wife, and the church applauded. Others of you were dragging one another before the civil courts, like Poseidon and Helios of old, the same

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public tribunals where status and rhetoric decide the outcome, rather than settling matters among yourselves as brothers. The prostitution of the mountain came down into the church, as you treated the body as available for whatever desire presented itself, forgetting that you had been washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As you fell apart morally, unsurprisingly, questions began to multiply. What about marriage and singleness in a city that had always treated desire as ordinary commerce? What about meat that had been offered to the likes of Aphrodite—could you eat it, or did that somehow join you again to the table of demons? When you gathered, some of the women prayed and prophesied with their hair uncovered or loosened in ways that stirred in some minds old associations with Dionysus and the Bacchae. At the Lord's Supper the divisions became visible in the most painful way: the wealthy arrived early and ate their fill while the poor went hungry. What was meant to proclaim the Lord's death until He comes became another stage for status and indifference.

And your gatherings themselves grew chaotic. Spiritual gifts of knowledge, tongues, and prophecy were being used for display rather than for building up the body. People

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spoke over one another. Some treated the more spectacular gifts as proof of superior spirituality. Order disappeared. The peace of God was hard to find.

Then came the most unsettling claim of all. Some among you began to say there is no resurrection of the dead. The body is a shell. What matters is the spirit. Your old philosophical instincts—that the physical is lower, that true life is escape from the body—had found a Christian vocabulary. And some of you were already living as if the body did not matter and the future held no raising of what had been buried.

This is the church you now belong to. Truly, perhaps the single most disgraceful mess of all the newly founded churches in the entire Roman Empire. It certainly has the claim of it from all we can gather. You are still proud—proud of the gospel that reached you, proud of the grace that called you out of the old life. Yet your old city is still inside the new assembly. The competitive spirit, the sexual perversion, the love of display, the discomfort with the body and the grave, the tendency to form factions around gifted leaders—all of it has followed you into the household of God.

And now a letter has arrived from Paul.

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The Opening of the Letter: 1 Cor 1:1-17, Its Shape and Message

As your pastor opens the letter, he quickly discovers that it begins like a normal Greco-Roman, yet deeply Pauline and Christian letter. More on the opening contents of this in a moment. First, I want to help you understand the shape and structure of this opening. It is normal to read it as following a typical letter formula, much like we do when we begin, "Dear sir," followed by the body and then the close. We were all taught how to write letters in grammar school … at least, we should have been.

- 1:1-3 is the **Greeting and Salutation**.
- 1:4-9 is the **Thanksgiving**.
- 1:10-17 begins **the initial appeal**.

This structure is followed in 12 of Paul's 13 letters. Only Galatians, because of Paul's anger at their departure from the true Gospel, skips the standard pleasantries, though *he still* identifies himself and greets them with grace and peace.

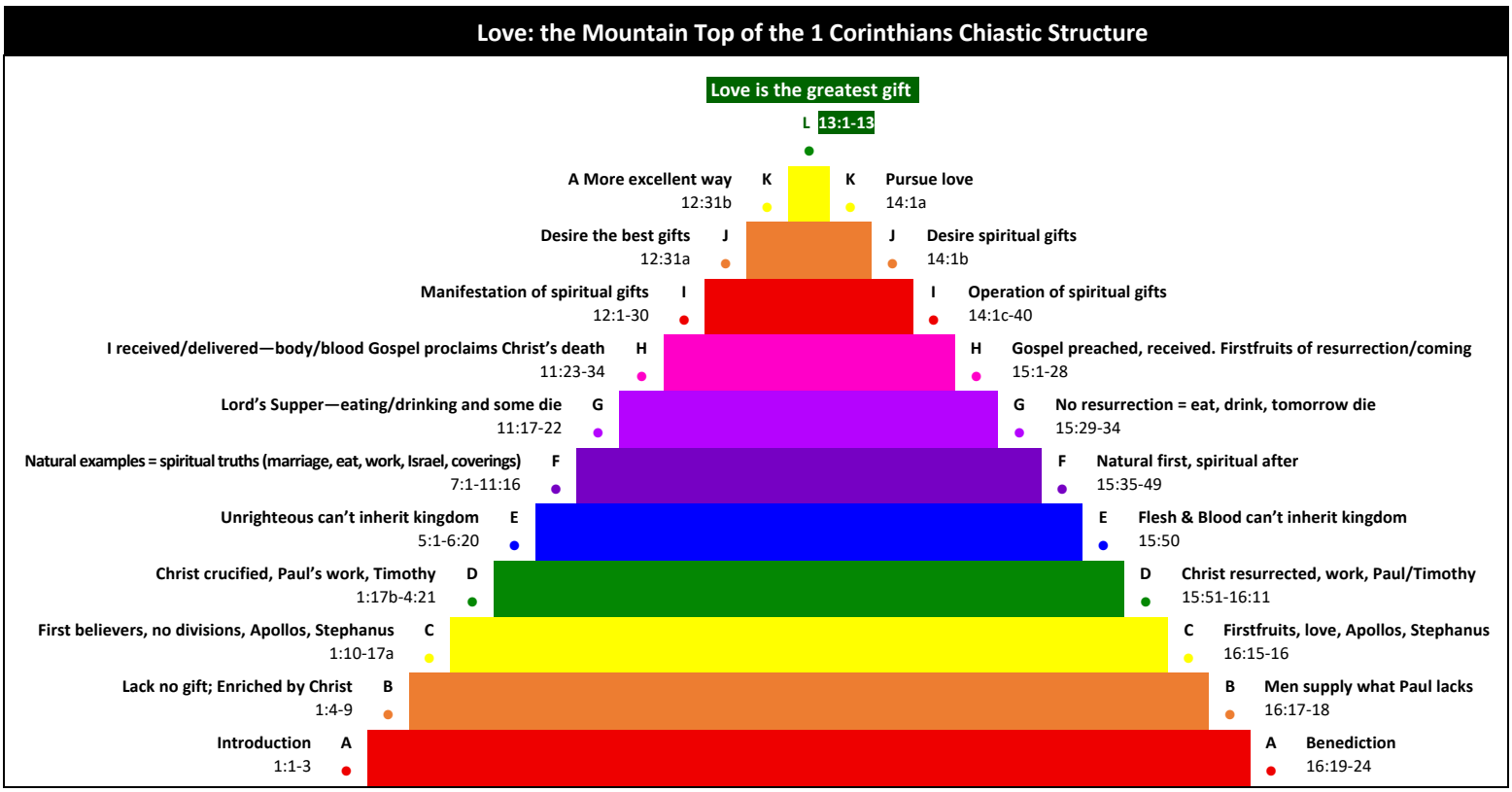
But we can analyze the contents of his opening and come to complementary ways of understanding. One is to see it as a two-panel structure of Affirmation and Correction. Panel A: 1Cor 1:1-9. This is the positive message of unity in Christ. 1:10-17 is its negative pair on factionalism. We

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know they are a pair because we can view it as a single thematic chiastic structure, thus showing that it all belongs together as a unit rather than being divided at vs. 10 as your Bible heading likely does:

A 1:1–3 Called by God / centered on our Lord Jesus Christ
B 1:4–9 Objective Unity in Christ already given
C 1:10–12 Subjective disunity reported
B′ 1:13–16 Guarding the unity (refusing factional baptism)
A′ 1:17 Sent by Christ / centered on the Cross

When we had our introductory reading, I told you that the entire book is a kind of macro chiasm inside of which resides smaller and smaller chiasms.



Adopted from Christine Miller, "1 Corinthians Chiastic Structure," *Christinesbiblestudy* (June 7, 2013)

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1. 1 Corinthians 1–4 (Divisions & Wisdom)
A — Divisions in the church (1:10–17)
B — The wisdom of the cross vs. worldly wisdom (1:18–2:16)
A' — Divisions & proper view of leaders/Paul (3:1–4:21)
2. 1 Corinthians 5–6 (Your example — very strong)
A — Sexual immorality (5)
B — Court litigation (6:1–11)
A' — Sexual immorality (6:12–20)
3. 1 Corinthians 7 (Your example — excellent)
A — Marriage and singleness (7:1–16)
B — Remain in the situation of your calling (7:17–24)
A' — Marriage and singleness (7:25–40)
4. 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1 (Your example — solid)
A — Food sacrificed to idols (8)
B — Paul's apostolic ministry / rights (9)
A' — Food sacrificed to idols (10:1–11:1)
5. 1 Corinthians 11:2–34 (Worship Disorders)
A — Head coverings / hair / glory (11:2–16)
B — Lord's Supper abuses (11:17–22)
A' — Proper Lord's Supper (11:23–34)
6. 1 Corinthians 12–14 (Your example — one of the clearest in the letter)
A — Spiritual gifts (12:1–30)
B — Love (12:31–13:13)
A' — Spiritual gifts in orderly worship (14:1–40)
7. 1 Corinthians 15 (Resurrection)
A — The gospel & resurrection of Christ (15:1–11)
B — The consequences if there is no resurrection (15:12–19)
A' — The certainty & implications of resurrection (15:20–58)
8. 1 Corinthians 16 (Closing)
A — Collection for the saints (16:1–4)
B — Travel plans & final exhortations (16:5–18)
A' — Greetings & benediction (16:19–24)[4]

[4] Sections 2-6 are found in Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Pauline Letters*, vol. II (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 149.

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We are seeing this work itself out even at the beginning of the letter which also shows that this single chiasm can be broken into three smaller ones:

Chiasm of 1:1-9

A (1–3) – Calling language centered on "Jesus Christ our Lord"
B (4–8) – Thanksgiving for grace, enrichment, gifts, and future confirmation
B′ (9a) – "God is faithful"
A′ (9b) – Called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord

Chiasm of 1:10-12

A (10a) – "that ye all speak the same thing"
B (10b) – "no divisions among you"
C (10c) – "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment"
B′ (11) – "contentions among you"
A′ (12) – "every one of you saith, I am of Paul…"

Chiasm of 1:13-17

A (13) – Is Christ divided? … baptized in the name of Paul?
B (14) – I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius
C (15) – Lest any should say that I had baptized in my own name
B′ (16) – I baptized also the household of Stephanas…
A′ (17) – Christ sent me not to baptize… lest the cross of Christ be made of none effect[5]

Because I mention these structures a lot, but these days rarely explain them, and since we are at the beginning of a new letter, I think a word about them is appropriate. **A chiasm** (also called chiasmus) is a literary structure in which ideas, words, or themes are presented in a particular order and then repeated in reverse order.

The longer I have studied them, the more convinced I am that they are simply how ancient minds processed and communicated information. Far from imposing something foreign on the text, we are recognizing the natural pattern of the air they breathed. Our modern Western minds have been shaped by scientific, mathematical, and linear logic. We

[5] These are found at Admin, "1 Corinthians 1:1-17," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Aug 27, 2016).

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prefer to move steadily from point A to point Z without circling back. We dislike redundancy and value progressive steps toward a conclusion. That way of thinking has produced many discoveries.

Ancient rhetoric, especially in oral cultures, worked differently. It relied on patterns that helped the hearer remember and feel the weight of what was being said. Sometimes the point is the reversal itself:

A Ask not what your country
  B can do for you
  B′ but what you can do
A′ for your country

Sometimes the point is the central feature:

A Whoever sheds
  B the blood of man
    C by man
  B′ shall his blood
A′ be shed

These structures do more than create elegant symmetry. They help us discern the main point of a passage and keep its context clear. That's the point of showing you the chiasm of our text today. Only when the two halves are read together do we see the full picture. So let us turn our attention to that now.

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The Positive Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1-9)

Ancient letters almost always begin by identifying *the sender*—who it is from, *the recipients*—who it is to, a *formulaic greeting*, and a *thanksgiving or blessing*.[6] "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes" (1Cor 1:1). Paul is the sender. Paul is Saul of Tarsus' Roman name. It means "Little." They knew him well, for he had spent 18 months (Acts 18:11) with them being a tentmaker (3) as he proclaimed the Gospel among them.

He importantly gives his credentials. These demonstrate his authority to write the letter, address their questions, and raise a not a few issues of his own. He is an apostle (*apostolos*), meaning a messenger, ambassador, or envoy on a mission. He writes not of his own authority, but rather as a man on a mission *from God* who alone called him to this station. It was God's sovereign almighty will, not Paul's who as Saul was out murdering Christians and persecuting Christ when he was miraculously and frighteningly called. He is an ambassador of "Christ Jesus," that is Jesus the Messiah.

Sosthenes (his name means Saving Strength or String Savior) is likely the ruler of the local synagogue who in Acts

[6] See Felix Just, "New Testament Letter Structure," *Catholic Resources* (1999, 2025).

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18:17 was seized and beaten in front of a tribunal before Gallio. His presence adds weight because he believes Paul's authority. He is a traveling companion of Paul, ironically for him a safer job now than remaining in this city! He is mentioned as being the co-sender of the letter, *not its author*, but perhaps its scribe, though the text does not say. What it does say is that he is "our brother," putting the familial language of Christians up front in the very first verse of the letter.

We turn next to *the recipients*. "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1Cor 1:2). "Church" is an OT LXX word that identifies the corporate people of God usually gathered for worship (Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:1-8; Josh 8:35; Jdg 20:2; 1Kg 8:14, 22, 55; Ps 22:22; 35:18; 149:1; etc.). Jesus did not make up the term, but he is the one who establishes the NT's unique identity as both Jew and Gentile into one body or family of brothers.

This church is God's church, part of both his universal and visible church on earth. This particular church is in Corinth, which you now know much about. What's interesting is that the second part helps to define what this church is.

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What does it mean to be the church? First, it consists of people *sanctified* in Christ Jesus. "Sanctified" is a perfect passive participle and this is significant. Usually, when we talk about sanctification, we speak about the *ongoing* work of God in our lives with which we cooperate. But this is not that. This sanctification is an action *completed by God in the past* with ongoing results in the present. The passive voice means the Corinthians are the recipients of the sanctification, not acting agents in it. This does not describe the ongoing process of sanctification, but the completed reality that, with justification, defines them.

At conversion, God set them apart as holy. Therefore, they are *saints*. I'm not particularly fond of the "called *to be* saints" translation of the ESV and other translations. The Greek is literally *klētois hagiois*. There is no infinitive "to be" here. Just the words "called" and "saints" (from *hagios*, meaning "holy").[7] As we just saw, they are not here called *to be* sanctified, they *are* sanctified. Similarly, they are not here trying to *become* saints, they *are* saints. Now. How badly this has been abused over the centuries, especially when churches ascribe "sainthood" upon the "really good" Christians, while the rest of us second-level dogs barely get scraps from

[7] "Saints" in the dative form, simply meaning that they continue the thought of this being "to" those who have been sanctified.

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their tables. No. Paul gives every Christian at Corinth the title of Saint. This is what God himself has called them. They are holy people, sanctified at their conversion. That is both humbling and liberating, and it fits the larger argument of the letter: their behavior must catch up to the status God has already given them.

The best part is, this isn't just the identity of the saints *at Corinth*. Rather, Paul adds, "together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." This means that *you*, dear Christian when you call upon the same Jesus Christ, you *are called saints* by Jesus Christ. You have been sanctified and set apart by him as you first called upon his great and powerful Name. It's amazing how much theology there is in just a short little opening.

Next up comes *the greeting*, not from Paul, but *from God himself*. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (3). The two are One God, yet distinct subsistences or Persons of a Godhead. Both do much more than *wish* grace and peace, they *grant* grace and peace through their life-giving greeting, even as you, this very morning, were greeting by God in the Liturgy, in a formula

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we have said for nearly 25 years in our church, a section perhaps you have not given much thought to, but which owes is origins to holy Scripture in places just like this.

This is deeply meaningful and powerful. For grace is a receiving of good things from God that you do not deserve, while peace is a receiving of friendship and fellowship and the end of all hostility between you and a God with whom you were, prior to calling upon Jesus, at enmity and hostility. Yes, God grants this over our very church this very moment, even as he granted it over their church and the letter they were now reading.

Typically, Paul also has a section of *thanksgiving* for the people he writes to. Here is theirs, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (4-9). This is a glorious thanksgiving. It consists of five distinct components:

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1. The act of thanksgiving (4a). Paul is always giving thanks to his God for them. It is not a one-off. And it continues to the very moment he writes this letter. Oh, how important this will be to remember if you are a Corinthian about to go under the scalpel from Paul.
2. The ground of the thanksgiving (4b). This refers to the grace that is given from God to them in Christ Jesus.
3. The content and result of that grace, their spiritual enrichment (5). Specifically, they have been enriched in Christ in all speech and all knowledge. These gifts will come up, so it's good to put down the facts, before going to the admonishment.
4. The confirmation of the testimony + present possession of gifts (6-7). Again, Paul will spend a lot of time talking about the spiritual gifts and abuses of those gifts by these Christians. They must know up front that God has not given them any lack of any of them. Why?
5. The future guarantee—God's ongoing confirmation and faithfulness (7-9). So that they may persist as they wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ. This "revealing" refers to the Second Coming of the risen Savior, and as we see at the end of the letter, their views of the resurrection were teetering on apostacy. Kistemaker says, "With the noun *revelation*, Paul states that at his return Jesus will remove the mystery of his being by unveiling his presence (2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7,

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13; 4:13). The Corinthians should eagerly look forward to the day of that revelation."[8] God will confirm them to the end where they will be considered blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh, what good and necessary news this opening of the letter is for a people who if they are not careful are going to all but forget every bit of it in the rebukes and admonishments to come. God is the faithful one, even when and while they are themselves unfaithful. For he is the one who called them and us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The entire letter begins with God's great and glorious grace. It must not be forgotten.

The Negative Complement: Stop the Factions (1:10-17)

It is only after this warm, theologically rich, Christian greeting that Paul begins to shift gears. But shift them is exactly what he does. Why? Leland Ryken writes, "The most important (and usually ignored) feature of the New Testament epistles is that they are occasional letters, not systematic essays. 'Occasional' literature is literature written for a

[8] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 18, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 41.

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specific occasion … The writers of the epistles did not sit down to write an essay; they wrote in response to questions they had been asked or circumstances that needed to be addressed. In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks to problems that existed in a disorderly church."[9] Paul won't get to these specific questions until Ch. 7. Instead, he has a few things he must address first.

He begins with an appeal. "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1Cor 1:10). Perhaps Paul has in mind the Lord Jesus' great High Priestly prayer. "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, *that they may be one, even as we are one* … I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that *they may all be one*, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:11, 20-21).

This was the last thing Jesus prayed for his disciples: their Unity. Clearly, Paul has the same thing in mind. But a couple of things need to be said about this. First, often in

[9] Leland Ryken, "What Every Book of the New Testament Is About," *Crossway* (Nov 11, 2015).

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circles like ours, some seem to me almost to view discord, disputes, disagreements, division, and denominations as a badge of honor! I'm right, your wrong, and the only thing God cares about is right and wrong. See ya later!

On the other hand, some particularly view denominations as evil *de facto*. Anyone who would separate for any reason whatsoever is violating Jesus' prayer and Paul's appeal. This often comes from Catholic or so-called "non-denominational" Protestants who view themselves as above all that division. One Bishop recently cited the 30,000 different protestant denominations myth as proof that everyone should become Roman Catholic.[10]

The source for this number appears to come from David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2001), which actually puts the number at 34,000.[11] What they don't tell you is that a "demonization" is not defined by doctrine, but by organizational unit. Thus, the same work says that Rome has "236 denominations in the world's 238 countries."[12] So much their for unity! The fact of the matter is, the total number of

[10] He has repeated this many times. For example, Bishop Robert Barron, "Bishop Barron on Protestantism and Authority," *YouTube* (Sept 28, 2009); Richard Declue, "What Bishop Barron Said to Ben Shapiro," *Word On Fire* (Sept 11, 2025). For a review of this see Sola Media, "The Pope or 30,000 Denominations? White Horse Inn Responds to Bishop Robert Barron," *YouTube* (July 27, 2025).

[11] David Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2001), vi.

[12] Ibid., 27.

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Protestant denominations is vastly smaller than this, and that includes outright heretical groups and cults that were all lumped in together. I'm the first to agree that we have had far too many splits occur over matters that are relatively trivial, secondary, indifferent, or even ridiculous. However, sometimes it is the case that a church becomes so outright heretical that true believers must distance themselves from them.

The fact is that Jesus is not calling for all believers to believe anything and everything to the point that they believe nothing at all and call that "unity." And, in fact, what we will see regarding the unity Paul is calling for has little to do with matters of doctrinal first importance and much more to do, especially here, with factionalism. This can actually speak to the denominational question if one is putting their trust and loyalty in a denomination rather than in Christ alone. I think that sometimes people actually do that. But at the same time, that is hardly necessary and it is certainly possible to view many of our denominations more like rooms in the same castle than individual islands in a vast ocean.

Look at what Paul calls them to be unified over: "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers" (11). Let's stop there. Chloe

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is a woman whose name means "Green Shoot." This is the only place she is mentioned. It is interesting that Paul talks about them as her "people" (lit. "those of Chloe"). These could have been family members or slave or freed member employees of her household.[13] Paul is likely writing from Ephesus and word came to him with this information which clearly bothered them a lot. This is more than a minor squabble breaking out.

He continues, "What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ'" (12). We know about Paul and Christ. Cephas is Peter, who may or may not have visited Corinth. Apollos was an eloquent Alexandrian Jewish Christian, well-versed in the Scriptures, who powerfully taught about Jesus in Ephesus and Corinth and was associated with Paul's ministry (Acts 18:24).

Factionalism exists to this day and it isn't difficult to think of names of teachers that people follow with almost religious zeal in our own times. It is one thing to treasure a man's wisdom and teaching and hold him in esteem; it is quite another to virtually begin to worship him. Apollos, Peter, and Paul never drew that kind of attention to themselves

[13] Florence Morgan Gillman, "Chloe (Person)," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 911.

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and they only ever taught what Jesus commanded. It is wrong to hold men higher than they held themselves, must less virtually worship them as if they were perfect. What is perhaps most remarkable about these factions is that some thought that Christ would trump the others. In reality, they appear to have been using Christ as a bully-club, as if Paul, Peter, and Apollos were all in disagreement with him!

This factionalism is causing real divisions in the Body. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (13). You can hear the division and it is easy to see how this is the opposite of the opening of the letter with all these same people part of one body as brothers, all sanctified by one God, called by one Lord Jesus, given the same fullness of grace and peace and so on. This sort of division truly is a tactic of Satan to pull apart the one Body of Christ.

Paul introduced baptism here and then continues with the thought, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)" (14-16). What's going on here? Think about what Paul is saying. As Calvin points out, "In these

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words he reproves very sharply the perversity of the Corinthians, which made it necessary for him to avoid, in a manner, a thing so sacred and honourable as that of the administration of baptism."[14] This will not be the only time that Paul refrains from participating in the honor God gave him as an Apostle to preside over the sacraments, as Acts 18:18 necessitates that he did not take wine at their Lord's Supper (at least for some of the time he was with them)—but we will have to wait until that proper chapter for that.

It seems that baptism may have become a key place where loyalty to a particular teacher could take root. After Paul left Corinth, Acts 18 tells us that Apollos arrived in the region knowing only the baptism of John (Acts 18:25). Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and explained the way of God more accurately, after which he was warmly received and became a powerful help to the believers in Achaia (26). I do not think this is a coincidence. The fact that such a gifted teacher had once operated with an incomplete understanding of baptism left a residual vulnerability in the churches. In a status-conscious city like Corinth, it would have been easy for people to begin treating the one who baptized them—or the teacher most associated with their entry into

[14] John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 71.

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the faith—as a primary identity marker. Paul appears to be guarding against exactly that danger. By deliberately minimizing his own role in baptizing, he refuses to let his name become a rallying point. How easily we are still led astray when it comes to celebrity.[15]

Paul comes full circle in our last verse, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1Cor 1:17). Paul is not pitting baptism against the Gospel. Rather, he is showing the Gospel that creates objective unity must take precedent even over something as pure and noble and important as baptism, if people misunderstand it. Paul is not saying there were not baptisms in Corinth. Rather, he is thankful that in God's providence it was not he who was baptizing them. His point is that neither he nor the others would ever want to be a stumbling block to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which we will look at in much more detail next time.

[15] I find it at least worth mentioning in a note that the baptism language could very well be a deliberate play on the parallel in the Thanksgiving section where he speaks about "testimony," "confirmed," "called," and "gifts." Listen to Origen who links these same ideas to baptism. Paraphrasing, "The washing with water … is the beginning and source of divine gifts … For there are diversities of gifts. This view receives confirmation from the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles, which shows the Spirit to have descended … on those who receive baptism, after the water had prepared the way for Him" (Origen, *Commentary on John*, Book 6).

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An Unexpected Application

To end this morning, let's look at the following summary and then I want to give you an application that I never imagined I would give. This is a messed up Church. Deeply morally corrupt. Perhaps the most of all the churches in the entire Apostolic era. Of all the people who deserve a *horrible* treatment, it would be them. But the Apostle does not do that. Instead:

- He calls them "the church of God."
- He calls them "sanctified" and "saints."
- He pronounces grace and peace over them.
- He thanks God for them.
- He celebrates the gifts already given to them.
- He assures them that God will confirm them to the end.

Only after all of that does he say, "I appeal to you, brothers…" as he begins his surgical removal of sin in the Corinthian church. Paul refuses to treat even this deeply flawed church the way we so often treat one another—especially online.

I want to tell you about a letter I received recently. This letter was sent to our church's email via our website. It had

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the person's name attached only in the contact form. The letter had no formal sender, no "Dear" pastor or elders or whatever—no recipients mentioned. It had no formal ending of greetings or "sincerely" or even "Good bye." It began, "Sorry for the directness, but no sense beating around the bush…" and then launched with an accusatory tone in the form of questions about our elder board—none of whom he's ever met. This was followed by lesser but still troubling questions about our ministries and deacons. Then a couple of short, blunt questions about certain doctrines we hold and how we answer more subjective experiences people might have. That's it. The same individual also contacted our Network with a short note, same format, no greeting, no ending, just questions about how he can possibly get people to come to the place where he lives to start a Reformed church because he needs a place to go to church.

This is hardly the worst email I've ever received, but being at the beginning of Paul's letter to a church that is truly in the midst of serious moral vice and grievous sins I find the contrasts striking. What has happened in our Christian culture to basic civility, decency, politeness, courtesy? These things are not "beating around the bush." They are necessary parts of Christian and human decency. We are not animals.

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\George Washington wrote a little book called *Rules of Civility*. His first rule is, "Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present."[16] His *first* rule! He said other things such as Rule 25: "Superfluous Complements and all Affectation of Ceremony are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected," and Rule 66: "Be not froward [difficult, stubborn] but friendly and Courteous." That's what we used to teach people in public school in our nation, in fact many schools once used this very book.

Today, we have the opposite, both in person but especially via email and online forums. Messages arrive with no attempt at basic human courtesy—just a cold dump of accusations, demands, and rhetorical traps. Strangers fire off questions designed not to seek understanding but to corner, embarrass, or convict. Online tone since almost the beginning has been truly ugly: anonymous voices sneer, mock, and pile on with the casual cruelty of people who never have to look another human in the eye. Threads fill with drive-by insults, bad-faith questions, and performative outrage that treats disagreement as moral failure. What once required at least the thin restraint of face-to-face presence now

[16] George Washington, *The Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation* (Literary House Press, 2007). At mountvernon.org.

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thrives in the frictionless space of screens, where courtesy is optional and contempt is easy.

This kind of rudeness is, at root, a gnostic impulse that feeds off anonymity. Gnosticism has always despised the ordinary constraints of embodied life with our shared forms, the small courtesies, and recognition that the person in front of you is not merely a vessel for error but a fellow creature with dignity. The other person becomes less a neighbor to be addressed and more an obstacle or a specimen to be corrected. It's so very … *Corinthian*!

Beloved, if God expects humans to show human courtesy and decency, how much more his own people—family members in the body of Christ? Of all the people who deserved to be treated like this, it was surely the Corinthians. But the Apostle refuses. Instead of cursing, he blesses; instead of condescending superiority, he deflects from himself; instead of instant demand there is grace and mercy; instead of dehumanization there is the necessary introduction that you, dear Christian, are loved by God, given every bit of grace and peace, supplied with all spiritual gifts, and most of all reminded of your impossibly true status as sanctified saved brothers all in true union with Christ—even if you are act like a jerk.

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It is the Gospel that always becomes the reason that any kind of law in the form of correction or rebuke can ever hit home in the NT. Because only when you are secure and safe in the arms of a loving God who loves you as you are and calls you something you are not because of his Son will you ever want to change. The gospel creates true repentance. Anything else just makes you defensive or hopeless or arrogant or combative in return.

And so we see that even though it is brief, the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the free grace that he gives undeserving sinners is front and center in a letter that will from this moment forward be full of correction for these wayward Christians. Paul needs them to know up front who they are in Christ and how God views them. This is the only way to properly and biblically deal with sin as we move forward in our *ongoing* sanctification. You, dear Christian, through faith in Christ, have been sanctified in Christ. You are called "saints," holy to the Lord. He loves you, even when you fall short. The Gospel is about him vindicating his righteousness through the work of his Son for you. With love like that, what other response to correction can there be than humility, repentance, kindness, and grace towards others?

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