

Two Pictures of a Church  
(1 Corinthians 1:4-9, 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday Adv, Year B)

Turn to 1 Corinthians 1. This is the First Sunday of Advent, which means it is the first Sunday of the church liturgical year for those churches that follow this all year around.

Each Sunday of the year, each day of the year actually, in a three year cycle, has four Scripture texts, one from Psalms, one from the rest of the OT, one from the Gospels, and one from the NT Letters. Our text for today is this Sunday's Scripture from the Letters.

1 Corinthians had an impressive list of church failings. No other church that we know of from the NT had nearly as much going on in the church as the disciples in Corinth.

I am going to survey their situation before we go to our text, because you need to get this picture of a NT church. What you will get today is two pictures of this church. First, I'm going to tell you about all the ways this church was a bad church. That's one picture.

Then we'll go over our text for this day, which gives you another picture of the same church. The combination of the two pictures will encourage you, and give you a different way to look at the big picture.

First Picture of the Corinthian Church – Church Failings in 1 Corinthians

Here is a brief list of the troubles of this church. In chapters 1-4 we learn that this church had divided itself up into something like tribes, depending on who their favourite preacher was: the Paul tribe, the Peter tribe, the Apollos tribe, and maybe more.

Also in Ch 1-4 we learn that the Corinthian believers loved the wisdom of the world, some kind of wisdom of the world that made Christ being the power of God look foolish.

Or, Christ being the wisdom and power of God made the world's wisdom look stupid. The church needed to choose, and was making the wrong choice.

Ch 5 – A man was living with his father's wife, his step-mother, and the church was pleased with themselves that they could love and accept this man. Put him out, said Paul.

Ch 6 – People in the church were cheating each other in business deals, and then taking each other to court to get justice. Paul said, stop cheating each other, solve these things in the church, and why don't you just let yourself be cheated.

Ch 6 – Later in Ch 6 we read that some church men were going to prostitutes.

Ch 7 – Some married people were denying their spouses sexual intimacy, because they had decided that sexual intimacy even in marriage was dirty and disgusting.

Ch 8-10 – Corinthians were going to some community meals in the city, not the church community but other communities, that were held in honour of some god or goddess.

Ch 11 – Women in those days did something different with their heads (scarf, veil, hair?) when they got married. Some of the Corinthian wives made a point of dressing like single women in the church gathering.

Ch 11 – Also in Ch 11, they abused the Lord’s Supper. It was a congregational meal, and the wealthy people brought most of the food, and hosted the meal, and they were eating most of the food before the poor people and slaves got there. Because of this sin, God had brought illness on many of the Corinthians, and a few had died.

Ch 12-14 – The gift of tongues was being abused. It overwhelmed the church gathering, and other gifts were seen as much inferior.

Ch 15 – Some Corinthians denied that believers would be raised from the dead; they did not seem to think it was even necessary.

Ch 16 – Paul had asked the church to save up offering money to go to the poor disciples in Jerusalem, but the Corinthian disciples were not getting around to this.

And that’s the end of the letter. What an impressive list! I saw a sermon title on a church sign yesterday in Winnipeg: “Why the Church is Unjust and Christians are Hypocrites.”

I love that title. I don’t know how the preacher would answer the question, but the Corinthian church was unjust and those believers in our days would be called hypocrites.

That’s the first picture of the Corinthian church. Now we’ll go to our text and look at **another picture of the very same church, in the very same letter.**

### Second Picture of the Corinthian Church – Paul’s Thanksgiving in 1:4-9

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 - *I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—<sup>6</sup>God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Let’s go through this paragraph.

Paul’s Thanks to God (v4) - *I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.*

This makes me chuckle. He does not thank God for what the Corinthians are doing, because he cannot quite get there. But he thanks God for them because of what God has done. God has been so generous to them through his Son Jesus Christ.

<sup>5</sup> *For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—* <sup>6</sup> *God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you.*

Here we get the evidence. How did Paul know that God had given them his grace through Jesus Christ? For Paul, that must have been a real good question.

Answer: because of how they had been made rich by God. God made them rich in “word” gifts and “knowledge” gifts, in speech gifts and knowledge gifts.

In the NT, churches were different from each other in the emphasis of the gifts in the church. We have two gift lists in the NT, in 1 Corinthians and in Romans. The Corinthian church did have many speech and knowledge gifts, but the Roman church had less of this and more love and service gifts.

Just as different people have different gifts, so different churches have different flavours of gifts. Churches should not try too hard to copy other churches. They’re different.

So, when Paul in v4 thanked God for the *grace* that God had given to the Corinthians, making them rich, Paul had in mind the richness of gifts given to the Corinthian church.

V6 – *God thus confirming our testimony of Christ among you.* Paul took this grace that had been given, the richness of gifts, as God’s way of confirming that the gospel Paul preached really had taken root in Corinth.

Paul knew that he *had truly* preached the right gospel, and the Corinthian believers *had truly* received it and the gospel *had truly* been effective and had taken root. He knew this because the richness of that congregation proved it. God confirmed their testimony.

I suppose Paul needed reasons to be sure, but he also had reasons to be sure. We should ask ourselves in what ways this church has been made rich. Are we rich in speech gifts and knowledge gifts? I think we could say that. Does our life together show God’s help and grace in other ways? I know we could say lots of that as well.

These things confirm that the gospel has been preached here, and that we responded as we should, and that God’s grace has come to us.

V7 - *Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*

In v4 we had the word “grace” – *I thank my God for the grace given you.* In v7 we have *Charisma* means “a little grace,” a little *charis*. God’s grace and spiritual gifts are closely related: the spiritual gift is a little grace.

So let's summarize so far. Paul was thankful that the grace of God had been given to the Corinthian church, and that the message of Christ had been confirmed by God himself. The evidence for this was the abundance of spiritual gifts.

These gifts could only be the direct act of God's generosity, which was God's way of confirming to Paul that his preaching had taken root in their lives. We're describing the second picture of the Corinthian church.

The first picture was everything wrong with that church. The second picture does not contradict the first, but the second picture has a very different view, doesn't it. So again, we need to think about our church, and view our church.

There will be the same two pictures of our church as well, one listing everything going wrong, and the other listing God's kindness to us that has made us rich in different ways.

*V7b - as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.* This second picture takes on a new direction at this point, aiming at the second coming of Christ.

"Advent" is an old English word for "coming." The Christmas Advent time traditionally celebrates *two* comings of Christ, the first already behind us, and the second ahead of us. It is mainly the first coming of Christ, but there is always some element of the second in the Advent Scriptures. That's why 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 is an Advent Scripture.

The church liturgical year is based on a three year cycle, year A = Matthew, year B = Mark, year C = Luke, with a bit of John thrown in all three. This is year B, Mark's Gospel, and there is no birth story of Jesus in Mark. That's only in Matthew and Luke.

I decided some time ago that since this year was Mark, who has not birth story, I would teach on Christ's Second Coming during this Advent. And that is why I picked 1 Corinthians 1 out of the possible Advent texts for today.

*As you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.* I love this. Some translations change the word from "revealed" to "coming," but that is sad. Now Jesus is hidden. We live our lives as if Jesus was the Master and we were his slaves.

We do this because Jesus is the best possible master a slave could have. To the rest of the world, making ourselves slaves to a crucified Jewish prophet from 2000 years ago is one of the silliest things a human could do.

Now he is hidden. The world cannot see that were the real power is, God the Father sits on the Throne and Jesus of Nazareth, his one and only Son, sits at his right hand. We cannot see that either, but somehow we got persuaded of this. We wait for the *revealing* of our Master, who is Jesus Christ the Lord.

But someday, on this earth, everyone will see. “*Look, he is coming with the clouds,*” and “*every eye will see him, even those who pierced him*”; and all peoples on earth “*will mourn because of him.*” *So shall it be! Amen.* (Revelation 1:7)

*Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. As you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*

That Jesus will be revealed is important. We need to know, now, every follower needs to know, now, that on some future day on this planet, everyone will see the raised Jesus that the disciples saw, although it will probably be more glorious, the way Jesus appeared when he was transfigured.

Every eye will see and will know that this is the Jesus that the Christians have been talking about all along. On that day, being his slave all along will be the smartest thing anyone anywhere has ever done. And walking away from him will be the more horrible thing anyone has ever done.

*As you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.* It does not seem like the Corinthians were actually doing this. We don't think it is right for a person to pray to God out loud and preach to those listening in the prayer, but I think the apostle Paul is doing a bit of that here. He's trying to get them to look at the big picture.

V8 - *He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* This is quite a line, considering the first picture of Corinth that we saw, which listed all their failings.

God will make the Corinthians firm and strong to the End, blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God will make the Corinthians strong and free from all blame, so that they will be blameless on the day when the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed.

In v6, the *charisma*, the spiritual gifts of the church, were actually God confirming that Paul's witness was true and had taken root there. In v8, God keeps them firm (same Greek word with a little different sense). God keeps them firm to the End.

The Corinthian church, for their part, waits for the Lord to be revealed. We also, for our part, wait for the Lord to be revealed, that day when every eye will see him.

God, for his part, keeps them strong to the End, so that they will be free from blame when the Lord is revealed. God, for his part, also keeps us firm to the End, so that we will be blameless on the day the Lord is revealed, the day when every eye will see him.

In this line, Paul goes in a different direction than evangelical theology normally goes. In our view, and I will exaggerate a bit but not much, God's job is to forgive our sins.

God forgives us when we become Christians, and he forgives us all along our Christian life, and one more big forgiveness when we die and go to heaven, and that's about it.

God certainly does forgive our sins along the way, but what I just said ignores a huge part of God's agenda. We have no idea how determined God is to keep us living faithfully, so that we are blameless at the End, when Jesus returns.

1 Thess 3:13 - *May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

1 Thess 5:23-24 - *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

What does "blameless" mean? It does not mean sinless or perfect. It does not mean living in victory in every part of our life. Remember the Lord's Prayer – the righteous disciple still needs to ask forgiven every day for sin, and that will be happening on the very day that the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed.

This is how blameless looks. Every day God forgives us, and every day we forgive each other. Every day. **God made peace with this long ago. Why won't you?** That's how blameless looks. Blameless by God's definition, not ours, and that's good news.

We have no idea how determined God is to keep us living faithfully, so that we are blameless at the End. And if Paul could be confident about this with the church in Corinth, there are not many churches so bad that this is not true.

V8 - *He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* He confirmed the gospel by making you rich in grace, and he will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless, by God's definition not ours.

<sup>9</sup> *God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

God is faithful. The Corinthian church was not very faithful. In this thanks for the church in Corinth, there is nothing about what the Corinthians were doing. It is all about what God had done, was doing while Paul wrote, and would yet do. God is faithful.

*Who called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.* This fellowship is future not present. In other places the NT says this about our partnership with Christ: we are heirs with him, that is, believers and Christ will share the same inheritance (Rm 8:17).

Our bodies will be come like his glorious body – we will share the same kind of incredible physical body that Christ has (Phil 3:21). We will share in his glory, we will be partner with Christ in the same magnificence that Christ has (2 Thess 2:14; Col 3:4).

We will rule as kings together with Christ, we will share kingship with him, we will be partner kings with him. THIS is the fellowship with Christ to which we were called. God called us to this incredible future partnership with Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord.

From the moment we first became Christians, that is what God had in mind. We didn't, but he did. That was his goal for us, to get us to that place. The first coming of Christ is a big part of how he's doing that.

The apostle Paul had a lot of confidence in what was going to happen in the Corinth church and to the Corinth believers. He knew the gospel had taken root there because of the spiritual gifts. And after that, it was God's faithfulness.

When God called them, he called them to that incredible future partnership with Christ, and Paul knew God would finish what he started. That's the second picture of the Corinth church.

Both pictures are real. They both matter. After Paul wrote this confidence thanksgiving, he wrote a long detailed letter, going through their errors and sins one by one, explaining what was actually wrong in each instance, and showing them the right way to respond.

For believers to be firm and blameless on the day the Lord is revealed takes human effort. It will certainly not happen with human devotion to the Lord, and obedience to the Lord. But God is behind that, organizing it, giving direction and giving energy, always moving with his Spirit, to make sure it happens.

So now I am going to read our text over one more time, paraphrasing is for our church. Don't follow in your Bibles. Take this as God's words spoke to you:

*I always thank my God for you believers at the Kleefeld Christian Community because of his grace given to you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him, in Christ, your church been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— <sup>6</sup> God thus confirming that the gospel of Christ is among you. <sup>7</sup> That is why you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you, yes, you, will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, who has called you, yes, you, into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*