

II. Salutation and Opening Comments

A. Paul's Self-Identification

1. Consistent with most of his epistles, Paul introduced himself by affirming his apostolic calling. He was an apostle of Jesus Christ – a man commissioned and dispatched by Jesus in His name and authority for the sake of His gospel. In all things, Paul recognized himself as no longer his own; he was Christ's servant and ambassador, and not because he sought this appointment, but because God Himself had willed it (1:1). Far from pursuing or even desiring his apostolic calling, he'd spent much of his adult life actively opposing the followers of Jesus Christ and the Way they embraced and promoted.

Through those years Paul had believed he was a faithful servant of the God of Israel; little did he realize that he was actually fighting against his God, but would yet serve Him, not by destroying the Way but by becoming its chief advocate in the Mediterranean world. Despite the years of opposition, God had set Paul apart from his mother's womb, and at the appointed time revealed His Son to and *in* this zealous Pharisee; from that moment, this man who'd dedicated himself to Yahweh's service became His servant in truth.

Paul introduced himself this way, not because the Corinthians weren't aware of his apostolic credential, but because they needed to be reminded of it.

- a. This was the case first of all because of the instruction that was forthcoming. Paul was poised to address issues and problems at Corinth in a direct and forthright manner, and the Corinthians needed to understand that he was speaking to them as Christ's apostle, not as a mere man expressing his own views. Much of what he was about to say would be painful to hear and therefore easy to resist, qualify or set aside. But doing so would amount to despising the Lord's words and mind - the very One whom the Corinthians affirmed as their own Lord (cf. 2:6-16 with 5:1-5, 7:10-12, 25, 39-40, 11:1-16, 17-26, also 16:21-24).
 - b. But the Corinthians also needed this reminder because some among them were questioning Paul's ministry as Christ's apostle, if not his apostolic calling. Paul knew that his instruction and directives were going to meet with some resistance among the Corinthians; human beings instinctively press against things they don't want to hear. How much more would that be the case with those who questioned his integrity and motives and perhaps even his apostleship? And these who were resolute in their resistance would doubtless influence their brethren for the worse.
2. Paul added Sosthenes to his salutation, and this addition served two purposes. The most obvious is that it extended Sosthenes' greeting to the saints at Corinth. He likely was the same Sosthenes named by Luke who was the leader of the Corinthian synagogue during the latter part of Paul's first mission in the city (Acts 18:17). Luke's account implies that he'd come to faith in Christ, provoking the fury of his Jewish countrymen, but there's no record of how he came to be with Paul in Ephesus. Whatever the occasion, Sosthenes wanted to send his own greeting to his Corinthian brethren.

But adding Sosthenes' name to the epistle's salutation (rather than in closing) served more importantly to connect him with the letter's content. Sosthenes was likely a leading figure in the Corinthian church given his role in the synagogue and knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. Sending a letter to the church in his name effectively stamped his imprimatur on Paul's words, and this couldn't help but add credibility to the letter and encourage the Corinthians to embrace it with a whole heart. This was Paul's sincere goal, not because he wanted the Corinthians to acknowledge and submit to his authority as such, but because he longed for them to grow up in all things into Him who is the Head.

B. Paul's Identification of the Corinthians

1. Paul proceeded from identifying himself to identifying the Corinthians as the recipients of his epistle. In that regard, he referred to them as "*the church of God which is at Corinth*" (1:2a). A couple of things about this designation are important to note:
 - a. First, it expressed Paul's conviction that the city of Corinth had only one church, though the community of believers there doubtless met, not as one assembly, but as several small congregations. There were no church buildings at that time and, short of someone allowing his personal property to be used as a meeting place (ref. Acts 19:9), congregations were forced to meet in the members' homes which were generally quite small and unsuitable to large gatherings.
 - b. The believers in Corinth may not have been able to all meet together, but they were yet one body. The reason was that they together constituted the Corinthian component of *God's* church, which is one throughout the world. Paul was reminding the Corinthians that, though they were a widely diverse group of people, they were to regard themselves as one unified body. And being a part of God's church, they needed to recognize their unity with all believers everywhere.
2. The Corinthian Christians were members of the Lord's church – the singular body that bears His name and belongs to Him. Regardless of where or when they live, all of the members of that body are God's own possession, and they belong to Him by His determination, not theirs. At Corinth as elsewhere, the community of believers were "*saints by calling*" (1:2b) – called according to the will of God as much as Paul himself.

This phrase is sometimes translated, *called to be holy* (so NAB, NIV), but this leads away from Paul's meaning and so loses the profound import of what he was expressing to his readers. Most simply, this rendering intimates that Paul was highlighting the Corinthians' practical obligation to live holy lives. It makes their *conduct* the issue rather than their *identity*, which was in fact what Paul was pointing to. By employing this expression Paul was identifying the Corinthians as "called saints": men and women called by God Himself. The meaning of this ascription is fleshed out in the following particulars:

- a. First of all, the term *saint* ("holy one") designates a being whom God has set apart to Himself; it speaks of identity, not conduct. So the holy things in Israel's history were holy, not because of their inherent nature or function, but their *consecration*.

Whether made of precious or common material, or whether designated for a noble or ignoble function in God’s service, a thing (or person) became holy when God determined to set it apart for Himself to be used solely in His service and worship. So the ark of the covenant with its solid gold mercy seat was no more “holy” than the bronze shovels that removed the ashes from the altar of burnt offering; in both instances, an Israelite other than Aaron and his sons looking upon them or touching them brought the same sentence of immediate death (Numbers 4:1-20).

So the Corinthian believers (as all Christians) were holy, not because of their godly behavior or even because they were called to such behavior, but because God had taken them as His own possession. They were holy because He chose them out of the world and set them apart into the truth (John 15:19, 17:14-17); they were holy because He consecrated them to His own worship and service.

*In the first instance, holiness is a relational rather than a behavioral concept. It speaks of what an entity is in relation to **God**, not in relation to **itself** as is the case with behavioral concerns.* It was precisely this relational dynamic – who they were in relation to God – that Paul was reminding the Corinthians of; keeping that understanding in the forefront of their thinking would be absolutely vital to them understanding and profiting from his forthcoming instruction.

- b. The Corinthians were “saints by calling,” which is to say that they had been “*sanctified (set apart to God) in Christ Jesus.*” The divine call had been realized in them – as it is in all believers – by a trinitarian work. A *saint* is a person who has been *sanctified* by the triune God: one whom the Father has taken to Himself and consecrated as His son through union with the only-begotten Son by the enlivening power and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.
3. The Corinthians were not a community of pious or religious individuals, but God’s “holy ones”: a people for His own possession by virtue of their participation in the life of Jesus Christ by His Spirit. But this very identity made them members of a larger community – the Body defined by this trinitarian union and communion (12:1ff). The Corinthians were “saints by calling,” but they were so together “*with all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*” – all who confess Jesus as Lord and Christ (1:2c).
 - a. This statement and its form importantly highlight the fact that the Church is an entirely *christological* entity: It has its origin, identity, substance and destiny in Him (cf. 1:30, 3:11, 6:15, and 12:12-27 with Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:9-10).
 - b. It was clearly no accident that Paul used this expression throughout his opening statements – in fact, it appears conspicuously redundant (ref. vv. 2-3, 7-10). One cannot fail to notice the repetition and so also Paul’s emphasis: *In laying the foundation for his instruction, Paul wanted to press again upon the Corinthians the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ to everything pertaining to their individual and corporate lives as Christians.* This expression accomplishes this by drawing together all of the core truths of a biblical Christology.

First of all, the name *Jesus* speaks to the Lord's true and full humanity. It is the name *Joshua* ("Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation") which He shared with many others, but in Him the name realized its true significance. It is indeed true that "Yahweh saves," but He has become the world's Savior in the Man Jesus who is the Last Adam (Matthew 1:18-21; Romans 5:18-19; 1 Corinthians 15:45).

Whereas Jesus was His human name, *Christ* is a title identifying Jesus of Nazareth as the Scripture's promised Messiah. "Christ" is the English transliteration of the Greek noun *christos* which is the equivalent of the Hebrew *meshiach*, which is rendered "messiah" in English. The term has the basic meaning of "anointed one" and designates a person formally set apart and ordained by God to fulfill a specific calling in relation to His covenant kingdom. It was applied to Israel's *priests* (Leviticus 4:1ff, 6:19-22), *kings* (1 Samuel 2:10, 16:1-6, 24:1-6), and *prophets* (1 Kings 19:15-16; 1 Chronicles 16:22).

Building upon these ascriptions, the Scriptures notably apply this title to the messianic figure who was to fulfill all three roles of prophet, priest and king: the prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-19) and the royal Davidic Branch and Melchizedekian king-priest (Zechariah 6:9-15; cf. Psalm 110). Significantly, Isaiah assigned the title *meshiach* to the Persian king Cyrus who served as a crucial messianic prototype by being the liberator of the covenant people and the king whose sovereign power authorized and presided over the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the sanctuary as Yahweh's dwelling place (Isaiah 44:24-45:4).

The coming *meshiach* would fulfill those roles on behalf of Israel, ***but ultimately for the sake of the whole world***. This is revealed in two key particulars:

- 1) The first is the messianic revelation concerning the *Branch of David*. This royal strand of Old Testament messianism is conjoined with its priestly counterpart, first in the Melchizedek typology, but then explicitly in Zechariah's physical prophecy of the crowned high priest (ref. again Zechariah 6:9-15). Zechariah identified that individual as the Davidic Branch: the Son of David who was to build Yahweh's house in accordance with the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:1-16). Zechariah then enlarged his prophecy by proclaiming that Branch would build Yahweh's house as an enthroned priest, but *also that He would do so in conjunction with the labors of men drawn from all over the world* (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10 with 1 Corinthians 3:10-17; Ephesians 2:11-22).
- 2) The second is the messianic revelation regarding the *Servant of the Lord*. This content is largely concentrated in Isaiah's prophecy, and Isaiah revealed that this individual was to be Yahweh's instrument for cosmic restoration and reconciliation – a *new creation*. Through His self-offering, this One would not only gather to Yahweh an abundance of children from all the nations of the earth (53:1-54:17, cf. 11:1-10, 49:1-6), His work was to result in a new heavens and new earth (65:1-25).

In the end, the title “Christ” embodies the totality of messianic revelation: It speaks to Jesus as the Seed of Eve, the Seed of Abraham and Davidic Branch, the Servant of Yahweh, True Israel and Yahweh’s Prophet, Priest and King. By repeatedly ascribing that title to Jesus in his salutation and opening comments, Paul was purposefully calling the minds of his Corinthian readers back to the glorious, all-embracing truth of the One who is the fulfillment of all the Scriptures; the One whose life they shared and whom they served as His Body.

Finally, the title **Lord** binds together and gives full expression to the significance of Jesus’ *name* (“Yahweh saves”) and His status as Yahweh’s *meshiach*. The reason is that “Lord” speaks to Jesus’ triumph over Yahweh’s enemies, His role as liberator of the covenant people, and His supreme rule over God’s kingdom as the first-born from the dead and enthroned priest-king (cf. Psalm 2, 110 with Acts 2:22-36 and 4:24-30, 33; Romans 1:1-4 with 8:31-39, also 10:1-13; cf. also Ephesians 1:15-23; Colossians 3:12-25; 2 Thessalonians 1:1ff; Revelation 19:1ff).

And so, after identifying himself and Sosthenes, Paul identified the Corinthians – not merely as he perceived them or even as they may have perceived themselves, but *as they were in truth*; as they were according to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ the Lord.

- They were members of God’s Church – the community of redeemed and reconciled people He has called by His Spirit and taken to Himself in His Son.
- But precisely because they were members of God’s Church which is in His Son (1:2b), the Corinthians were to perceive themselves in terms of their sharing in Jesus’ true humanity, His kingdom of the new creation and His lordship as the Church’s Head and Husband. They were sons in the Son: a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a people for God’s own possession (1 Peter 2:4-10; cf. Revelation 5:1-10), spiritual offspring of the Last Adam and children of Abraham and heirs of the covenant promises made to him (Romans 5:12-19; Galatians 3:26-29). They were those whose lives were hidden with Christ in God; men who’d died in Christ and were now living out His life in them (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1ff).
- And perceiving themselves in this way as members of Christ, they ought to recognize that their lives are inextricably joined to their fellow believers – not only at Corinth, but across the globe and in every generation. Being members of Jesus – sharing in His life by His Spirit – means being members of all who so share in Him (1 Corinthians 12:1-27; cf. Ephesians 4:14-16; Colossians 1:18-19).

The notion of the Church of God implies a community that reaches through time and space, but *Paul’s primary thrust was to remind the Corinthians of who they were in relation to one another in the body at Corinth*. The reason was that all of their corporate sin and dysfunction was grounded in their failure to “rightly judge the body.” As important as it was for them to recognize Christ’s Body as a universal community, their well-being and growth as believers depended upon them discerning and living out the truth of Christ’s Body as it manifested itself in the church at Corinth.