



Catalog No. 779

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

First Message

Gary Vanderet

February 4, 1990

# A CONFIDENT GREETING TO AN IMPERFECT CHURCH

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

One of my worst fears is that sometime I am going to sleep through my alarm on a Sunday. I have been known to turn off an alarm in my sleep. Once I even had a conversation with my wife on the phone early one morning and went back to bed, never recalling the phone call. That is why I turn my alarm away from me so I can't easily reach it, and when I am away on a trip, I will request a wake-up call from the front desk. That shrill, irritating sound is enough to wake the dead.

In a very real sense what I would like to provide for you over the next couple of months is a wake-up call. I am concerned that some of us have become a bit drowsy, and others are fast asleep.

We who are living in the dawn of the 21st century are living in some of the most significant years in all of Christendom. Doors are opening all over the world for evangelism. Opportunities in the international scene are expanding and exciting. Yet it seems to me that many in the church have lost sight of the objectives. Long-time values are eroding. Small-time skirmishes and petty fighting are draining our energy. Instead of fulfilling our grand mandate, many of us have become myopic and consumed with selfish involvements. Instant gratification has replaced long-time goals.

This is why I appreciated very much Ray Stedman's series on the first three chapters of Revelation. As we looked at those seven churches we began to see that they were a lot like the church today. Each church had its own distinctives, its own opportunities and challenges. Each was a place where truth was taught and lives were changed. And then slowly something happened to each that silenced its witness. Like erosion, the slippage was slow but sure. Then, in the midst of the decay, an angel cupped his hands and shouted, "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain." Again and again the Lord prodded them to wake up. In each of the seven commentaries we heard the same warning: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

That is what we need—a wake-up call. I believe that is what the book of First Corinthians is: It is a wake-up call to a church that has forgotten who they are and why they exist. A number of years ago as Ray Stedman preached through the Corinthian letters, he called them "First and Second Californians." Having "lived," as it were, in First Corinthians for over seven months, I understand what he meant. The parallels to Corinth and the San Francisco Bay Area are many. In fact, let me summarize for you in three phrases the city of Corinth and see if you can identify with it: Intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally decadent. Do these sound familiar?

Corinth was a key city in Ancient Greece until it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony in 46 B.C. and it grew and prospered, largely because of its unique geographical location. It lay at the neck of a narrow isthmus connecting the two parts of Greece, and thus it controlled all north-south land traffic. In this important position it inevitably became a prosperous center of trade and commerce. By the time of Paul's visit, some

100 years after its rebuilding, Corinth had become the capital of the province of Achaia. It was a center of wealth and influence. Luxury and excess were the norm in this wealthy young city.

Corinth was filled with shrines and temples, but dominating the city was a large temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which stood on a 2000-foot high hill outside the city. Every evening, the 1000 priestesses of the temple, who were sacred prostitutes, came down and plied their trade in the streets. The worship of Aphrodite was very similar to that of the Ashtoreth in the days of Solomon, Jeroboam and Josiah.

Intellectually alert, materially prosperous, but morally corrupt. These proud, sometimes wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was at the issue of lifestyle, not theology, where they were confused. Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one's culture must be abandoned when one becomes a Christian? Paul's answers are decisive, direct and, as we will see, extremely relevant.

First Corinthians is a practical, issue-oriented letter which relates the truth of the gospel to the ethical issues of daily life. In fact, it is the most practical of all Paul's letters. It is indeed a tract for our times. Listen to one man's exhortation on the value of this book:

I believe that the church in our generation needs to discover the apostolic gospel; and for this it needs the Epistle to the Romans. It needs also to discover the relation between this Gospel and its order, discipline, worship, and ethics; and for this it needs the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. If it makes these discoveries, it may well find itself broken; and this may turn out to be meaning of the 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians... Yet an earthenware vessel that contains such treasure need not fear breaking; it is the apostolic vocation to carry about the killing of Jesus, and those who accept it are apt to find the funeral turned into a triumph, as they learn not to trust in themselves but in Him who raises the dead.

It is my prayer that you will find great help in this book for the issues and problems that face you as individuals, and for those that we face together as a body.

The opening three verses of the letter give Paul's greeting to the church.

## I. Paul's greeting to the church at Corinth (1:1-3)

**Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes, our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, together with all who in every place, call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:1-3 NASB)**

Paul is writing this letter from Ephesus around A.D. 56. A description of the apostle's founding of the Corinthian church some five

years earlier is provided for us in Acts 18:1-18. He entered Corinth full of fear and trembling. In the second chapter of this letter he admits as much. In spite of his confidence in the power of the gospel, he was a bit shell-shocked by the savage opposition he had encountered in Macedonia a few weeks earlier. And it is certainly to be expected that he would be affected by the reputation of Corinth in the Mediterranean world. The fact that his companions, Silas and Timothy, were occupied in Macedonia, would not have made things any easier. Imagine beginning a ministry all by yourself in the city of San Francisco. Imagine trying to penetrate that city, all by yourself, with the gospel, and you probably have imagined a little of what the apostle felt as he entered Corinth.

As always, Paul initially preached in the synagogue, and he had some success in spite of opposition from the Jewish community. If you are familiar with the book of Acts, you will recognize the name Sosthenes in verse 1. He was at one time the ruler of the synagogue. Both he and the former ruler, Crispus, were converted. He is now with Paul in Ephesus.

Paul always looked back on his time in the city with great affection. He arrived feeling nothing but weakness; but he left having experienced the secret to all effective ministry—that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. He always felt close to the church in Corinth.

It had come to his attention that the church was struggling with a number of problems. He sent some men there to investigate these things and they had now come back to Paul, carrying a letter from the church. Though we do not have all the correspondence that passed between them, we can divide this letter into two parts. In the first six chapters, Paul deals with the problems the church was having. Then, beginning in chapter 7, he responds to questions which the church had asked concerning various issues.

There are a couple of observations I would like to make in the first three verses.

#### A. Our life as Christians is, in essence, a response to a call

In verse 2, Paul uses a number of pungent phrases to describe the church at Corinth. As you read on you begin to see an emphasis, in fact, a deliberate play on the word *call*, a theme which is central to Paul’s thinking, particularly in the opening paragraphs of the letter. Look at the text:

Verse 1: “Paul, *called* as an apostle.”

Verse 2: “to the church of God which is at Corinth, saints by *calling*, with all who in every place *call* upon the name of our Lord.”

Verse 9: “God is faithful, through whom you were *called* into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Verses 23-24: “we preach Christ crucified...to those who are *called*...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Verse 26: “consider your *calling* brethren; that there were not many wise according the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.”

Paul is conscious of this sense of God’s calling as he ponders the relationship between himself and the Corinthian church, and as he recollects the circumstances in which the Christian community came into being at Corinth. He is conscious of God’s initiative in his own call as an apostle and in the call of the Christians at Corinth, both individually and corporately.

We might paraphrase the apostle’s words this way: “God called me to be an apostle, God called each one of you to be saints, to

enjoy the fellowship of His son, Jesus.” If God hadn’t initiated this call, this would not be so. That is so important for us to remember. We become so caught up in all we need to do we forget that what we are about is all wrapped up in responding to God. He has called us. He has wooed us to himself. As many of our men have testified this morning, this was the theme of our Men’s Retreat last week. The Christian life is, in essence, a response to a call. Everything we are and everything we do is a response to that call.

Peter Marshall, who served as Chaplain of the United States Senate in the late ’40’s, was an extremely gifted preacher. One of his most powerful sermons was entitled “The Tap on the Shoulder.” The following excerpt illustrates so well this idea of calling.

...if you were walking down the street, and someone came up behind you and tapped you on the shoulder...what would you do? Naturally, you would turn around. Well, that is exactly what happens in the spiritual world. A man walks on though life—with the external call ringing in his ears, but with no response stirring in his heart, and then suddenly, without any warning, the Spirit taps him on the shoulder. The tap on the shoulder is the almighty power of God acting without help or hindrance...so as to produce a new creature, and to lead him into the particular work which God has for him.

At the retreat last weekend we had the privilege of seeing four men respond to that tap on the shoulder. There may be some here this morning who have heard that call ringing in their ears for a long time, but perhaps today you will feel that tap on the shoulder.

This calling has not only affected us personally but has dramatically changed our relationships as well. The word translated “church” in verse 2, *ekklesia*, means literally, “a company of those called out; the called-out ones” All those who hear God’s call and respond are members of the *ekklesia* of God. They have been set apart by God in that call and are reserved for Jesus Christ (sanctified in Christ Jesus). We are who we are because God has initiated the action. He has set us apart for himself. We are special and different. He has called us, and we can no longer cavalierly drift off to follow whatever voice we hear. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me.” We belong to him. He has given us a new name: We are “a holy nation, a people for his possession.” He has chosen us.

That is why Paul does not talk about his church but of the church of God. He was as responsible for the birth and life of that church as it is possible for one human to be; but it was God’s church, not Paul’s. It is a healthy corrective to note Paul’s example. Many problems in a church revolve around a selfish possessiveness. No individual Christian or group of Christians has any special claim on Jesus. He is *both their Lord and ours*.

Let me make one other point.

#### B. Our call to salvation is a call to service

This is what it means to be sanctified, to be set apart for a special use. God has called us for a purpose. For Paul himself there was no distinction in time between his call to be a saint and his call to be an apostle. The one included the other; the former was something he shared with others, and the latter something that set him apart from others. When God called Paul from his persecution of believers, he called him into his apostolic ministry. That vocation was not a second call after his initial call.

In a very real sense, that is true for all Christians. Our appointed ministry is part of what it means to be saved. People sometimes ask me how one can know if he has been “called into the ministry.” What they mean by that is they are looking for some special experi-

ence, a sense that God has anointed them for a specific duty. We are all called into ministry when we were called out of this world and into his kingdom. I personally have never had a “call” to the ministry in the sense of having some experience. I had read most of the New Testament before I became a Christian, and when I finally responded to that call, I knew it was going to radically affect every future decision I would make. I knew that God wanted every part of my life. I did not even know what a pastor was when I responded to his call.

I believe we were all called into ministry when we were called into salvation by God. At salvation we are given spiritual gifts, divine abilities to serve. It may take some time to discover these gifts, and certainly it will take time to find the appropriate ministries in which to use them, but each Christian is called to serve.

Of course, Paul’s call to be an apostle was different from the other apostles. That was one reason his ministry was called into question by the Corinthians. He was harassed and had to establish his credentials before them. Although we don’t face that kind of struggle it is good to remember that our call to salvation is a call to service.

After his initial greeting, Paul expresses his confidence in the church’s future. Verses 4-9:

## II. Paul’s confidence in the church at Corinth (1:4-9)

**I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1:4-9)**

I was taken aback by Paul’s initial words to the Corinthian church. We know from reading the letters that it was a mess. Many Corinthians had been won to Christ, and the church was large. It was full of cliques, each following a different personality. Many were snobbish. At fellowship meals the rich stayed together and the poor were left alone. There was very little church discipline, either morally or doctrinally. There was a lack of humility and respect for others. Some were taking other believers to court. Others were celebrating their new freedom in Christ without the slightest regard for the conscience of their fellow believers. In general, they were very excited over the dramatic gifts of the Spirit, and were lacking in love which was rooted in the truth. This is the church Paul greets.

I was reminded of how similar this is to most churches. Even those churches with glowing reputations are well known by those on the inside to be full of weaknesses and sin. I remember how much in awe Kathy and I were when we came to PBC, but I was soon to discover that it had its own share of weaknesses. My first clue should have been when they hired me! We somehow think when we are dissatisfied with one church that if we attended another we wouldn’t have these struggles. The problem with that is, you are going to take all of your problems into that perfect church you dreamed of.

I was struck by Paul’s words: Paul looks at the Corinthian church as it is *in Christ Jesus* before he looks at anything else that is true of the church. How different that is from us. We examine the problems and lament over them. We look at everyone’s weaknesses before we look at what God has done in their lives. Often there is no vision of what God has already done in Christ. If we removed these nine verses

from the letter, it would be impossible to come away with anything but a pessimistic view of the Corinthian church. The statements of faith, hope and love that occur frequently through the letter would have no context, and would merely be pious dreams.

For lack of this kind of vision today the ministry of the church in many places has stagnated. Believers have no real expectation of significant spiritual growth because they have no sense of what God has already done in their lives. But unless we realize all that God has done for us already, and all the resources that are ours in him, all we will come away with is some hollow exhortation to more effort, more prayer or more faith—because those seem to be the right things.

We don’t need more activity. What we need is simply an understanding of the implications of our calling. God has called us into a very significant relationship, one that has changed us completely. We are no longer the same. Once we were dead, now we are alive. Once we depended on our own resources, now we have the Spirit of God residing within. He motivates and equips us for everything we need.

In spite of all these provisions the Corinthians were failing to understand how to apply these resources to their everyday life. And so they were struggling with divisions and strife that had escalated into lawsuits, sexual immorality, and other things. They needed a wake-up call. Instead of the church making an impact on the city, the city was making an impact on the church. Instead of the church being in the world, the world was in the church. Peter Marshall also made this statement concerning contemporary Christians: “Christians are like deep sea divers encased in suits designed for many fathoms deep, marching bravely forth to pull plugs out of bath tubs.”

So Paul wrote this letter as a wake-up call. It is a reminder of who we are and the resources that are ours as a result. Maybe you find yourselves here this morning simply going through the motions of being at church, with no real expectation of growth to maturity. But you are radically different from what you once were: You are a new creature in Christ. I encourage you to take a fresh look at who you are.

As we read these verses, take note of Paul’s confidence in the church at Corinth. It is based on God’s faithfulness and generosity.

There are two principles here.

### A. Our confidence is based on God’s generosity—He has given us every resource

These opening verses remind us of the tremendous resources that are ours in Christ. For instance:

Verse 4: “the grace of God...which was given you.”

Verse 5: “in everything you were enriched in Him.”

Verse 7: “so that you are not lacking in any gift.”

These statements speak of the lavish generosity of God towards these redeemed sinners at Corinth. Throughout this letter, Paul reminds these believers of the resources that are theirs in Christ, the wealth of power that is available to God’s people. That wealth is summed up so well in the word “grace”—God’s investment of himself in us. In giving us his son Jesus, God has given us all he has. He can give us no more. We have everything in him.

The word for “enriched” in verse 5 is the word from which we get the word “plutocrat,” which means a very wealthy person. The Corinthians were spiritually wealthy, particularly in two areas—in speech and in knowledge. They were gifted Bible students—able to

apprehend intellectually the meaning of the Scriptures—and they were extremely eloquent—able to express that knowledge in words. In fact, Paul goes on to say that they were not lacking in any gift. Corinth was an exciting place to be a Christian.

It is important to note that these statements are made about the church at Corinth, not about individual believers. If we are to know the fullness of God's blessing, if we are to experience all the gifts of his grace which are ours in Christ, it has to be together in fellowship. And as we focus on the richness of his grace these gifts will become a greater reality among us. Paul reminds us also in verse 7 that we need to keep our eyes fixed for our Lord's revealing. That kind of hope will motivate to move forward those destined to become the bride of Christ, because it is then (and only then) on that wedding day, that we shall enter into the full reality of all that is ours in Christ.

Notice one other thing.

**B. Our confidence is based on God's faithfulness—He has assured us of our destiny**

Not only is Paul positive about the present resources of the church of God at Corinth, he also confident for its future. Whatever ups and downs it might face, Paul is sure of the faithfulness of God. God has called them into the fellowship of his Son; he will *confirm* them to the end. If we have been called on the initiative of God himself to share in his Son, Jesus Christ, then God will not abandon us or go back on his promises. That is the force of the word *faithful*. We can totally depend on God. He is not a man. He cannot deny himself. He will keep his word. The church is God's responsibility. He is committed to the perfecting of the saints.

God's terminus is not merely the end of each individual's life-span, which he certainly guards with personal care, but the "day of our Lord Jesus Christ." God's faithfulness extends to that day, and beyond it into the fullness of eternity. He will keep his people *blameless* in that day, the day when the secrets of men's hearts, all of our thoughts and motives, are disclosed. If there is any day when we might have had legitimate fear of being finally found guilty before him, it is that day. But God will ensure that absolutely no charge or accusation is laid against his people, whether by human beings, or by Satan, the great "accuser of the brethren." It is Jesus who matters on that day. It is his day. He calls the tune. He determines the issues. Because we have called to share in Jesus, we will share in his supremacy on that day. What a wonderful sense of confidence that should bring to us!

I pray that in the weeks ahead we will come to understand our calling. It has great implications in our lives. I pray also that as we will come to view one another with that sense of calling, we will learn to see one another first as we are in Christ.

Father, thank you so much for that sense of confidence that is ours through you. Thank you for tapping us on the shoulder, and inclining our ear to your voice. We are your sheep. We need you. Without your loving care we tend to stray. Keep us better attuned to your voice, and ever mindful that you are our Good Shepherd. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

© 1990 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino