

Boasting Baby Believers

1 Corinthians 1

Hymns: #23 Praise My Soul The King of Heaven

#263 The Church's One Foundation

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1

"You are young only once, but you can stay immature indefinitely."

This is an appropriate adage to remember and one which summarizes the book of 1 Corinthians which we'll begin to work our way through today. Here at TA& F over the past many months we have been laying several building blocks on the one foundation of Christ. We have laid down the Trinity and the Gospel of John; we have discovered our Contemplative heritage and recaptured our Eschatological heritage; we have laid down the theological key to the entire NT in the Book of Romans and raised the alarm to be Beware of Counterfeits through 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude; we have commenced a study of the future state of Heaven and today we begin to look within the assembly and the hurdles we face presently as seen in the Corinthian letters. Having established our bearings we are now in a place to be able to take an honest look at ourselves in the mirror of God's word and learn from the young, immature and carnal Corinthian church and by God's grace grow into the practical mature sonship that has been given to us by Christ's redeeming, reconciling, propitiating, justifying, sanctifying and glorifying work of grace.

First a bit of background to 1 Corinthians. This letter was written by the apostle Paul around 54 AD from Ephesus partway through his third missionary journey. Paul had originally visited Corinth on his second missionary journey and resided there for one and a half years. During that time he met Priscilla and Aquila and clearly had a fruitful apostolic ministry there resulting in the Church being formed. This young group of believers was living in a completely debased city. Corinth had a reputation for vulgar materialism. It was there that "a magnificent temple was built for the Greek goddess Aphrodite, or Venus as we know it by Roman name. In it were a thousand so-called priestesses who were actually nothing in the world but prostitutes. Sex was their religion...Not only was their religion debased but the Greek philosophy was in its decay also. The city was given over to licentiousness and pleasure. The Isthmian games were conducted there. The people went on in endless discussions...This was a people given over to pleasure, debauchery, and drunkenness. In fact they coined a term in the Roman Empire, which was to "corinthianize"...which meant that you went to the very limit in sin." ¹ Sounds not too dissimilar to many modern day cities including Melbourne.

While we have only two of the letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the Bible, if you read them carefully you will discover that Paul actually wrote four letters to them, two of which are lost, and he made three separate visits. Understanding this will help you sense the flow of thought and correspondence Paul refers to in these letters. Here is a summary of his 4 letters and three visits:

1. Paul first came to Corinth around 52 AD (Acts 18:1-4) as mentioned already, before he went on to Ephesus. (Acts 18:18-19).
2. During Paul's third missionary journey while he was in Ephesus for two and half years, he wrote a letter to the Corinthians which they misunderstood (1 Cor. 5:9-11). This first letter is lost and not part of the Bible.
3. Paul learned of their misunderstanding and of additional problems in the Corinthian church from members of the household of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11). He then received an official delegation in the form of Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17) who brought corroborating news and specific

¹ J. Vernon McGee; *1 Corinthians; Through The Bible Books; Pasadena Cal; 1977; p. 8*

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questions of issues dividing the church.”² Paul then wrote them a second letter to address these issues, which we have and know as 1 Corinthians.

4. However the problems didn't get resolved. Paul then decided to visit Corinth personally for the second time, sailing directly from Ephesus to Corinth. This journey is not recorded by Luke in Acts, possibly because he didn't accompany Paul. This it seems was the “painful visit” referred to in 2 Cor. 2:1 and associated with the man mentioned in 2:5-8.

5. Paul returned to Ephesus where he wrote them a third letter, which is now lost like the first one. This third letter grieved Paul to write because of the stern apostolic authority and disciplinary tone he had to take with them. (2 Cor. 2:3-7; 7:8-9)

6. Paul left Ephesus and travelled to Macedonia and from there he wrote his fourth letter to the Corinthians which we have and know as 2 Corinthians.

7. Paul then made his third and final visit to Corinth around 56-57 AD (Acts 20:2-3)

Seeing this will hopefully help us to not “lose the plot” when we come to the several reference to Paul's correspondence to the Corinthians.

A broad outline of this letter of 1 Corinthians might be as follows:

Part 1: Ch. 1-4 Paul's answer to Chloe's report of divisions.

Part 2: Ch. 5-6 Paul's answer to reports of incest, litigation among believers and warnings against sexual immorality.

Part 3: Ch. 7-16 Paul's answer to the Corinthian delegation's letter of questions regarding marriage, things offered to idols, public worship, and the Resurrection

So let's take a look at the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, understanding this as the second letter they would have received from Paul.

Once there was a news reporter doing a storey on a local mental institution. When he arrived he was astonished to find that there were only three guards watching over more than a hundred dangerous inmates. He asked his guide, “Don't you fear that these people will overpower the guards and escape?” “No”, the guide replied, “we're not worried. You see, lunatics never unite.”

Lunatics never unite and unfortunately the believers at Corinth were acting like lunatics. They were not united, but were babies in the faith who had become splintered into little cliques based on their favourite teachers like people in Melbourne barrack for a local footy club. In this first chapter, Paul addresses these boasting baby believers by highlighting to them their need to remember four very important truths: The Deposition of Gifts, the Divisions of Men, the Divisions of God and the Destination of Believers.

1. The Deposition of Gifts (V. 1-9) *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: 3Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- 6because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the*

² David K. Lowry; 1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.552)

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day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful

Paul begins his letter with four solid affirmations regarding the deposition of Gifts that must be embraced by both the Corinthian believers and ourselves today if they and we are to mature. First, notice that Paul is lit. a “called apostle”, not called to be one as many translation render this verse. In other words, “called” is an adjective describing what kind of apostle Paul is. He is a called one; called by God on the road to Damascus; called into the desert of Arabia where he was taught directly by God. The legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship was being denied by some at Corinth as seen in this letter (chapter 9) and which receives an explicit defence in 2 Corinthians.³ Paul is a God called apostle to the Corinthians and this is actually the first of all their many gifts. The second affirmation is that the Corinthian church belongs to God, not to men. He addresses this letter to the Church of God in Corinth, not the church of the Corinthians in God. Getting and keeping this point clear can solve a lot problems among believers. The Assemblies of believers, the Church, belongs to God not us. To belong to God is a second gift often overlooked. The third affirmation is that the Corinthians themselves, like the apostle Paul were lit. “called saints”, not called to be holy as many translations have it. The believers there had been called by God and as a result were “sanctified in Christ Jesus”. When the Bible speaks of sanctification it uses the word in two different ways. Sometimes it refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying believers, that is, conforming us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ; it is a subsequent work to our justification and involves the actual impartation of Christ’s righteousness to our lives; it is a “practical sanctification”. But the Bible also speaks of a “positional sanctification” in Christ. This is the imputed righteousness of Christ as a gift received by faith whereby God declares us righteous. It is critical for us to understand that “practical sanctification” is something that varies as we shall see in the immature and carnal lives of the Corinthian believers and as you yourself can attest to in your own life. It varies because it depends on your cooperation and participation to grow. “Positional sanctification” however does not vary because it depends on “the work of Christ and is fully entered the moment that Christ is received by faith...the weakest most ignorant and fallible believer has precisely the same (standing and) relationship in grace as the most illustrious saint... (You see) we grow IN grace, not INTO grace.”⁴ You and I and the Corinthians must understand WHO WE ARE before we can LIVE LIKE WE are and before we can enjoy the fellowship with Jesus Christ into which we have been called. The gift of being positionally sanctified was Paul’s the third affirmation to the Corinthians. The fourth affirmation is that the Corinthian believers had been fully endowed with the full deposition of Gifts of the Holy Spirit. They did not lack any spiritual gift, including a clear, expectant eschatological outlook waiting for the revelation of Jesus Christ and their rapture to Him. In their speaking they had received the gift of tongues and in their knowledge they had received the gifts of prophecy. The Corinthian believers were endowed with all these gifts and affirmations, and they even boasted in them all. There was a problem however...they were babies. They were a bunch of boasting baby believers and as result they made a hash a many things. It was this “hash of things” that forced Paul to write to them to correct, rebuke and encourage them to grow up. And the first mess Paul seeks to clean up is the divisions within the baby laden nursery church in Corinth.

2. The Divisions of Men (V. 10-17) *10I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow*

³ *Ibid.* (p. 507)

⁴ *CI Scofield; New Scofield Reference Bible; Oxford University Press; 1967; 1 Corinthians 1:2 note*

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Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas "; still another, "I follow Christ." 13Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 14I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. 16(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

When I was a boy growing up in Texas, me a several neighbourhood boys spent a lot of time together playing football, playing at the creek catching tadpoles, crawdads and horned toads, and playing cowboys and Indians. When there wasn't much to do sometimes things would deteriorate into one-upmanship and it would often start with this line: "My dad could whoop your dad". This was usually followed with "Like to see him try. My dad could whoop your dad with one arm tied behind his back". Back and forth it would go until somebody shoved somebody and then a wrestling match a bunch of yelling and going home.

The Corinthian believers had become just like us bunch of little boys with their immature boasting in the superiority of their perceived "spiritual dads". "I bet Paul could whoop Apollos". "Oh yeah, well Peter could whoop Paul and Apollos with his little pinkie". "Ya'll is dreamin. Christ could whoop 'em all with his eyes closed". It sounds so immature doesn't it? Yet that's what was going on then and unfortunately it still goes on to this day in Christendom and among too many believers. Today it's not Paul, Peter, Apollos or Christ that men are dividing over, but more often it's the styles they represent. Paul was the theologically deep and intellectual type. Peter was the fiery, emotional and unpolished preacher. Apollos was the super eloquent and refined orator. And Christ here represented the "super duper spiritual" style. And notice that these styles are easily identified in denominational expressions. Paul in the bible churches; Peter in the charismatic churches; Apollos in the liturgical high churches and Christ in the exclusive "were the only ones" churches.

The splintering of the Corinthian church into little cliques around certain leaders was the result of boasting baby believers. And unfortunately it didn't stop there, but spread. It spread through Christendom, particularly after the protestant reformation into what could only be described the way Jesus described it; a mustard seed tree. David Barrett the Missionary Statistician has identified 20, 800 Christian denominations worldwide. (<http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2012-01/2012-01-030-johnson.html>) Let that number sink in...do we see 20,800 denominations expressing the unity of the glorified body of Jesus Christ in the Church today? Do we see even 2? I think we can safely say no. This monstrously abnormal and splintered denominational growth is the mustard seed-tree that allows evil to find its home in the visible professing church as Jesus prophesied in Matthew 13. And it is partly the perpetual immaturity of boasting babies that fertilizes the ground around this tree. I don't believe our biblical mandate in this dispensation is to attempt to put all the splinters back together nor is it to become yet one more splinter group in the already shattered mustard-seed tree. Rather, I believe we are called to glorify God as we preach Christ, and Him crucified; as we edify and equip the saints of works of service; as we make disciples and withdraw from known evil.

Then, as today, men were dividing over the wrong things, all the while refusing to divide over the right things. They had completely lost sight of the centrality of Christ crucified. It is Christ Crucified alone that "is the bedrock of Christian unity and it is absurd to contemplate establishing a unity on any other basis."⁵ Apart from the unity produced by the centrality of Christ crucified, assembled

⁵ J. Vernon McGee; *Through The Bible Books*; Pasadena Cal; 1977; p. 25

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believers remain babies and are no more threat to the enemies of Christ than the lunatics who never unite. They can be easily kept in check by just a few guards.

There is a story told of a small English village that had a tiny chapel whose stone walls were covered by traditional ivy. Over an arch was originally inscribed the words: WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED. But times changed. The ivy grew and soon covered the last word. The inscription now read: WE PREACH CHRIST. Other men came and they did preach Christ: Christ the example, Christ the humanitarian, Christ the ideal teacher. As the years passed, the ivy continued to grow until finally the inscription read: WE PREACH. The generation that came along then did just that: they preached economics, social gospel, book reviews, just about anything. Let us beware of the encroaching ivy and keep things cut back so that it can be said of us, like Paul, WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED.

Notice here too, that it is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, not water baptism, which placed the Corinthians and us into the Body of Christ as a result of Christ Crucified. The Corinthians were not baptised into the body of Paul, but into the Body of Christ. This is Paul's point as he is attempting to direct their thinking away from men and back to Christ and in doing so bring an end to this baby game of "my dad can whoop your dad".

While the divisions of men based on men is wrong, there is a dividing that is right, that is the divisiveness of God caused by the preaching of the Cross.

3. The Divisions of God (V. 18-25) *18For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*

Notice here there are three things that bring about a right dividing:

First, is the **Message of Cross**. The message of the cross divides. We must understand that, expect that and appreciate that. For some the message of Christ Crucified as the only means of salvation is utter foolishness to them. For the "wise" and "intelligent" by the worlds standard; for the scholars and philosophers of this age, the message of the cross is foolish and a divinely ordained and frustrating message. But for others, for those who listen and learn from God and believe the message of the cross, it is the power of God unto salvation.

Second, is the **Method of Preaching**. God has ordained that the Message of the Cross be delivered by a specific method, namely through the divine vehicle of preaching, lit. κήρυγμα meaning "that which is promulgated by a herald or public crier, a proclamation by herald."⁶ While there is something valuable to be understood from the statement attributed to St. Francis of Assisi where he said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and if, necessary use words", but it is the use of words that makes preaching, preaching. And notice the definition in Thayer's Greek Lexicon. It is a **public proclamation with the use of words**. It is what Paul exhorted Timothy to in 1 Tim. 4:13 "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching." For some,

⁶ THAYER'S GREEK LEXICON, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2002

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this method “just don’t float their boat”. But it is this foolish, lit. μωρία- from which we get the English moronic, message and method that pleased God. And note that God was pleased to save those who believed the message and the method. Those who don’t will perish.

Third, is the **Foolishness and Weakness of God.** God’s apparent foolishness and weakness divides mankind into two great ethnic groups the Jews and the Greeks (meaning Gentiles). The Jews represented religion. They had the God given truth in the Law, but their relationship to it had deteriorated into nothing but ritualism. The power was gone, The Love was gone; the faith was gone. “They would have accepted a deliverer on a white charger who was putting down the power of Rome. But a crucified Christ was an insult to them.”⁷ Christ crucified was not the sign they wanted and so He became a stumbling block to them and a rock of offense.

The Greeks represented philosophy. They were always looking for the truth philosophically. But philosophical looking for the truth is like “a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn’t there.”⁸ The Jews had ritualism without relationship and the Greeks had rationalism without reality. They considered the message of the cross utterly ridiculous and irrational to any worldly system.

Folks “The cross divides men. The cross divides the saved from the unsaved, but it doesn’t divide the saved people. It should unite them...The Lord Jesus called Himself a divider of men, and the dividing line is His cross. The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto the saved person it is the power of God.”⁹ It was this message and method that Paul employed to bring the boasting baby believers at Corinth to maturity.

4. The Destination of Believers (V. 26-31) *26Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, 29so that no one may boast before him. 30It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*

Having affirmed the Deposition of Gifts, appealed to them to stop their Divisions of Men and accept the Divisions of God, Paul now reminds the Corinthians of where true boasting should lay, namely in their calling and destination as believers. Let him who boasts, stop boasting in men and start boasting in a God who has turned things upside down as far as this world is concerned and that is good news. For if the Corinthians and we ourselves are honest and take a proper assessment of ourselves, we will find that we are nothing to boast about and that God should be so kind as to find us and bring US home, is pure grace and mercy. Look at v. 26 again...“Brothers think of what you were when you were called.” What were you like when **YOU** were called? Do you remember? I do, it’s been written in the margin of my bible next to this verse for over 30 years...these are the words written there when I was called: rebel, drinking, drugs, immorality, a liar, violent, selfish, uncaring, undisciplined, stupid, ignorant even by the world’s standard and broke. Oh thank God for the foolishness of God in the foolishness of what was preached to save and grow foolish people like me, like you and like the Corinthians. It is all of Him. He did this. It’s grace.

⁷ J. Vernon McGee; *1 Corinthians; Through The Bible Books; Pasadena Cal; 1977; p. 29*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *Ibid. p.27*

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And notice the destination of those foolish ones who dare to believe this foolish message of the cross, it is to be IN CHRIST JESUS who has become for us our righteousness, holiness and redemption. In Christ means in our Vicarious Man who is Himself the sphere of all three phases of our salvation. He is our righteousness; that is our justification; the imputed righteousness of Christ to our accounts and the forgiveness of all our sin past, present and future. He is our sanctification positionally and practically through the indwelling Holy Spirit. And He is our redemption; that is the guarantee of our future glorification when our physical bodies are redeemed in resurrection to enjoy Him in the future eternal state. He is everything you and I can possibly need or desire and it is because of God that we are IN him. You did not place yourself in Him, you did not earn him or so wisely seek Him out and somehow manage to get yourself IN Christ. It is because of Him that you are IN Christ. It is because of the sovereign grace of God who knew you before you were born, who knit you together in your mother's womb, who ordained all your days before one of them came to pass; it is because of Him who came and accomplished all for you as pure gift and then pursued you your whole life; it is because of Him who has borne patiently with your wilful disobedience and your ignorant sheeplike straying and has chosen to bear the consequences of your sin for you and no longer count your sins against you; if you are in Christ it is all because of Him. Since that is the biblical truth about you, is there any room for you to boast? Moreover, is there any room for you to boast in mere men? Even gifted men or apostolic men? Even the great apostle Paul said of himself and Apollos "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe--as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." (1 Cor. 3:5-7)

So how can we take all this in and apply it to our lives? I think there are three clear reaffirmations we can make.

First, let us reaffirm and give thanks to God for the gifts he has given us. For the apostolic gift still speaking to us in the Bible; for belonging to Him corporately; for the positional sanctification that we stand in this very moment; and for the Holy Spirit's many gifts in and amongst the Body of Christ.

Second, let us reaffirm our commitment to not divide and splinter the Body of Christ further, while accepting and embracing the reality that the presentation of Jesus Christ and Him Crucified is divinely ordained divider of men.

Third, let us reaffirm our gratitude to God for His amazing, condescending grace to have placed us In Christ. That which is humanly impossible for us to do, God has done for us, so let us boast in Him before men.

Let's pray... Father, as we come to your Table now, we ask that, just as this sacrament of bread and wine are visible and tangible to us and will be received inwardly and assimilated into our physical bodies, may the ministry of your word this morning be visible, tangible and inwardly received and assimilated into our lives and faith. To your praise and glory we pray and give thanks to you in Jesus Name. Amen.