THE CHURCH OF GOD

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Big Idea: *The church belongs to God, exists by the grace of God, and is sustained by the faithfulness of God.*

I. THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH — 1 Corinthians 1:1–3

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–3.

Before Paul addresses everything that is wrong with Corinth, notice what he calls them:

- **"the church of God"**
- **"sanctified in Christ Jesus"**
- **"called as saints"**

That becomes remarkable when we remember what kind of church Corinth was. They were divided, prideful, morally compromised, suing one another, abusing spiritual gifts, and tolerating behavior that even the surrounding culture found scandalous.

And yet Paul begins with their **identity before their problems.**

Discussion: Why do you think Paul does that? What difference is there between saying, *"You need to become saints,"* and saying, *"You are saints; therefore, live like saints"*?

This gives us an important biblical principle:

God does not lower His standard because of our failures, but neither does He define His people by their failures.

They weren't **behaving** like the church, but God still called them the church. They weren't **acting** sanctified, but God called them sanctified in Christ.

Cross references: Philippians 1:6; 2 Timothy 2:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11.

Application question: Is there a difference between conviction that says, *"This behavior is inconsistent with who you are in Christ,"* and condemnation that says, *"Your failure is who you are"*?

That also changes how we think about the church itself. We sometimes speak about "the church" as though we were standing outside of it:

"The church hurt me."
"The church has problems."
"What is the church doing?"

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

If you belong to Christ, **you are part of the church you're talking about.** That does not excuse genuine church hurt, abusive leadership, false teaching, or other serious problems. But it does challenge the idea that Christians can simply detach themselves from Christ's body.

Discussion: What is the difference between having a legitimate reason to leave a particular congregation and giving up on the church altogether?

II. CALLED TO A CHURCH — 1 Corinthians 1:2

Look carefully at Paul's language:

"To the church of God which is at Corinth…"

The church is God's church, but this particular expression of God's church existed **at Corinth**.

Christianity has both a **universal** and a **local** dimension. God expects us to belong to a local church.

That raises the sermon's question:

Do I merely come to church, or have I been called to serve in a church?

The outline uses Ruth as an illustration. Ruth "happened" into Boaz's field, but once there, the kinsman-redeemer told her, **"Do not go to glean in another field…stay here."** In that field she found opportunity to work, fellowship, protection, provision, water, harvest, and favor.

Read Ruth 2:8–12.

Notice something: **Ruth worked the field.**

She didn't sit in Boaz's field complaining that nobody had brought her any grain. She gleaned.

That raises a very contemporary question:

Have we developed a consumer understanding of church?

"I didn't get anything out of worship."

"They're not feeding me."

"I like that preacher better."

"I can watch church online."

There is a difference between a **viewing mentality** and a **vested mentality**. Some people continually change churches because they *come* to church without understanding they are *called* to serve.

Discussion questions: What should a Christian reasonably expect to receive from a local church? What should the local church reasonably expect from the Christian? How has livestreaming and "channel-surfing church" changed our understanding of belonging?

Cross references: Hebrews 10:24–25; Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Peter 4:10; Acts 2:42–47.

III. GOD'S CHURCH IS BIGGER THAN YOUR CHURCH — 1 Corinthians 1:2

"...together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours."

Corinth was important.

But Corinth wasn't **the Church**.

Paul immediately connects this congregation with believers **"in every place."**

That confronts **"ecclesial exceptionalism"**—the attitude that a particular congregation is the place where God is *really* working.

We hear it:

"Other churches aren't teaching this."

"Nobody else is preaching this."

"You won't get this anywhere else."

There may occasionally be truth in such statements but repeated often enough they can produce spiritual arrogance.

Discussion: How can a church have strong convictions about what it believes without beginning to think it has a monopoly on God's work?

Paul's language allows us to say both:

"We believe God has called us here."

and

"God is doing something beyond here."

Cross references: Mark 9:38–40; Revelation 7:9–10; Ephesians 4:4–6.

A healthy church ought to be able to thank God when another Bible-believing church grows.

A healthy pastor ought to be able to thank God when another pastor is used by God.

IV. THE CHURCH EXISTS BY GRACE — 1 Corinthians 1:4–7

Read verses 4–7.

"I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus."

Paul knows their problems.

Paul knows some of these people have opposed him.

Yet Paul thanks God for the **grace God has given them.**

Can I thank God for the grace He has given someone who is presently making my life difficult?

Not thank God *for their wrongdoing*.

Thank God that His grace is still operating in their life.

Discussion: Why is it sometimes easier to see someone's faults than God's grace working in that person?

And notice where the grace comes from:

"given you in Christ Jesus."

Christ dominates verses 4–9. Paul's attention keeps returning to Jesus.

There is a practical lesson here:

When we realize God's grace toward us, we can thank God for His grace toward others.

Discussion: Do we often believe that we need God's grace less than others?

V. A GIFTED CHURCH CAN STILL BE AN IMMATURE CHURCH — 1 Corinthians 1:5–7

"you were enriched in him in every way, in all speech and all knowledge…so that you do not lack any spiritual gift."

However, Corinth was still immature.

That's important because we sometimes confuse **giftedness with godliness.**

Someone can preach and still need to mature.

Someone can sing and still need to mature.

Someone can teach Scripture and still need to mature.

Someone can possess extraordinary gifts and still lack love—which is exactly why Paul eventually gives them **1 Corinthians 13.**

Discussion: Why are we tempted to assume that someone who is highly gifted must also be spiritually mature?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

"Am I becoming mature enough for God to trust me with the gift He gave me?"

If God has given the church the gifts it needs, what happens when the church appears to be lacking something?

VI. THE CHURCH IS SUSTAINED BY GOD'S FAITHFULNESS — 1 Corinthians 1:7–9

"He will also strengthen you to the end…"

And then Paul gives the foundation:

“God is faithful.”

This is the most important statement in the passage.

Why will the church make it?

Not because we're always faithful.

Not because we're sufficiently gifted.

Not because we have great preaching.

Not because we have enough money.

Not because our leadership never makes mistakes.

Because God is faithful.

“Our perseverance does not depend on our speech, our knowledge, our giftedness, nor our strength; it depends on the faithfulness of God.”

Cross references: Philippians 1:6; Jude 24–25; 2 Timothy 2:13; John 10:27–29.

“You were called by Him into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

We started with a **calling to be saints**.

We finish with a **calling into fellowship with Christ**.

The Christian life is ultimately not merely about belonging to an institution, attending worship, exercising gifts, or even serving.

It is about **fellowship with Jesus Christ.**

And our fellowship with Christ necessarily brings us into fellowship with **His body.**

Closing Discussion

1. **Am I treating the church primarily as something I attend, or as a body to which I belong?**
2. **Am I serving in the field where God has placed me, or primarily asking what the field can give me?**
3. **Can I recognize God's grace in Christians and churches that don't look, worship, preach, or operate exactly like mine?**
4. **What gift, ability, experience, or opportunity has God given me that His church presently needs me to use?**

The church belongs to God. The church exists by the grace of God. The church is gifted by God. And the church will ultimately endure because God is faithful.