

The Imperfect Church – 1
The Perfect Church
1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Introduction

In July of 1961, the 38 members of the Green Bay Packers football team were gathered together for the first day of training camp. The previous season had ended with a heartbreaking defeat when the Packers squandered a lead late in the 4th quarter and lost the NFL Championship to the Philadelphia Eagles. The Packers had been thinking about this brutal loss for the entire off-season and now, finally, training camp had arrived and it was time to get to work. The players were eager to advance their game to the next level and start working on the details that would help them win a championship. Their coach, Vince Lombardi, had a different idea.

In his best-selling book, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life Of Vince Lombardi*, author David Maraniss explains what happened when Lombardi walked into training camp in the summer of 1961:

“He took nothing for granted. He began a tradition of starting from scratch, assuming that the players were blank slates who carried over no knowledge from the year before... He began with the most elemental statement of all. “Gentlemen,” he said, holding a pigskin in his right hand, ‘this is a football.’”

Six months later, the Green Bay Packers beat the New York Giants 37-0 to win the NFL Championship [pic of Lombardi]. That 1961 season was the beginning of Vince Lombardi’s reign as one of the greatest football coaches of all-time. He would never lose in the playoffs again. He won five NFL Championships in a span of seven years, three of them in a row. He never coached a team with a losing record. That’s what happens when you focus on the fundamentals.

For the next number of months, we are going to focus on the fundamentals. As we journey together through 1 Corinthians, we are going to let God’s Word lead us. We will hear time and again God declare to us, “This is the Church.” As we rediscover the nature and purpose of the church, we will be given the foundations, the fundamentals of the church. What we will see may surprise us because the Church in Corinth is not given as an example to follow. It is not a perfect church by anyone’s standards. We will see it as it is...deeply flawed, selfish, mistake-ridden, sinners...just like all churches. While it is not an exemplary church, it is a normative one. Imperfect, filled with imperfect people, led by imperfect leaders, with imperfect doctrine, living imperfect lives...yet loved by, saved by, and following a perfect Savior.

As a means of setting context, let's look at some of the background information about this letter and about the city of Corinth itself. This letter is written by the Apostle Paul. We are introduced to Paul in Acts 8 as a chief persecutor of the church. He was a Jewish religious leader who wanted to eradicate this fledgling religion called Christianity. But in Acts 9 he encounters a vision of the resurrected Jesus and he is commissioned to become the most prolific missionary in history. He travels around the known world to preach the Gospel, plant churches, and writes letters to the churches he has planted.

The back half of the book of Acts chronicles his three missionary journeys. During his second one, beginning in Acts 16, he meets Timothy and they travel around to primarily Jewish cities and lead people to Christ. One night Paul has a dream of the Man from Macedonia (Greece) pleading with him to come help them there. He immediately gets on a boat and crosses into Greece, plants the church in Philippi, then goes on to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, then to Corinth. With the exception of Ephesus, he stays in Corinth the longest, 18 months.

Corinth [[pic – map of Corinth](#)] was the capital of Achaëa, the largest region of Greece. Only 45 miles west of Athens, it served as the gateway to the Peloponnesus (large southern region of Greece). You may know of that area because of the Peloponnesian War. Connecting that southern region and the rest of Greece is a small isthmus of only 4 miles wide [[pic – Corinth aerial](#)]. At the center of that isthmus, on top of a high plateau, sat the city of Corinth. All North/South traffic in all of Greece had to pass through it. As did all East/West traffic. Instead of sailing the 250 miles around the Peloponnesus, ship captains would either transfer their cargo, or move their boat on skids over the four miles. As you can see from the picture, now they have cut a canal to cross it. So to get anywhere in Greece and around the Mediterranean world required you to go through Corinth. For obvious reasons it became a cultural hub and center of commerce and trade. Due to its high population and central location, it hosted the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics in the ancient world.

Though Corinth was a world-leading, world-class city, Paul offers not a single commendation for the city in this letter. Primarily because behind all those positive attributes of the city was its dark underbelly. Corinth was known as one of the most immoral cities in history. If Las Vegas, Amsterdam, Ibiza, and Dubai had a love child, it would be called Corinth. Above the city on its highest hill was the Acropolis [[pic – Acropolis](#)] with its temples to the false, pagan Greek gods. Headlining them was the Temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of

love. Over 1,000 temple prostitutes occupied the temple and would descend upon the city each evening for “worship.”

So well-known was Corinth’s immorality that the Greeks invented a word to describe it...*Korinthiazesthai*. Literally translated as ‘to live like a Corinthian.’ So all around the Greek empire, instead of calling people addicts, drunks, or whores, they called them Corinthians. This is context of this great letter. This setting is where the Gospel of Jesus Christ did incredible work. It is here in this pagan setting, with a government that disregards the faith, a culture that dismisses the faith, that we will learn what it means to be the Church.

As we will see as we walk through this letter, the Corinthian church was imperfect. Specifically, the church struggled with three primary sins that Paul will address at length. This church struggled with Pride. Time and again Paul will speak to their blind confidence in themselves and their own abilities. They are overly-concerned with status and recognition. Secondly, they struggled with immorality. Though these people have placed their trust in Jesus, they could not seem to free themselves from the grip of their culture. There doesn’t seem to be much difference between their Christian lives and the pagans around them. Their final primary area of struggle is disunity. This is a group that is divided. They are in factions, uniting behind different leaders, treating one another in terrible, ungodly ways. They are, in a word, a church.

David Prior – “The one fact most people have at their fingertips concerning the Corinthian church is that it was a mess—full of problems, sins, division, heresy. It was, in this sense, no different from any modern church. The church is a fellowship of sinners before it is a fellowship of saints. Even those churches which have glowing reputations are known all too well by their members and pastors to be full of weaknesses and sins. The sad thing is that dissatisfied church members will often naively think that another church in the area will somehow be better than the one they now attend. From this restlessness comes the common habit of church-swapping. Perhaps one of the best antidotes for this kind of malaise is to look again at what Paul says...about the notoriously messy church at Corinth.”¹

TS – here in these first nine verses, Paul will overtly hint at where he is going, speak to these three sins of Pride, Immorality, and Disunity, and offer truths about the Church that fight against these very sins.

¹ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 23.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 - This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Sosthenes.

² I am writing to God's church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

³ May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

⁴ I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. ⁵ Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. ⁶ This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. ⁷ Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. ⁹ God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

--Three Truths about the Church that Fight Three Primary Sins:

1. GOD IS THE CENTER OF THE CHURCH (FIGHTS AGAINST PRIDE)

Again, this is a church that is full of themselves. They are right, others are wrong. They are never to blame. They have amazing spiritual gifts; God is at work in their lives. They are awesome. We will see this all throughout the letter. That attitude leads people to view themselves as the centerpiece of a church. Ministry becomes all about my preferences, my opinions, my power, my needs getting met. Friends, pride is never a sign of spiritual maturity. Being full of yourself never coincides with being filled by Christ. Taking steps toward Christlikeness always, always, always leads to humility. So Paul not so subtly reminds who is really at the center, who the church is really about.

Notice the repetition:

- v. 2 – “I am writing to **God's church** in Corinth...”
- v. 2 – “**He** made you holy by means of Christ Jesus...”
- v. 4 - ...” for the gracious gifts **he has given you**...”
- v. 5 – “**God has** enriched your church in every way.”
- v. 8 – “**He** will keep you strong...”
- v. 9 – “**God** will do this...”
- v. 9 – “**He is faithful** to do what he says...”
- v. 9 – “**He has invited** you into partnership with his Son...”

Do you see the theme? Whose church is this? God's church. Who is responsible for making people holy? God is. Who has enriched their church? God has. Who will keep you strong? God will. Who is faithful? God is. Who invited you to Jesus? God invited you, not the other way around.

The message is clear...if you want to be part of the Church, you can never make it about you. Here is the reason why...the only way we got into the church in the first place was by the saving work God initiated for us. We did not get into the church on our own, and we therefore will never be its centerpiece.

Titus 3:3-7 - ³ Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other. ⁴ But—When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, ⁵ he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. ⁶ He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. ⁷ Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - ⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

2. JESUS IS THE LORD OF THE CHURCH (FIGHTS AGAINST IMMORALITY)

This church lives in a pagan city, constantly fighting against the idolatry and immorality of the culture around them. The challenge for Christians as they are "called out" of that world to be the Church is that we still have to live in that world. Until we die or until Jesus returns, we are constantly warring against the temptations offered by the world around us. For this church in Corinth, it didn't seem like they were fighting too hard.

From one end of this letter to the other, Paul confronts their sin. They were fighting non-stop, trusting in the wisdom of the Greek philosophers over Scripture, speaking ill of Paul, committing gross sexual sin that even pagans frowned upon, tolerating sin, suing each other in court, living in dysfunctional marriages, insisting on their way, worshiping idols, making a mockery of communion, selfishly misusing spiritual gifts, unloving, and denying the hope of the resurrection. And what are Paul's instructions to them? He reminds them that the Church belongs to Jesus. He literally owns it.

v. 2 – I am writing to God's church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God **to be his own** holy people.

v. 4 – I always thank my god for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, **now that you belong to Christ Jesus.**

Christians do not get to live however they want to live. The hallmark characteristic of a Christ-follower is that they follow Christ. They submit to him and his will. We have been (v. 2) “called by God to be his own holy people.”

Anthony Thiselton – “Here the emphasis of the word *holy* lies primarily in the notion of *belonging to God* as his own special, distinctive people...Practical holiness entails being transformed in Christ-likeness and goodness day by day. This is living out in practice what *belonging to God* means.”²

Paul will deal with this issue at length in chapter 6. In the specific context of sexual sin, he ties personal holiness to this issue of ownership:

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 - ¹⁸ Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. ¹⁹ Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, ²⁰ for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

If you are a believer in Christ, you are owned. He has purchased you at the cost of his very life. He's the boss. He is Lord. I said earlier that we are going to work our way through this letter so we can let God's Word lead us...we do that because what he says goes. His Word has all authority. So, as the Church and in the Church, we don't do whatever we please. We do whatever pleases him.

3. WE ARE PARTNERS IN THE CHURCH (FIGHTS AGAINST DISUNITY)

1 Corinthians 1:7-9 – ⁷ Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. ⁹ God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

“He has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” What a great statement! This idea of “invitation” is more than God sending an invite and hoping we RSVP. The implication is that the invitation is offered and you have responded. Paul uses the same word 9x in chapter 7 to refer to a person's specific point of conversion. And it's a great word he chooses to use. We mentioned last week that the word the New Testament

² Anthony C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 31.

uses for Church is *ekklesia* (the called-out ones). That is the word he uses here for invite. "He has CHURCHED you into partnership with Jesus." You have been called out of this world by God into partnership with Jesus. That is what it means to be the Church. That is a Christian.

And if you have been called into this partnership with Jesus, locked arms with him, guess who is also there? All the other Christians! They are in partnership with him too. Partnership with Jesus equals automatic partnership with other Christians. We are called out of this world TOGETHER as one to be the Church. Paul ties these together in another of his letters:

Philippians 2:1-4 – *Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate?* ² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. ³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

Back to 1 Corinthians 1...you heard twice in those verses, once in v. 7 and once in v. 8, of the return of Jesus. Remember, Hope is the engine of our faith. It fuels our faith in Christ and our love for people, according to Colossians 1. This is Paul showing us that Hope defines the Church. Hope drives the Church. Look at the people around you...these are not just the people you will spend eternity with, they are the people you are getting ready for eternity with. He has called us out of the world together, to be his own people together, who are moving towards Heaven together, where we will be with him forever, together.

Scott Sauls – "Membership in a local church means joining your imperfect self to many other imperfect selves to form an imperfect community that, through Jesus, embarks on a journey toward a better future . . . together."

This...this is the Church. God is at our center. Jesus is our Lord. We are partners together. This is the Church. May we become experts in the fundamentals.

PRAYER
COMMUNION