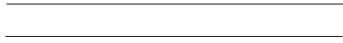


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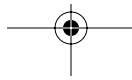
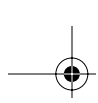


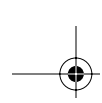
The Ambiguity of the Church



1 Corinthians 1:1-17







1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-17

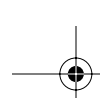
*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and our brother Sosthenes,*

*To 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:*

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord
Jesus Christ.*

*I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in
Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every
way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—
because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.
Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait
for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you
strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of
our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship
with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*

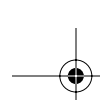




I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For 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.





The Ambiguity of the Church

The image of the church presented in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians is extremely ambiguous. For there is a paradox at the heart of the church. It is the painful tension between what the church *claims* to be and what it *seems* to be; between the divine ideal and the human reality; between romantic talk about “the bride of Christ” and the very unromantic, ugly, unholy and quarrelsome Christian community we know ourselves to be. It is the tension between our final, glorious destiny in heaven and our present, very inglorious performance on earth. This is the ambiguity of the church.

Consider the first two verses of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul describes both himself as the author of the letter and the Corinthian church as its recipient:

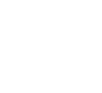
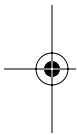
Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

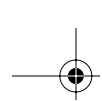
To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.

As for himself, Paul is *called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. As for the Corinthian church, it is *the church of God in Corinth*. Thus an apostle of Christ is writing to a church of God. Both are privileged and exalted titles.

I. PAUL'S SELF-DESCRIPTION

In nine of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament he identifies himself as Christ's apostle by the will or





command of God. How then are we to understand this word *apostle*? It is used in the New Testament in three distinct senses.

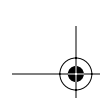
Only once is *apostle* used of all the disciples of Jesus indiscriminately, namely in John 13:16, where Jesus says after washing the feet of the Twelve. “I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger (*apostolos*) greater than the one who sent him.” In this general sense we are all apostles, because we are all messengers or ambassadors of Christ sent out into the world with the message of the gospel, sharing together in the apostolic mission of the church (cf. Jn 17:18; 20:21).

Three or four times we read in the New Testament of “apostles of the churches.” These were messengers sent out by a particular church on a particular mission, as Epaphroditus was the Philippians’ “apostle” (“messenger”; Phil 2:25), and as certain brothers were “representatives (*apostoloi*) of the churches” (2 Cor 8:23). We would probably call them “missionaries” or “mission partners.”

The overwhelming use of *apostle* in the New Testament, however, is in relation to the Twelve, whom Jesus himself named apostles (Lk 6:13), and to whom certainly Paul and probably James were later added. They were not “apostles of the churches” but “apostles of Christ.” They were a unique group with the following three characteristics.

- They had been personally chosen, called and appointed directly by Jesus Christ, not by any human being or institution.
- They were eyewitnesses of the historical Jesus—either of his public ministry for three years (e.g., Mk 3:14; Jn 15:27) or at least witnesses to his resurrection (e.g., Acts 1:21-22). “Am I not an apostle?” writes Paul later in 1 Corinthians (9:1), and adds immediately the supplementary





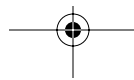
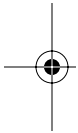
question, “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” And in the list of resurrection appearances that Paul gives in chapter 15 he writes: “Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles” (15:8-9).

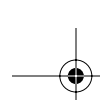
- They were promised a special inspiration of the Spirit of truth, who would both remind them of what Jesus had taught them (Jn 14:25-26) and supplement it as he would lead them “into all truth” (16:12-15). These great promises were fulfilled in the writing of the New Testament.

It is extremely important to maintain these three apostolic characteristics that gave the apostles their unique authority and qualified them for their unique ministry as scribes of the New Testament. Theological liberals are brash enough to say, “That was Paul’s opinion; this is mine.” Or, “He was a first-century witness to Christ; I am a twenty-first-century witness to Christ.” Or, “We wrote the Bible, so we can rewrite it.”

But no! We did not write the Bible. The biblical authors did not write in the name of the church or in their own name. On the contrary, they wrote *to* the church in the name of God (the Old Testament prophets) and in the name of Christ (the New Testament apostles). This is why we receive the teaching of the biblical authors “not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

So then, as we study these early chapters of 1 Corinthians, we shall not wander through the text like a gardener through a herbaceous border, picking the flowers we like and discarding those we do not like. We shall not behave as if we thought the New Testament were a collection of the fallible opinions of fallible human beings. We shall rather put ourselves humbly un-





der its authority, and listen attentively to what God has to say to us through his Word.

So much for Paul's self-description. He had been called to be an apostle of Christ. True, he adds a mention of Sosthenes, perhaps the former ruler of the synagogue in Corinth whom Luke mentions (Acts 18:17). And Paul refers to him by name perhaps because he was Paul's scribe, to whom he was dictating this letter, and because Paul was appointing him to carry the letter to Corinth and to read it aloud in the public assembly. Yet Paul designates him only "our brother," not an apostle.

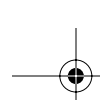
Indeed, we need to have the courage to insist that there are no "apostles of Christ" in the church today. Perhaps some leaders could be described as having apostolic ministries (e.g., bishops, superintendents, pioneer missionaries and church planters). But there is nobody with the authority of the apostles Paul, John, Peter and the others. If there were, we would have to add their teaching to the New Testament.

2. PAUL'S DESCRIPTION OF THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Paul says he is writing *to the church of God in Corinth*. The words sound innocent enough at first hearing. But it is extraordinary that such a community should exist in such a city.

What do we know about Corinth? Owing to its political opposition to Rome, Corinth had been destroyed in 146 B.C. But it was rebuilt and refounded as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar about a hundred years later. It owed its distinction mainly to its strategic location on the narrow Corinthian isthmus. Here it commanded the trade routes both north-south by land and east-west by sea. It was therefore both a manufacturing and a





trading center. It also played host to the world-famous Isthmian Games, which were held in its huge stadium every two years.

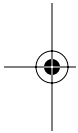
Corinth was also a religious city, honoring “many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords,’” as Paul was to write later (1 Cor 8:5). Among its idolatrous buildings the temple of Aphrodite dominated the Acrocorinth, which rose nearly two thousand feet behind the city, and the temple of Apollo in the town center. At the same time Corinth was an immoral city, so that Aristophanes coined the verb “to corinthianize,” meaning “to live a licentious life.”

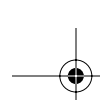
Corinth also had political importance as the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia (southern Greece). Thus Corinth was a busy, thriving, affluent, proud and permissive city. Merchants and sailors, pilgrims and athletes, tourists and prostitutes jostled one another in its narrow streets.

Yet in this heathen city there lived a small group of people whom Paul called *the church of God in Corinth*, the divine community in the human community. It was like a fragrant flower growing in and out of the smelly mud.

Already therefore in verse 2 the ambiguity of the church is indicated—its two habitats (earthly and heavenly, in Corinth and in Christ) and its two sanctities (actual and potential, “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy”). It also had two callings, for God calls us to be holy, and we call on God to make us holy. Again, God calls us to be the holy people we are, and we call on God to be the unique person he is, according to his name or nature. Indeed, this is the essence of prayer. It is only by calling on God to be himself that we have any hope of becoming more truly ourselves, the holy people of God.

Fundamental to New Testament Christianity is this ambiguity of the church. We are living between times, between the first





and second comings of Christ, between what he did when he came and what he will do when he comes again, between kingdom come and kingdom coming, between the “now already” of kingdom inaugurated and the “not yet” of kingdom consummated. It is the key to our understanding of 1 Corinthians and of the Christian life. John Newton expressed it well:

I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world. But still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.¹

Now, having considered the apostle Paul and the Corinthian church separately, it is time to consider them together.

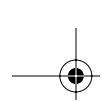
3. PAUL AND CORINTH

Paul had a close, longstanding, personal and pastoral relationship with the Corinthian church. It began in A.D. 50, during his second missionary journey, when he first visited the city and founded its church (2 Cor 10:14). Using the three metaphors that he himself develops in these chapters, we may say that he planted the church, while Apollos and others did the watering (1 Cor 3:6); he laid the foundation, while others erected the superstructure (3:10); he fathered the church, while others were its guardians and tutors (4:14-15). Over the years Paul visited Corinth at least three times and wrote to its church at least four times, although only two of his letters have survived.

Having looked at Paul and Corinth both separately and together, we are now able to return to his letter and to consider what Paul wrote in its first seventeen verses.

- First, Paul greets the church (vv. 1-3).





- Second, Paul gives thanks for the church (vv. 4-9).
- Third, Paul appeals to the church (vv. 10-17).

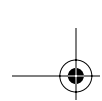
And in each of these three sections (the greeting, the thanksgiving and the appeal) the apostle singles out one essential characteristic of the church. Each of these characteristics illustrates the church's ambiguity in relation to its holiness (vv. 1-3), its giftedness (vv. 4-9) and its unity (vv. 10-17).

a. Paul greets the church (1:1-3), and in his greeting he emphasizes its holiness. What Paul has called *the church of God in Corinth* he now also identifies as *those sanctified in Christ Jesus* and *those called to be holy*.

The ambiguity is obvious. The church is both already holy and not yet holy. It has been sanctified, and it is called to sanctify. Moreover, this is so of *all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours*. The addition of these words, writes Anthony Thiselton, “reinforces the thought that the church in Corinth is *not a self-contained autonomous entity: they are not a self-sufficient community; they are not the only pebble on the beach.*”² On the contrary, they are part of God's worldwide community.

On the one hand, the Corinthian community is “the church of God.” Like Israel before it, it is God's holy people. Its members have been set apart to belong to God. On the other hand, as the coming chapters will make clear, much unholiness remains in the holy people: quarrelling, pride, complacency, immorality, taking one another to court, disorders in public worship and boastfulness in relation to their spiritual gifts. For this mixed-up community Paul wishes and prays *Grace and peace . . . from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (v. 3).



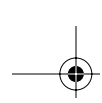


b. Paul gives thanks for the church (1:4-9), and in his thanksgiving he emphasizes its giftedness. In spite of the Corinthian church's many failures, Paul begins with a positive evaluation: *I always thank God for you*. For what does he give thanks? First *because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus* (v. 4), which is surely a reference to their salvation by God's sheer grace. But he also thanks God that in Christ *you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge* (v. 5; that is, their understanding and ability to communicate it). Next Paul reminds them that his apostolic *testimony about Christ* had been *confirmed* in them (v. 6), since what he had taught about Christ had proved to be true. And in consequence, *they do not lack any spiritual gift* (v. 7).

It is a remarkable expression of thanksgiving to God that the Corinthians had received his saving grace in Christ, that they had been enriched in every way and that they therefore lacked no spiritual gift. It sounds as if the Corinthian church is perfect—in every way enriched, in no way deficient. It appears to be complete. (Not of course that each individual Christian has all spiritual gifts—1 Corinthians 12 will make that plain—but each local church, as the body of Christ, may expect to be given collectively all the gifts it needs.)

And yet this is not the end of the story. Even though the Corinthian church has been wonderfully graced and enriched in every way in Christ so that it lacks nothing, it is still not blameless. That is why they still *eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed* (v. 7). Not only will he keep them *strong to the end*, but in consequence they *will be blameless* on that day (v. 8). Enriched now, we shall be blameless then. We know this not because of our faith but because of God's faithfulness. *God, who*





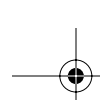
has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful (v. 9). It is a pity that in this rendering the adjective *faithful* comes last in the sentence, since in the Greek it comes first: “Faithful is God who . . .” Having called us into fellowship with Christ, into our common participation in Christ, he will one day perfect our participation in him. “God called us” is a past reality. “Fellowship with Christ” is the present experience. “God is faithful” is the ground of our confidence for the future.

c. Paul appeals to the church (1:10-17), and in his appeal he emphasizes its unity. Before we are ready to consider the divisions in the Corinthian church, we need to glance back to the beginning of verse 2, where Paul addresses *the church of God*. Doubtless God says to himself, *I have only one church*. As Paul later teaches in his letter to the Ephesians, there is only one family because there is only one Father; there is only one body because there is only one Spirit who indwells it; and there is only one faith, hope and baptism because there is only one Lord who is the object of them all (Eph 4:4-6). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians Paul will later write, “you are God’s field” (3:9), “God’s temple” (3:16), “the body of Christ” (12:27). These are collective nouns that all declare the unity of the church. There may have been several house churches in Corinth, but if so, Paul still thinks of them as “the church of God,” one and undivided.

Yet the Corinthians had succeeded in dividing the indivisible! They were tearing the church apart by their factions. Paul has given thanks for them; now he appeals to them. He has been affirming them; now he reproves them. He turns from their enrichment in Christ to their fragmentation from one another.

What can we learn from the apostle’s appeal? First, we notice



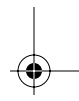
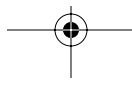


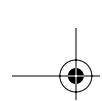
that twice he addresses them as *brothers* (vv. 10, 11). He reminds them of the family of God to which they belonged but which they were contradicting by their behavior. Next he makes the basis of his appeal the name of Christ: *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (v. 10). It is the name on which all Christians call (v. 2) and the name into which all Christians are baptized (vv. 13, 15). They named human names, claiming their patronage (v. 12); but, as Chrysostom wrote, “Paul keeps nailing them to the name of Christ.”³

Here is his appeal: *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* (v. 10). Next he goes into more detail. Some members of *Chloe’s household* (evidently known to him and them, though not to us) had informed him *that there are quarrels among you* (v. 11). That is, *one of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas [Peter]”; still another, “I follow Christ”* (v. 12).

There is much discussion about the identity of these rival groups. Some try to find different theologies in contradiction with one another. The most famous of these was the theory of F. C. Baur, the nineteenth-century professor of New Testament at Tübingen. He argued that in the early church there was a fundamental opposition between Gentile Christianity (headed by Paul) and Jewish Christianity (headed by Peter). He found support for his thesis in these verses of 1 Corinthians, and went on to interpret the whole New Testament in the light of an ongoing tension between Paul and Peter.

But there is no evidence in our text that these groups were divided by doctrine. No, the issue in Corinth concerned personalities, not principles. The groups were separated from each





other by a celebrity cult, by pride, jealousy and boastfulness, which deeply distressed Paul. He was their brother (vv. 10, 11), not their master. If anybody “belonged” to anybody, he belonged to them, not they to him (cf. 3:22-23).

What, then, about the fourth slogan, “I follow Christ” or “I belong to Christ”? How could one faction claim to have a monopoly in Christ? All Christians belong to Christ, not to a clique. Some therefore suggest that, although the first three were the slogans of different Corinthian factions, the fourth is not another but Paul’s own indignant retort: “As for me, I belong to Christ” (cf. 2 Cor 10:7).

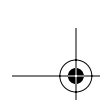
Consider now the seriousness of the situation in the Corinthian church. Although the divisions were not doctrinal in origin, they had profound doctrinal implications, especially in relation to Christ and the gospel. In order to show this, in 1:13 Paul asks three leading questions, all of which demand as an answer an emphatic, uncompromising “No!”

Question 1: Is Christ divided? That is, “Is there more than one Christ?” (J. B. Phillips). Or “Has Christ been shared out?”⁴ with fragments of him distributed between different groups? No! The very idea is preposterous. There is only one Christ.

Question 2: Was Paul crucified for you? Were they trusting for their salvation in Paul and him crucified? No! The idea is ludicrous, almost blasphemous. Jesus Christ alone is our crucified Savior, in whom we have put our trust.

Question 3: Were you baptized into the name of Paul? No, of course not! Baptism is into allegiance to Christ. As the apostle emphasizes in Romans 6, we have been baptized into union with Christ crucified and risen.

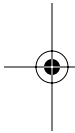


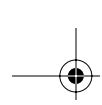


Thus the effect of the Corinthian divisions was to undermine the essentials of the gospel. It was to deny that there is only one Christ, who was crucified for us and into whose name we have been baptized. Clearly, the person of Christ, the cross of Christ and the name of Christ are all at stake when the church is divided. The Corinthians were effectively insulting Christ by dislodging him from his supremacy and replacing him with human leaders.

In verses 14-17 Paul lingers on the topic of baptism because the Corinthians were putting their emphasis in the wrong place. They were exalting the human baptizer at the expense of the divine Christ, into whom they had been baptized. Consequently, Paul expresses thankfulness for what he saw as the providence of God in “a simple, uncalculated, historical reality.”⁵ This was that he had not baptized any of them, except (he adds) Crispus the synagogue ruler (Acts 18:8) and Gaius, who became the church’s host (Rom 16:23). In consequence, *no one can say that you were baptized into my name* (1 Cor 1:15). Yes, he adds as an afterthought, even a parenthesis, *I also baptized the household of Stephanas* (cf. 16:15, 17); *beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else* (1:16).

His inability to remember exactly whom he had baptized indicates how comparatively unimportant the question was. For what matters in our baptism is not the person by whom but the person into whom we were baptized. Besides, Paul adds, *Christ did not send me* (or “apostle” me) *to baptize, but to preach the gospel* (v. 17). He is not being derogatory to baptism. He knew that baptism had been instituted by Jesus as an integral part of the Great Commission, and he himself had a high view of the importance and significance of baptism, as is plain in Romans 6.





But his speciality as an apostle of Christ was evangelism, not baptism; pioneer preaching, not local-church pastoring; the gospel, not the sacraments that dramatize it visibly.

Moreover, the evangelism Paul was commissioned to do was *not with words of human wisdom* (literally ‘not in wisdom of word’), *lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power* (1 Cor 1:17). This is a very important statement, not least because it anticipates the developed argument of 1:18—2:5, which we shall consider in the next chapter. The phrase “not in wisdom of word” expresses a double renunciation. On the one hand, Paul renounced the world’s wisdom in favor of the cross of Christ. On the other hand, he renounced “the skills of rhetoric” (Revised English Bible) for the power of God. The Jerusalem Bible brings the two together in a footnote referring to “philosophical speculation and tricks of rhetoric.” This double renunciation of human philosophy and human rhetoric Paul elaborates later. As C. H. Hodge put it, “He was neither a philosopher, nor a rhetorician after the Grecian school.”⁶

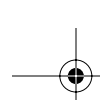
CONCLUSION

The opening section of 1 Corinthians obliges us to reflect on the ambiguity of the church and to come to terms with it.

On the one hand, biblical Christians are not perfectionists who dream of developing a perfect church on earth. As Billy Graham has often wisely said, “By all means look for the perfect church, and when you find it, join it. But remember, when you join it, it ceases to be perfect!” On the other hand, biblical Christians are not defeatists who tolerate all manner of sin and error in the church.

To perfectionists we say, “You are right to seek the purity of





the church. The doctrinal and ethical purity of the church is a proper goal of Christian endeavor. But you are wrong to imagine that you will attain it. Not till Christ comes will he present his bride to himself as ‘a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless’ (Eph 5:27).”

To defeatists we say, “You are right to acknowledge the reality of sin and error in the church, and not to close your eyes to it. But you are wrong to tolerate it. There is a place for discipline in the church, and even for excommunication. To deny the divine-human person of Jesus Christ is antichrist (1 John 2:22). To deny the gospel of grace is to deserve God’s anathema (Gal 1:6-9). We cannot condone these things.”

So this is the ambiguity of the church.

- The church is sanctified yet still sinful and called to be holy.
- The church is enriched yet still defective, eagerly waiting for the return of Christ.
- The church is united (the one and only church of God) yet still unnecessarily divided and called to renounce personality cults.

In these ways we are living in the painful tension between the already and the not yet. Only when Christ comes will the ideal become reality, and all ambiguity cease.

