

God's Unfinished Work

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Imagine you'd been on the mission field. You'd gone into a tribe that had never heard the gospel. You'd spent four years living in that tribe. During those four years:

- You'd taught them the Bible.
- You'd preached the gospel to them.
- You'd seen most of them become Christians.
- You'd seen the church start.
- You'd appointed some church leaders.
- You'd started to train a pastor.

Now you're in Australia on home assignment. You're having a great time visiting churches and explaining the great things God's done in your tribe. After nine months, you receive a letter from that trainee pastor. He tells you:

- One of the deacons has just taken a second wife.
- Two of the deacons resumed the feud between their two families that's been going on for fifty years.
- The church split into three groups. Each group follows a different tribal leader.
- There are fights over land.
- Tribal enemies ambushed a hunting party, killing four of men and most of the tribe wants to launch a counter-attack.
- The most wealthy people in the church aren't putting anything in the offering plate – nor are they helping the poor people in the church.

How would you react? Would you think to yourself:

- I'd better get back there straightaway and fix up this mess.

- I've wasted the last four years. When I get back there, I'll have to start all over again.
- I've wasted the last four years – I might as well move to another tribe and start with a clean slate.

That's something like the situation Paul faced at Corinth. He spent 18 months in the city. He preached the gospel and founded the church. He moved on to plant churches in other cities. Then he received some bad reports about what's happening at Corinth. This letter is his reaction to what he heard.

Opening Greetings

Paul begins his letter in a typical way. Verse 1:

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.

When we write a letter, we follow a certain format.

- We put the date in the top right-hand corner.
- We begin with the word *dear* and then the name of the person we're writing to.
- At the close of the letter, we use words such as *yours sincerely* or *yours faithfully*.
- And then we sign our name at the bottom – unless we're sending an anonymous letter.

If it's a business letter, there are a few more formalities to be included. They're the conventions we follow when writing a letter.

In the first-century Roman world they also had certain conventions for letters – but different ones from us today.

- They began with the name of the person writing (perhaps more sensible than us – we have to look at the end of the letter to find out who wrote it).
- Then they put the name of the people they're writing to.
- And then there's some form of greeting.

You can see that quite clearly in this letter:

- Verse 1 gives us the name of the person writing: Paul (and Sosthenes also is included).
- Verse 2 gives us the people Paul's writing to: the church of God in Corinth.
- Verse 3 gives the initial greetings.

That's all fairly standard.

However, even in this standard opening, Paul gives some hints as to the contents of this letter. **First** of all, he adds a description of himself: *called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. That's one of the issues in Corinth. Some people in the church questioned Paul's authority. They suggested Paul wasn't on the same level as the real apostles – the twelve appointed by Jesus. They suggested, therefore, that it's OK for them to question Paul's teaching and Paul's right to tell them what to do. Already at the beginning, Paul indicates his authority to write to the church – authority that came from God Himself, both Father and Son. His message came from Jesus who sent him to proclaim the gospel amongst the Gentiles. This was according to God's will.

It's an issue we'll come back to later in the letter. For the moment, though, we should note there are still those – even in the church – who question Paul's authority to tell

them what to do. This issue didn't die out with the Corinthians. Today, the answer's strengthened:

- Not only does Paul remain an apostle of Jesus who has authority in the church;
- But also some of Paul's writings are now part of the Bible we acknowledge as the authoritative word of God.

Secondly, he reminds the Corinthians that, when they became Christians, God *sanctified* them and *called* them *to be holy*. *Sanctified* and *holy* look like two totally different words in English. In Greek they both come from the same root – like *to build* and *building*. God *sanctified* them: that is, God set them apart as His special people. Because they're set apart for God, so they should bear the character of the God who set them apart. Thus, as God's people, they're to be holy.

As we go through the letter, we'll see some rather significant moral problems in the Corinthian church. At times, their outward behaviour didn't look very holy at all. And it seems they weren't too worried about that fact. In too many ways they looked more like the people of Corinth than they looked like God's holy people. Right at the start, Paul reminds them that holiness is part of the Christian life.

Thirdly, there's some suggestion in the letter that the Corinthians saw themselves as better than other churches or independent of other churches. They thought rather highly of themselves and perhaps even saw themselves on a higher spiritual plane than other churches. Thus, they may have done things differently in the Corinthian meetings. Paul reminds them they're part of a wider body

of people – they're part of those everywhere who call on the name of Jesus. Just as Jesus directs other churches, so He's also to direct the Corinthian church. They didn't have some exclusive access to Jesus not available to other churches. What Paul says to the Corinthians is exactly what he says to all the churches. They're not on a different plane to everyone else.

That, then, was the normal way to begin a letter. But, even in using that normal beginning, Paul adapted it to introduce some of the main things he'll say later. Already Paul responds to their wrong attitudes and actions.

Paul's Thanksgiving

It's also fairly normal in first-century Roman letters to begin the letter proper by thanking the gods for the health of the people being written to, and perhaps also praying for them. Paul also does that – not to the gods in general, but to the one true God of the universe: the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He thanks God for them. Verse 4:

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 must confess that, if I was writing this letter to the Corinthians, I don't think I'd start in quite this way. There are

some really serious problems in this church. For example:

- There are factions in the church – groups of people divided from one another; groups of people quarrelling with one another.
- There's a man in the church sleeping with his step-mother – and the rest of the church do nothing about it.
- Some church members are taking other church members to court.
- There are serious problems with their celebration meals for the communion service: some get all the food, while others miss out; some become drunk.

This church has problems. It's a real mess. I suspect I'd have trouble thanking God for them.

And yet, that's exactly what Paul does. Despite all the problems in the church, still he recognises they're a church. They're Christians. They're God's people. God's grace is given to them. Sure, there are still problems – and Paul will deal with many of those problems later in the letter – but they're problems they have as Christians, not as non-Christians. It's important to remember there's a difference.

Thanksgiving for Past Grace

Paul thanks God for the grace given to the Corinthians in the past. This grace was shown in the fact they became Christians. This grace was especially shown in the spiritual gifts God gave them. Paul indicates they're *enriched in every way* in Christ Jesus. It's similar to Ephesians – that in Jesus we're blessed *with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms*. Paul understands God is generous. God isn't stingy in the way He gives His grace to His

people; rather He blesses them abundantly.

Do we believe that? How much are we influenced by our materialistic culture? When you hear the statement "God isn't stingy" – what are your first thoughts?

- Well, it'd be nice if God put an extra \$200,000 in my bank account.
- I wouldn't mind a new car.
- Perhaps an overseas holiday would be pleasant.

That isn't the level at which Paul speaks. Paul's talking about being enriched in the spiritual realm, not the physical realm – for it's the spiritual realm that's important. In that realm, God's extremely generous towards Christians.

Paul specifies two particular areas of God's generosity to the Corinthians – *in all your speaking and in all your knowledge* (v.5). Why's Paul pick these two? Because they're two areas especially important to the Corinthians.

- *Speaking* included things like prophecy, teaching, preaching, evangelism, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues. It included those gifts that communicated the word of God to others.
- *Knowledge* included things like wisdom, insight, discernment, truth. It included those gifts that helped the church to have a true understanding of God's word and how to apply it in life.

There is, of course, some amount of overlap between the two.

As we read the letter further, we'll discover some of the emphases the Corinthians had in these two areas. These things were important in their church life. They thought they were especially blessed by God in relation to these things – so blessed they even tended to boast about it.

We'll also see, as we read the letter, that these gifts were being abused and causing problems in the Corinthian church. The very fact they boasted about these things was itself a problem and a sign of spiritual immaturity. Some of their church divisions resulted from their wrong attitudes towards these gifts:

- Boasting about some gifts led those without those gifts to feel inferior.
- Emphasising some of the gifts led to disorder and a lack of balance within their church meetings.
- Boasting about their great wisdom and knowledge led to the danger of undermining the message of the cross itself.

Their attitudes to these particular gifts caused serious problems in their church.

Yet, Paul thanks God He gave these gifts to the Corinthians – for these gifts confirm the message of the gospel Paul preached to them and came as a result of their reception of that message. These gifts demonstrated God was at work among them. These gifts helped them move away from their non-Christian thinking and lifestyle and towards thinking Christianly – even if they still need a lot of improvement in this area.

The problem's not in the gifts – they're God's good gifts and should be recognised as such. The problem's in the Corinthians' attitude to the gifts and the way they abused them for their own ends. And so, although Paul will later correct them, yet still he thanks God for them and the work God's done in their lives – yet he does it in such a way as to already begin that correction process.

Part of the Corinthians' problem is their self-centred attitude to these gifts. They boast about them as if the gifts prove their own importance. It's worldly thinking about spiritual gifts. While Paul doesn't address this issue directly here, he prepares the way for it. The gifts, he notes, come from God through Jesus. It isn't that the Corinthians deserve these gifts; rather God in His generosity gives them. Gently Paul shifts the focus from them as recipients to God as Giver – for that's far more important. Ultimately, that shift in focus provides the solution to their problems.

Confidence of Future Grace

In thanking God for them, Paul also expresses confidence God'll keep working in their lives. God hasn't given up on them. That comes out in verses 8 and 9. Paul doesn't pretend there are no problems in the church. Nor does he suggest those problems aren't serious. That's very clear later in the letter. However, he's confident God's begun to work in their lives – and he's equally confident God will bring that work to completion and present them *blameless* in His presence.

When you think about it, verse 8 is rather remarkable. The current behaviour of the Corinthian church is anything but *blameless*. Paul later warns them quite strongly about their current behaviour. And yet, he still states his confidence of their standing on the coming judgment day.

This reflects Paul's theology of salvation. Salvation's God's work, from start to finish.

- The very gospel itself is God's word about what God's done. Jesus has died for sins. Jesus has risen from the dead. Jesus is King over all. Jesus is the

One to be acknowledged as Lord.

- As that message is preached, so God's Spirit works in the minds of individuals, convincing them of the truth of that message and enabling them to repent and submit their lives to King Jesus. That is, God's Spirit brings about their conversion or their initial salvation. They become Christians.
- As people live as Christians – as they live from that position of submission to King Jesus – so God's Spirit continues to work in their lives, developing within them the fruit of the Spirit. That is, God's Spirit brings God's salvation into Christians' lives at the practical, day-to-day level. They begin to look like God's people rather than slaves to sin.
- Yet that isn't the end of the process – they aren't yet perfect. In this life, they still sin. The process looks forward to the end – to that time when Jesus returns and establishes God's kingdom in its fullness: a kingdom in which there's no sin or suffering or sickness or sorrow. At that time, salvation will be completed in the lives of Christians – for God's Spirit will enable them to live in that kingdom without sin.

It's similar to what Paul writes in Philippians 1:4-6

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul's confident God's begun His work in the lives of these people. He's seen the evidence in their lives – God gave them gifts when they became Christians. He's also

confident that God is faithful – what God begins, He will bring to its proper conclusion. Again, it's similar to what Paul writes in Ephesians 1: God gives His Spirit to Christians as the down-payment or guarantee of what's to come. The Spirit is the initial instalment that guarantees the rest of the promises God's made to us. The Corinthian church hadn't yet arrived at perfection – not by a long shot. Yet, Paul remains confident – not in the Corinthians, but in God who brings their salvation about. God is reliable and will bring His promises about.

What are the implications of this for your life? It means you too can be confident God will bring to completion what He's started. Paul's theology here isn't something peculiar to the Corinthians and their situation. It's Paul's general view of people who truly become Christians. If God has begun that work of salvation in your life, then He'll continue it so He brings you to the perfection of heaven. God is reliable and He will do it. The One who brought you into His family – into fellowship with Jesus – will help you live as a family member.

Does that then mean you don't have to worry about how you live? Does it mean you can go out and sin to your heart's content? No. That shows a lack of understanding of salvation itself. That's the sort of thing from which you're saved. It doesn't make sense to run back to what you're rescued from. It doesn't make sense to live as if you aren't part of God's family. Your lifestyle should demonstrate who you now are. And that's what Paul will say to these Corinthian Christians about many of the problems present in their church. More of that in coming weeks.

Conclusion

What's your reaction to the problems you see in our own church? There are always problems in churches – for churches are made up of sinful people like you and me. A piece of folk-wisdom has come down through many generations:

If you find the perfect church, don't join it – for then it will no longer be perfect.

All churches have their problems – maybe not as many as the Corinthian church, but they do have problems.

What are we to do about the problems? We don't ignore them. Paul doesn't do that. He doesn't focus on the problems in these opening verses – although, as I said, there are hints he has them in view. But he does get to those problems pretty quickly – and he deals with each in turn. As Paul does so, he encourages the Corinthians to deal with their problems. So he doesn't ignore them.

However, at the beginning of his letter, he expresses his thanks to God for them. Always. He directs the church's attention to God and Jesus.

- It's God who began the work in them. It's God who will bring it to completion. God's the subject of many of the verbs in this passage. And God is reliable.
- And Jesus is very central to what God's done. Jesus is mentioned at least 10 times in these 9 verses. It's through Jesus God expressed His generosity to them. It's Jesus to whom they're called into fellowship. It's Jesus whom they eagerly await.

The focus is on God who works His salvation in their midst.

It's easy to allow our problems to distract us from what God's done and is doing – even to allow them to cause us to despair.

- Those people in the church with whom we just can't seem to get along.
- Those people in the church who just can't seem to see things from our point of view.
- Those people in the church whom we think are a bit wishy-washy.
- Those people in the church who do things we think a Christian shouldn't do.
- Those people with whom we have strong disagreements.
- Those people who've stabbed us in the back.

It can be discouraging – just as others may be similarly discouraged by us. Yet, these are people to whom God's given His grace. They're people called into fellowship in Jesus with us. They're people God is still perfecting – just as He's perfecting us. So let's continue to thank God for His work in their lives.