

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Epistle, Year A

SAINTS TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Analysis by Paul Jaster

1Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

2To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—6just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—7so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.^a

DIAGNOSIS: Gifted But Divided

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Gifted But...

This is the time of year when people go back and reread their Christmas letters carefully. Well, read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 carefully and you will see much between the lines. “Paul to the

church of God which is at Corinth: Greetings!" That is what Paul should have said were he just writing an ordinary letter in the ancient Roman world. But no. Paul's pattern is to expand and augment the opening formalities to start proclaiming the Gospel from the very start and immediately to put his finger on the problems in the house churches in this great port city.

Already from the start Paul gets right down to the nitty-gritty issues of identity. An apostle of Christ Jesus, one commissioned by the will of God to speak authoritatively on God's behalf—that's who Paul is. And a people saint-ified in Christ Jesus, a people transformed into the corporate body of Christ, a people called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ—that's who the Corinthians are. And why does Saint Paul have to tell them? Because so often they would forget, as we still do today. The Christians at Corinth were gifted, yes. Extremely gifted! But they were divided, signaling their need for grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. There you have it. Diagnosis and remedy in the first three verses of what looks to be a "normal," everyday letter.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Lacking

The Corinthian Christians were an enthusiastic, energetic, gifted bunch. But they were exasperating, too. And if the apostle Paul is as bald as legend has it, it is because this is the collection of house churches that made him tear his hair out. Paul offers thanks to God for the extraordinary charismatic gifts they possess. But he does not praise them for the way they used those gifts. He does not praise them for their faith, hope or love, or for their partnership in the Gospel, as he does for Christians in other cities.

For all their ability to speak in tongues and to talk in the language of the angels and for all of their "wisdom" and their

“knowledge” in the deep things of Christ, they had no discernment of the “corporate nature” of the church and of their connectedness with other Christian churches and each other. They did not act like a church at all, but like a private club. And a divisive and cantankerous club at that! Behavioral problems. Over emphasizing knowledge and wisdom, but lacking love. The behavior of the Corinthians is out of sync with their calling. Their giftedness has become source of division in the church. And what is the source of our divisions in the church and in our society? Isn’t it much the same? A lack of faith, hope and love.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Solution): Called Out

And so with the full authority of God, Paul “calls them out,” challenges them, and exposes their faults and failings. They are blamed, faulted, criticized as being faithless, loveless, and hopeless. They are not the “call-outs” (ekklesia) of God they were called to be. Grace and peace should extend from Christ to their relationships with one another, but it hasn’t. And so, they are in danger of missing out on the greatest gifts of all: faith, hope, love.

PROGNOSIS: Ministers Together

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Sanctified in Christ Jesus

God gave Paul a monumental task: reshaping the behavior of Gentile converts into patterns of life consistent with the ways of Jesus. God is faithful and Jesus is the initiator of a whole new age. The cross has brought the old age to an end, and the power of the Holy Spirit working in the community is a sign of God’s new way of doing things in light of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The community is still awaiting the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. But in the meantime the gospel overturns the world’s

notions of power and social standing. God calls and sanctifies the group collectively. Paul's prayer of thanksgiving stresses the grace of God, who is the giver of all the gifts enjoyed by the Corinthian house churches, and God's call to community in Jesus Christ. By virtue of a divine "call" believers have been "separated" from a world dominated by a false value-system of competition and upward mobility. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: they are "believers cleaned up by Jesus and set apart for a God-filled life." Holiness is received not achieved.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Called out to be Saints Together

The Corinthian Christians are "called out" to be saints together by the will of God with all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus did not call his disciples to be a bunch of rugged individualist or lone rangers. None of us have a private line to God. We are called to be saints together...together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The saving death of Jesus Christ weaves a network of connectedness much like a body—a human body, Saint Paul will say later in this letter. Each individual Christian, each individual congregation is only part of a larger whole—the fellowship of Christ.

And we cannot deny our mutual dependence on each other any more than a finger can tell the brain or a division in a corporation can tell the corporate office to go and take a hike. As a major port city, the people of Corinth were very diverse. Many Christians were former slaves, who now as free people had new opportunities for economic and social advancement. Paul's letter is an extended appeal for unity. As the body of Christ, they are linked together—rich and poor, slave and free—into a network of mutual love.

Old status distinctions—patron/client—no longer have effect "in

the Lord.” Paul calls upon the Corinthians to rethink their inherited sociocultural norms and practices. Transforming the community mind, they had the same task as ours: how to shape a Christian community identity within a pluralistic world. The church is a community specifically summoned by God for service, like Israel’s priests or the vessels used in the Temple. Paul is echoing God’s call to Israel. A single congregation or house church is part of a much larger movement. To be “in Christ” is to be in the fellowship of the entire church. The universal one. To be a member of the church is to be in close, intimate contact with others, including those of different social classes, those with whom one might not have anything in common at all.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) Enriched:

By God’s grace and peace, the Corinthians are strengthened to the end. Waiting for the revealing. Blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Saint Paul has a vision of the church that is larger than any one congregation. And through his Apostolic Word he calls, commands and summons us—US!—to be “saints together”—“saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For by God’s grace, that’s who we are. God supports and enriches us, while we await the day of the Lord or (as Peterson puts it) “the Grand Finale.” Although Jesus will appear only in the future, he is active in the present, and Christians can rely on his aid.