

Second Sunday after the Epiphany – Epistle

The Strength of The Gospel

I Corinthians 1:1-9

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

I Corinthians 1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To 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: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

DIAGNOSIS: Weakness That Saps Strength

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Trivializing Gifts = Weakened*

Paul gives thanks to God for enriching the Corinthians with “speech and knowledge” (v. 5), and with many spiritual gifts (v. 7), and then assures them that God will also strengthen them “to the end” (v. 8). But when we read the rest of this letter, and hear Paul correct and admonish the Corinthians on account of their inadequate speech and knowledge (factionalism, sexual immorality, marital infidelity) and their misuse and misunderstanding of spiritual gifts, we have to wonder whether he isn’t talking tongue-in-cheek. At the very least, he must be enormously frustrated with them. For, on the one hand, the Corinthians already seem to have been “strengthened,” but on the other hand, they seem incredibly weak, because instead of capitalizing on all the gifts they’ve been “enriched” with, they have trivialized them.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Calling on Other Lords

Trivializing their God-given gifts is the source of Corinthians’ weakness. Paul diagnoses this weakness as stemming from the fact that they are still “people of the flesh” (3:3). Flesh is weak. Why? Because it is vulnerable to the “calls” of alternate lords (as in benefactors, who take care of you, “save” you, make you “good,” or at least make you “feel good”). Flesh hears those calls (versus the “call” issued in vv. 2 and 9), chases after the caller, succumbs to the caller and, ultimately, makes the caller “Lord.” What’s more, flesh turns around and calls out to (read “confesses”) the lord who has called to it. But calling on other lords (as opposed to calling on Jesus, v. 2) leads to discord and dissent, immoral behaviors, and so on. (“For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?” 3:3.)

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Blamed

But, worst of all, calling on other lords ultimately prevents lips from calling on (and hearts from trusting in) the “name of

the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 2). Consequently, when “the day of our Lord” arrives—that is, Judgment Day—the lords to whom flesh calls simply can’t muster the strength to handle the “blame” (counter v. 8). Other lords cannot make flesh “blameless” or good. So flesh is held accountable. Mercy may be begged for, but on what grounds, and to whom? These other lords don’t have the strength to overcome death. So strength fades and flesh succumbs to divine judgment (death).

PROGNOSIS: Weakness That Produces Strength

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Saving Weakness*

Paul proclaims: “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1:25). This “weakness” is “Christ crucified!” (1:23). Precisely when human strength fails, God’s weakness—the baby Jesus, the crucified outlaw—takes over; God offers himself in Jesus Christ as “Lord.” He earns that title by taking all blame as his own and replacing that blame with his blamelessness. His blamelessness provides the strength for our flesh to survive judgment. As Paul assures the Corinthians, “He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 8). [Note that Paul uses the title “the Lord Jesus Christ” five times in these nine verses.]

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Calling on the Lord Jesus*

“All those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 2) receive the “strength” which is finally strong enough to survive “the day of the Lord.” Paul relates this strength to the Corinthians’ “testimony of Christ” (v. 6). The stronger one’s voice is in calling on Jesus as Lord, (an act that coincides with one’s heart trusting in him), the greater one’s strength is. Such strength, Paul says, comes “through the foolishness of our proclamation, [that God chooses] to save those who believe!” (1:21).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Capitalizing on Gifts = Enriched

So maybe Paul wasn't speaking tongue-in-cheek after all. He knew that all those who "call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," are strengthened "to the end" (v. 8), not just to survive divine judgment, but also to capitalize on the gifts they have at present. Believers replace discord, factionalism, immorality, and abuse of spiritual gifts with "fellowship" (v. 9), harmony, moral behavior, and the proper use of spiritual gifts. Paul calls such enriched Christ-confessors "saints" (v. 2). Their strength is observable. Watch as a Christ-confessor approaches his deathbed. Even as his physical body deteriorates, his "strength" increases as his lips assuredly proclaim: "Jesus is Lord." He is confident, on the basis of whom his Lord is, that already he has been "healed" (made well, saved). That strength carries him through the Judgment straight into the arms of the heavenly Father.