

Title: What is a Church pt.1

Text: 1 Corinthians 1.1-9

Theme: Called by God to be like Christ in and to our world

Series: 1 Corinthians #1

Prop Stmt. The church is a group of people called out of their world to Christ and yet called to their world for Christ.

Read Text: 1 Corinthians 1.1-3

I began working on this message listening to the sounds of a city that was not my own. I recognize but do not understand the language, and I find that some of the most simple functions of life are needlessly complicated by language and cultural barriers. For the past two weeks and a couple of days, Roy Schnepfer accompanied me on my 5th trip to Russia. The romance of traveling to Russia wore off a long time ago. Particularly, the more I go, the more I see the reality of life and the demanding responsibility of ministry in this difficult land. The landmarks are different, the terrain is a bit different, the people are different, the culture is different, the food is different, they understand the Bible a little bit different. They say, "Where two or three are gathered, there is a KGB officer present. Even the location is different. I think that Kirov-Chepetsk, Russia is so far north, that you cannot sing shout to the north in that church, because there isn't anything north. You have to sing shout to the south and you have to shout real loud. And yet, in a land with all of its differences, God is building His church, His family, and our family.

For several years, I have planned on preaching a series from 1 Corinthians. This book is a cry for the church to show forth the glory of Christ. And I am thrilled that we are finally launching the series today. Particularly on a day when we are privileged to observe communion together being reminded that our brothers and sisters in KC did this today, just 8 hours before us. The more that I study the Scriptures, the more convinced I am that in order to fully appreciate all that this letter was intended to communicate, we need to understand as much as we can about the background of the writer, the recipients and the reason (or what we often refer to as the occasion) for writing this letter. As we were going through the streets of Moscow I wondered what it was like for Paul to make his way into the city of Corinth for the first time. As I began to put the pieces of that original scene together, my heart really went out to Paul. Paul's ministry in Corinth was born out of difficulty and faced a series of problems. There have been times when I have been away from home for the purpose of ministering the Word and have faced a few unpleasant situations. But, I know that no matter where I am or how long I am there, I will be going home. I do not think that Paul had such a place. Paul came to Corinth during his 2nd missionary journey. Corinth was basically known for 3 things; sports shipping and sin.

Corinth was a prosperous city that was situated at a key commercial crossroad. Corinth hosted the Isthmian games, which was an athletic festival 2nd only to the Olympics. These games were held every 2 years, attracted large crowds, and generated additional revenue for the city. The importance of these games can be seen in the fact that the most prestigious political office in the city was that of the sponsor of the games. All of this

was interrupted by the Romans who in 146 B.C. captured the city, destroyed the buildings and either executed or enslaved the inhabitants. 100 years later, (44 B.C.) Julius Caesar reestablished the city as a Roman colony. Many of the colonists of Corinth were former slaves, who for whatever reason were now Roman freedmen who were given a chance to do what had been very difficult to do in the Roman empire and that is move upward in society. The recipients of this letter, were only a few generations removed from this. The city, though a Greek city in philosophy and art, was politically oriented toward Rome. And while the city was known for its loose morals, in Paul's day, it was probably not much better or much worse than any city that functioned as a seaport in those days. Corinth had been the home of the goddess Aphrodite, but that had been destroyed by the Romans, and the temple prostitution that went along with that, was not in place anymore. Granted, the city was no mecca for holiness but it may not have been quite as bad as some have made it out to be. We see from Acts 18, which tells us of how this church began that there was a Jewish element in the city, but the race issue does not seem to be much of an issue in the church (like it was at Rome). It was a city without a long aristocracy, people (like our own colonies) without roots, it was a Roman colony, with many veterans of the Roman army, given land there to settle and due to its strategic location soon became a patchwork of races, creeds, languages and cultures. Corinth was everything at the same time. It was a rough and tough place for the gospel probably something akin to San Francisco, New York, Las Vegas, Rio de Janeiro or Cape Town. Corinth was the biggest city that Paul had yet encountered, a brash new commercial metropolis. The buildings were fairly new, the roads were new, and one outdoor theater sat 20,000 people. The city itself squeezed 250,000 people into a small area with a large proportion being slaves engaged in the unending job of moving goods from one port to the other. Bond or free, the people were rootless (which presents its own challenges and opportunities), cut off from their country background, etc. If the love of Christ and his gospel could take root in this city, it could take root anywhere!

I mentioned that Acts 18 provides the background for the beginning of this church. I am asking each of you read this chapter this next week. Paul came as a tentmaker and worked at that for several weeks. He mentioned that he came to the city with much apprehension (1 Cor 2.3). Getting the ministry started was probably an exhausting work for a man who did not appear to have great health to begin with. Paul was accustomed to hard work. He made that clear when he spoke to the elders at Ephesus, Acts 20.18-35, but whenever he went into a new setting, he knew to some degree what he was going to be up against. And usually that meant rejection and some jail time.

Paul had faced some rough treatment by the Macedonians – especially at Phillipi, but a church was started. Athens was not too bad by comparison, the usual mockery and insults were there, but so were a few believers. Paul never seemed to be real excited about the potential of the Athens church. He came to Corinth, physically tired, lonely (being deprived for a time being of Silas and Timothy – gives one new appreciation for the longing our missionaries have to work in partnerships on the field) and was spiritually unexcited about the Athens crusade. Walking through the streets of this city, trying to figure out where to begin, being overwhelmed with the bigness and the newness of this city, Paul was very likely facing a real crisis point in his life and ministry. What an

incredible providence of God to connect Paul with Aquila and Priscilla – fellow tentmakers and fellow Jews. This meeting would prove to be the beginning of the church. Aquila and Priscilla were at Corinth because the Roman Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome for about two years. It wasn't too long before the gospel began to make an impact. In his usual fashion, Paul began teaching at the synagogue until he was thrown out. But by that time a number of people had come to faith in Christ, and from these people, the church was formed. Even though there was some immediate fruit in his ministry, we wonder if Paul himself was wondering about whether he ought to stay put or push on. Then the Lord spoke to him in a vision and told him that there were many more people in that city. This had to be an encouragement for Paul. Later on Silas and Timothy joined the team so this group of 5 became a powerful group for the sake of the gospel in Corinth. After 18 months, Paul was able to look back and see the hand of God. That had to be a personal thrill for Paul. We relish the memories of God working in our lives and taking us through valleys by his grace. We like to walk back to the places where God seemed to arrest us, or use us in an important way. Corinth was more than a city of sin and challenge, it was a place of pruning and blessing in Paul's life. He learned the truth of what he said at the end of chapter 15, "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." When Paul left the city, he left a thriving church. What a joy to be able to look back and see the tangible results of your ministry. Not everyone gets to do that, but when you do, it is one of the most satisfying moments in a person's life. When a church gets into your heart, it never leaves you, for it truly becomes a part of you.

The church was probably 4-5 years old when Paul, who was at Ephesus now, received a report from Chloe's people (and it was not a good report), then a report from Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus as well as a letter about the same time that was asking him to help resolve some problems. He had already written one letter to them (5.9) and now in addition to the messengers Paul had received a letter from them. This much is clear from their letter, the church does not agree with him on many issues. They are calling his apostolic authority into question, which gives us a bit more understanding of the sheer weight and intended impact of the very opening words of the first verse. I will come back to this issue many times in this series as it bears down upon the specific passages. But this letter from the church is full of all sorts of questions and challenges to the apostle. It (7.1) obviously asked about sexual relations in marriage, food sacrificed to idols (8.1 and ff) and brought up the problem of the exercise of spiritual gifts (12.1 and ff). This troubling information deeply affected Paul. They would any believer. We care for the church. So, in a nutshell, and in order, here is what happened.

1. Chloe's people bring a report to Paul at Ephesus and
2. Paul sets about writing a letter.
3. Timothy is preparing to take the letter to Corinth when Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrive with more news (not good) and a letter. (4.17)
4. Paul immediately writes chapters 5-6, in response to the news and then writes 7-16 in reply to the letter.
5. Timothy takes the completed letter to Corinth.

Paul wrote this letter to this church that he loved so much, but was in danger of being consumed by its problems. The church was facing possible disintegration from the inside out (10.11-13) and Paul knew that a long visit was necessary to sort things out, but since he could not get there right away, he wrote this letter to address some things until he could make it. The church at Corinth was probably of a substantial size. Full of cliques, some snobbish, little or no church discipline, laxity in morals and doctrine abounded because no one would submit to authority and even Paul's authority was constantly questioned. There was a lack of humility and consideration for others, while the worship times were chaotic and some were celebrating their freedom in Christ without any thought for the other brothers and sisters. They were big on image and very short on truth rooted in love.

Clearly the issue of the unity of the church is not only woven throughout this letter, it is screamed from every hill in about every chapter. This church cannot survive if it is divided. No organization can function for long with unaddressed and or unresolved division. The history of Christianity is pot-marked with the stories of division, rivalry and schism. The solution is not unity at any cost, but unity based upon the revealed doctrines of God. This is exactly what the Spirit of God is seeking to do with the Corinthian church through the apostle Paul and to us through this portion of His inspired Word. This letter is an attempt to do radical surgery to deal with a life-threatening condition without killing the patient.

I titled this message – “What is a church?” Because that is what Paul is trying to remind these people of right here at the beginning of the letter. The appeal that he makes for unity in these first 3 verses is based on reminding them of who they are. Remember who you are! Clearly this church had forgotten that. This was supposed to be the church of God in Corinth, when in reality Corinth was in the church.

1. Remember that you are the Church that belongs to God.

While the word church had been used to describe a gathering of people to deal with political issues in the ancient Greek world, “church” was the word that Christ chose to describe the new group of people who were followers of Christ. The idea of a church was born in the heart of God. The church belongs to Him. The church is full of defects and flaws. We are not yet, what we will be, but thank God we will be what we shall be. Please remember this. The church belongs to God – it is His idea. I love the church, not because I am a pastor, but because I love God. Some of you have the mistaken idea that you can be committed to God without being committed to the church. The call of commitment that I give for you to be part of the church should not be interpreted as coming from the chief promoter of the church's programs. I do not love the church because I am a pastor. I love the church because I love God. They cannot be separated.

Please also notice this. This church at Corinth was a local church. It was a specific local church that was identified as belonging to God. The call to God is a call to one of His local churches. But, I have been burned. I have been hurt by the church. People have disappointed me. Yes, they have, and yes they will. That is not an excuse it is an

observation. But you have not been hurt deeper than Paul who understands that with all of her warts and blemishes, she still belongs to God, the church is THE means that God has raised up to reach this world and grow His children. Rightfully understood and functioning, the church is the most incredible, delightful and meaningful organization you could ever be part of. You see the church gets into your heart and will not let you go.

2. **Remember that you are a Christian** - Sanctified in Christ Jesus

Sanctified means to be set apart or made holy. This idea was clearly presented in the OT when items that were used in the temple were set apart for that purpose. When you come to faith in Christ, you are set apart for ministry for Him. But being set apart is the reason why we are saved. What becomes very clear in the church at Corinth is that there were people who were claiming to be spiritual because they had what they called spiritual experiences, but in reality were not becoming like Christ. This, of course was a huge problem that occupies a good bit of Paul's attention in this letter.

3. **Remember that you have a Calling** - Called to be holy

We are in the world. We are called to the world. We are to live in many practical ways for the benefit of this world. But, here is the fundamental difference, we are not of the world any longer. We are in it, but not of it. We are at once here, and there. We are the church that belongs to God that is in this community, but our ultimate allegiance, and our ultimate identity is not our land of native birth, school of graduation, job or race. We are followers of Jesus Christ.

4. **Remember that you are Connected** – together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours.

There is no such thing as a lone ranger Christian or a lone ranger church. God has not only called us individually to functionally and practically belong to the church, he has called our church to functionally and practically work together with the rest of His body. Of course, there is no group that is perfect, but that is why we need each other.

Five years ago, we were asked to help strengthen the national leadership of the Russian Baptist churches by sending finances and teachers to educate some of their young men. This partnership with several churches in the Detroit area has resulted in a partnership with a network of churches in the Kirov region of Russia. The believers in these churches have such a personal sense of loyalty and commitment to our church and the other churches that work with us. Part of my trip involved laying the groundwork for expanding the breadth and the depth of the training that we are providing. But in the process of working on this, we have been developing a network of relationships with churches here. I believe that in the immediate future we will be able to provide the Kirov region churches with some wonderful help, but I believe that the greatest benefit will be the God-honoring, Christ-exalting, theologically-driven unity that our churches experience and promote right here in this area. All of which to say, the call to Christ is the call to community. Today, as we remind ourselves of this through the ordinance of

communion, look around you. This is a body, a family, a flock. Today we serve each other because we are part of the stuff. You are called, to the church, to the world, for the glory of God.