

1 CORINTHIANS 1

1 Corinthians 1:1

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 69.

With his very first words, Paul reminds his readers of his rank, that of Apostle. By the modern definition of that word, there can be no question that Paul held that office. He was in very deed one of the “special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world” who differed “from other officers in the church in the duties of their calling” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:23). But was he a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles? Because individuals have been called to that office without also being members of the high quorum in this dispensation, it is possible the same occurred in the meridian of time. Further, the Greek word *ἀπόστολος* (*apostolos*) had the basic sense of “envoy” or “delegate.”

It is very likely that Paul’s purpose in emphasizing his office was an effort to make his readers take his words seriously. Indeed, he brings their attention to the fact that the call was extended by God Himself. In short, Paul did not speak on his own authority but on that of the Father. In giving credit to God rather than putting himself forward as the authority, Paul humbly steps back and puts God in the foreground. Paul’s emphasis was not on his word. Rather it was on Christ’s, shown by the Apostle invoking the name of the Lord nine times in the invocation.

1 Corinthians 1:1–3

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 68–69.

Paul's greeting here follows that of the typical letter form of his day with two exceptions. First, he includes another writer, Sosthenes, and second, he not only uses the usual Greek valediction of "grace" but also adds *εἰρήνη* (*eirēnē*), "peace." The latter was the common greeting of the Jews in his day (*שָׁלוֹם*, *šālom*). By using it, Paul connected his God to that of the Jews and the Old Testament. This connection is an important point. Paul was often accused by his Jewish contemporaries of attempting to destroy their faith, but this one word shows that he was actually reaching out to them.

1 Corinthians 1:7

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 105–106.

In speaking of the gifts of the Spirit, Paul also emphasizes the point that these gifts are no longer the provenance of the small, somewhat homogeneous Jewish people with their given mindset and culture. Rather, the Spirit has now manifested itself in the urban, multicultural, pluralist Corinthian way of life. In this widening and continually diversifying community, the work of the Spirit has been openly displayed. The Apostle reassures his readers that each revelation, each miracle, each witness, each demonstration of a spiritual gift has confirmed beyond doubt the truth of Jesus.

Even though they are enjoying an outpouring of the Spirit, Paul reminds them that the war is not yet over. They must yet wait for "the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). Though it is true that the decisive battle has been won by Christ, thus assuring future victory, the war still goes on and Christians cannot let up their intense fight until the enemy has been fully vanquished.

1 Corinthians 1:9

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 109.

Paul reminds his readers that God is faithful and true and, therefore, can never go back on His word. This divine being has called them into the same fellowship (*κοινωνία*, *koinōnia*) He has with His Son. Thus, they are shareholders (*κοινωνός*, *koinōnos*) with Christ in all that the Father has. In short, Paul's words are a tacit reminder that God has called the Christians into the intimate circle of the divine.

1 Corinthians 1:10–17

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 116.

Paul bases his appeal for unity on trifold authority: first, as a member of the family of Saints (his “brothers and sisters”), second, as an Apostle, and third, in the name of Jesus Christ. All three bolster his plea but from different directions and thus give it the weight and the seriousness it deserves.

Paul’s request that they all speak with a united voice shows that a power struggle was going on. Corinth, as a microcosm of the Greco-Roman world, was a model of the competitive, social-climbing, status-obsessive culture that prevailed in the big cities. Some of the early converts to Christ brought these traits with them, which resulted in the divisions that so concerned Paul. Further, some of these belonged to the great houses where honor and face were of primary importance. That condition exacerbated the problem by making the people less inclined to back down from a position. The Apostle was begging them to release their pride and “to all take the same side.”

1 Corinthians 1:10

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 117.

Paul’s concern with the *σχίσματα* (*schismata*), “divisions,” seems to have been based not only on personal rivalries and arguments but also on the Corinthians’ perceived levels of spirituality. The Church was plagued with a “holier than thou” attitude with various groups or individuals insisting on a greater degree of spirituality either by tracing their conversion to a supposedly holier leader or by possessing a seemingly greater gift of the Spirit.

Quarrels erupted as each side tried to best the other. Unwittingly, elements of the Christian community in Corinth provided a body in which the deadly cancer of pride took hold. That disease threatened to destroy the Church. What made pride so dangerous was that at its heart stood competition, the striving to be above the rest. Pride will abide no equal and, therefore, cannot admit to wrong or weakness.

1 Corinthians 1:13

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 117–118.

The Saints’ “seeking to excel” describes exactly what the major problem was at Corinth. Paul attacked this pattern by showing his readers the absurdity of such a proposition. He does so by formulating the series of rhetorical questions. Essentially, they force Paul’s readers to consider three questions: Can the spirit of Christ be apportioned out such that only one group can enjoy it? Did anyone die for you and thereby bring salvation other than Christ? Are saving ordinances performed in any other name but that of the Lord? Paul’s intent is to show these people that no single congregation can claim exclusive right to Christ’s spirit, doctrine, and power.

1 Corinthians 1:17

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 118.

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul carefully distances himself from the Sophists, whose major aim was to gain popularity and wealth through the sophistication, skill, and sometimes tricks of their arguments. The Sophists’ aim was to impress their audience by winning arguments rather than expounding truths. Paul was intent on fulfilling God’s assignment—that is, to preach. And, as one scholar noted, “what he has to preach is not a philosophy to be discussed, but a message of God to be believed.”¹ Therefore, he carefully went opposite the Sophists and philosophers, choosing a most appalling symbol on which to make his case—the cross. That imagery connoted a most gruesome, ignoble, even ignominious, death.

1 Corinthians 1:18

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 128–129.

The imagery of the cross was extremely important to Paul though it was repellent to both the Jews and the Greeks. Justin Martyr noted that many Roman citizens called the idea of the Christian worship of a crucified person “madness.”² Pliny the Younger called the whole Christian movement “madness” (*amentia*) and “a perverse and outlandish superstition.”³ The feeling that anyone who believed in Jesus must be mad shows how radically different “the message of the cross” was. Therefore, despite crucifixion’s awful repute, Paul kept it forefront to his readers. He understood the full breadth of the Savior’s act: first, it made atonement for past sins, thus allowing them to be forgiven; second, it provided the remedy against those very human weaknesses that caused the sins in the first place through the enabling power of His grace; and third, that grace went further—even reshaping the Christian soul and bringing about a new kind of existence in the present world as well as in the future heavenly one. The cross was, for Paul, the symbol for this triple effect.

1 Corinthians 1:18–25

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 130.

It is important to note that Paul’s argument is against neither reasonable thinking nor in wisdom itself. It is rather the manipulative, self-serving, status-seeking, and otherwise flawed thinking that diverts a person from accepting and serving the Lord. Paul’s use of the aorist active verb *μωραίνω* (*mōrainō*), “to make foolish, show to be foolish,” is emphatic; God has shown this earth-bound thinking and effort to be foolish through His Son’s power to transform souls into new creatures. Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with that of God, showing their antithetical nature. The former is temporary, short termed, fallible, and self-absorbed while the latter is eternal, infallible, and other-seeking. In short, God has made fools of these self-important persons by showing that their assumed status or achievements are, at best, illusory and, at worst, damning.

1 Corinthians 1:22

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 131.

Paul mentions two ways people want him to prove the gospel true. He notes that the Jews demand signs (the Greek here is plural)—that is, a series of extraordinary and heavenly generated events—in order to prove Jesus really is the Messiah. On the other hand, the Gentiles want well-reasoned and convincing arguments as their proof. Paul will give them neither.

1 Corinthians 1:23

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 131.

Paul states clearly the reaction of the Jews and the Gentiles to preaching of a crucified Messiah. For both Jew and Gentile, the Corinthian lifestyle demanded gaining status, honor, success, or power by whatever means possible. Those obsessively and blindly caught up in these pursuits would find the idea of a crucified Messiah either totally foolish or a stumbling block. Both Jew and Gentile viewed Jesus as a person of the lowest possible social status—namely, a crucified criminal. For the Jews, to be asked to accept as a heavenly sign of God’s saving power the humiliating and disgraceful execution of a Jewish teacher by a foreign power was an affront. They wanted a victorious Messiah heralded by a display of divine power.

For the Gentiles, to be asked to accept as a God one whose suffering and death shouted dishonor, shame, and especially failure was nothing short of foolishness. They wanted a philosopher king whose wisdom and intellect none could challenge. In these ways, both Greeks and Jews became adversaries of the crucified Messiah. But, as Paul insisted, the real Messiah was neither a conquering hero nor a worldly sophist. As a result, neither side would readily accept Him.

1 Corinthians 1:24

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 132.

There were, however, those who did accept Paul's witness. The Apostle calls these "the called ones." The word *κλητός* (*klētos*) refers to anyone who receives an invitation to some event. Paul's use of the term refers specifically to those who actually accept the call and actually entered into the kingdom of the Son—therefore, in Latter-day Saint parlance—the idea is best caught in the word *elect*. Jesus noted that the call is extended to many but few become chosen—that is, actually accept the call (see Matthew 22:14). Only those with a deeply spiritual nature receive the call and gain the title of "called ones."

Those who enter the kingdom come to understand who and what Christ really is. First, He is the power of God; He holds the full power of Elohim for the salvation of humankind through the divine investiture of authority. Through that authorization, the Son can transform those who will yield to Him into sons and daughters of God, thus directly assisting the Father in His work "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

Second, the Savior is the "wisdom of God"—that is, he is the one who "makes possible [the] correct understanding" of God, His nature, and work. He is the full revelation of the divine to humankind.

1 Corinthians 1:25

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 133.

In 1 Corinthians 1:25, Paul concludes his first of three arguments by making two points: First, that which the wise of the world consider God's foolish thing—namely, the Savior's self-sacrifice—is the seat of true wisdom because the Savior's act shows the true way to success and happiness. And second, that which the wise see as God's weakness—that is, giving Christ His power—is where His real strength lies. With the cross, God revealed what He expects of His followers. It was the idea of giving of oneself for the good of others that most Corinthians just did not get. As a result, they were suffering from the cancer of pride

that manifested itself in self-aggrandizement and competition. Consequently, they sought happiness and fulfillment where they could not be found. Unfortunately, this vile sickness had found its way into the Church and could destroy it if it were not cured. Understanding and applying the message of the cross was the cure.

1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 140–141.

At this point, Paul begins his second of three arguments showing the superiority of God’s wisdom over that of humankind by using the nature, composition, and social status of the Christian community. Some have taken Paul’s words to suggest that the early Christian movement took place among the poorest class of the Greco-Roman world. The latest studies show that quite a number of influential people were drawn through the Church’s doors. Thus, Paul was addressing a community experiencing “status inconsistency,” with high- and low-born, rich and poor, free and bond, all meeting together.⁴

Unfortunately, this diversity did not protect the Church from problems but instead exacerbated them. Many Christians from all classes and levels of society were infected with the Corinthian disease of pride and, thus, competed with one another for status and position. Paul likely chose his words in verse 26 as a reminder to many of them of their humble origins. Paul’s point is that the gospel plan is not a mere self-improvement program. It is rather a radical rescue brought about through the transforming power found in the grace of Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:29–30

Adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 141.

Paul’s concern is giving credit where it is due. Many of the Corinthians, being heavily involved in self-reliance and self-promotion, bragged about all they did. Self-glory was a large part of the game they played. Paul redirects this καύχασθαι (*kauchasthai*), “glorying, boasting,” to God and Christ. He shows that God has used the Christians to put down the wise, the influential, and the powerful and, in the process, made them wise, influential, and powerful in the eternal scheme. In verse 29, Paul makes his point, showing that “glorying is inappropriate in God’s presence because whatever provides grounds for such glorying [station, gifts of the spirit, rebirth, and so forth] has come from God as his gift.”⁵ Thus, the Apostle begins verse 30 with ἐξ αὐτοῦ (*ex autou*), “It is from him that,” the phrase forcing Paul’s readers to

remember that God alone made their relationship with Jesus possible. Therefore, they have no right to brag about anything. But the idea goes a step further: in Christ they have not only access to salvation but also to the perfect model of leadership. That model does away with any self-glorifying and puts a stop to all boasting.

Notes

- 1 George G. Findlay, *St. Paul's First Epistle* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 800.
- 2 Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 13.4
- 3 Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 10.96.4, 8.
- 4 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 54, 68–73.
- 5 Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 436.

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