



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

In Christ Jesus 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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You can tell what a person is excited about by what they talk about. It was only a couple of weeks after I started dating Veronica that I went home for spring break. I remember my sister saying something like, “Geez! Veronica this and Veronica that!” Apparently she’s all I could talk about, but I was genuinely excited about having her in my life. It’s what we do. One of my friends just got married, but when he and his wife first met everything on his Facebook feed changed. He used to show an interest in a variety of things, but suddenly *everything* was about her. Another of my friends just became a grandfather. Suddenly all he can talk about is his new granddaughter. We talk about the things that excite us. Veronica is extremely patient with me. I tend to process things verbally, so when I read something or work out something out that gets me excited it’s often all I talk about for hours or days on end. Usually the stuff that gets me that excited is theological and I know that half the time Veronica has no idea what I’m talking about, but she a perfect model of last week’s Epistle. She’s patient and she bears with me in love, eager to our unity in the bond of peace!

I say all this because we see just this in this morning’s Epistle from 1 Corinthians. It’s a short excerpt from the introduction to St. Paul’s letter. In these first *nine* verses Paul mentions Jesus Christ *eight* times. Jesus was all he could talk about because Jesus was who he was excited about. If we were to read 1 Corinthians without this we might think that Paul was a domineering and bossy control freak. There were a lot of problems in the Corinthian church and Paul was writing to these people to get them back on track, but Paul’s motivation wasn’t his own desire to be right or to be in control. His motivation was Jesus—always Jesus and nothing but Jesus—and he wanted them to share that priority. He wanted them to put Jesus above everything else.

Think about Paul. Actually, think about *Saul* of Tarsus, the zealous Pharisee who persecuted Christians before Jesus got hold of him and changed his name. Saul of Tarsus had it all figured out. Everything in his life made sense. But then one day on the road to Damascus, where he was going on the hunt to find more Christians, he had an encounter with the risen Jesus and everything—*ev-ry-thing*—changed. Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews. As far as the law was concerned he was blameless. And then he met Jesus and, he says, in Philippians 3 that everything he once prided himself on was, in the light of Jesus, *skubalon*. It’s a Greek word that most translations render as “dross” or “refuse” because the most accurate English word has four letters and is one we don’t say in polite society and certainly not in church! As it turns out it was actually Jesus who was the Hebrew of Hebrews and blameless as to the law and as much as Saul thought he had it all figured out, Jesus gave new meaning to his faith and everything about it—Jesus completely reoriented Saul—so much so that he changed his name to a Greek name (Paul) and went out as an apostle to proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles.

Paul’s friends and family and colleagues thought he had lost his mind. They couldn’t understand what had happened to him. But that’s because what happened to him only made sense in light of Jesus. And this is what Paul wants for the Corinthians. Sure, they *talked* about Jesus being everything and the *talked* about Jesus being at the centre of their life. But when it really came down to it, if Jesus really had been their everything, if they had truly repented and turned from everything that was not Jesus so that they could follow Jesus with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength they wouldn’t have been having all these problems Paul is writing to correct. Paul wants them to do more than talk about Jesus; he wants them to live Jesus—so to speak. He wants them to understand what it means and what it looks like to have Jesus at the centre of their life. If they could do that as a church they’d already be half-way to correcting their problems.

Paul knew that a major part of their struggle had to do with understanding the big story of redemption. The Corinthian church was made up mostly of Gentiles. These last few weeks our Epistle lessons

have been from letters written to churches that were predominantly Jewish and they dealt with how the divide between Jew and Gentile was bridged by Jesus. While the struggle with what to do about Gentile converts, as Jews they knew the story of redemption. Just like Paul, all they needed to do was put Jesus in the centre of the Old Testament story and everything fell into place. But the Corinthians struggled to understand this. They knew little, if anything, of Judaism. They knew little, if anything, of the Old Testament. There was no New Testament yet. The Gospels hadn’t been written. People relied on the oral traditions of the eyewitnesses to Jesus and his ministry. The book of Revelation was a long way off. And the Epistles were just being written. Jesus’ ministry hangs on the Old Testament. Jesus really only makes sense when we see him standing at the centre of history as the Jews understood it, but these people were pagans. They had worshipped the false gods of the Greeks and Romans. They had no concept of history as it’s laid out in the Old Testament and that meant that for all their faith in Jesus, they really had little, if any, idea of how they as Gentiles had been swept up in the amazing drama of redemption that begins with Adam and Eve being cast out of the garden and that’s traced through the calling of Abraham and Israel, Moses and David, and that looks forward to the God of Israel sending his Messiah to set everything to rights, to judge the wicked and to vindicate the righteous. That was all a Jewish story; the Greek and the Romans knew nothing of it. In that sense the Corinthians aren’t that different from the people out there in our own community today—or even that different from some of us.

And so in these introductory verses to First Corinthians Paul quickly sketches out a picture. It’s a picture of the saints in Corinth, but more importantly it’s a picture that shows them how their own lives have now been intertwined by Jesus into the story of the God of Israel and his plan of redemption. Look at verses 1-2:

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Paul writes to them as one called by God. It was never Paul's will to sign on with this Jesus movement. He was out to shut it down, but it was a zealous Jew like Paul whom God needed to go out as an apostle to the Gentiles, to the non-Jews. An "apostle" is literally one who is sent and that's just what Paul was. It wasn't Paul's idea to go to the Gentiles any more than it was Paul's idea to follow Jesus, but Jesus came to him on the Damascus Road in a blinding light that threw him off his horse and the will of God overtook him. The God of Israel swept this man of Israel off his feet and sent him out to proclaim Israel's Messiah to the Gentiles. None of it made sense and it never would have happened had it not been the will of God.

And notice that it's Israel's Messiah whom Paul was sent to proclaim. Paul says that he was an apostle of Christ Jesus. We use the word Christ a lot, but we often forget what it means. Popular culture treats Christ as if it was Jesus' last name. I remember seeing a cartoon about the wise men visiting Jesus and it showed the three exotic kings approaching a house and out in front was a mailbox that said "Christ"—"Hey, Melchior and Balthazar, we've found the place where the Christ family lives. Let's go in and say hello to Mr. and Mrs. Christ." No. Christ isn't a name. It's a title. It's a Greek word that's used throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It means "anointed" and it was reserved for the anointing of kings. Saul was anointed, David was anointed, Solomon was anointed. For Greek-speaking Jews it became the equivalent of the Hebrew word "messiah". Jesus Christ means Jesus the Messiah. And the Messiah was the one in whom all of Israel's hopes were placed. He was the King whom the God of Israel had promised would one day come to judge Israel's enemies and to vindicate the faithful. He was the one who would come and set everything to rights and who would establish the Lord's eternal kingdom. It was Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the King who had called Paul and given him this mission.

And Paul writes to the Church at Corinth and he says that they've been sanctified in this same Jesus the Messiah, this same King Jesus. What does it mean to be "sanctified"? Well, I have a tuxedo zipped up in a garment bag and hanging in my closet. I hardly ever wear it. Every

once in a very long while I'll put it on to go out to dinner with Veronica. I used to put it on when we would go to the opera. It's a suit, but it's not just any suit. It's a suit for very special occasions. And that's something like what it means to be sanctified. It means to be set apart for a special purpose—specifically for a holy purpose. The priests in the Old Testament were sanctified—set apart for serving God in the temple. The furnishing and vessels and instruments used in the temple were sanctified too. And we too are sanctified—set apart for a holy purpose—when we identify ourselves with Jesus the Messiah. Paul makes this point because so much of what's wrong in Corinth hinges on their having forgotten or simply not understood that they've been set apart. They're doing things and living their lives as if they were people not set apart by Jesus—as if I were to put on my tuxedo to mow the lawn or change the oil in my car. People who have been set apart and called holy have no business living "unholy".

And Paul stresses too something that Gentiles particularly needed to hear—and something we need to hear today. Through Jesus the Messiah God had set the Corinthian Christians apart and, he writes, "called them to be saints together with everyone else in every place who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ". They and we are sanctified—set apart for a holy purpose—and called to be saints. Those words, "sanctified" and "saint" are both from the same root. They mean the same thing. We're set apart for a holy purpose to be a holy and set-apart people. "Sanctified" is what God does to us and "saints" is what we become as a result. But notice, we're not called be loner saints. As saints we're called *together* to be a special people—people whose lives are united and bound together in Jesus. This wasn't a problem for Jewish Christians. To be a Jew was to be set apart and to be a Jew was to be part of one family descended from Abraham, the first to be set apart by God for this holy purpose. But the Gentiles struggled with this. In fact, Gentiles still struggle with this. We don't start out with the same sense of family that the Jews had. And so this is why it's so important to understand Jesus and the Good News of the Gospel in the context of the larger biblical story of redemption. I meet a lot of Christians who are out there all by themselves. Their reasons vary. Some don't like

commitment and drift aimlessly from church to church and never really connect or commit. One person once told me she didn't come to church because the people here were too immature and dragged her down. Frankly, that statement right there is a sign of immaturity, but nevertheless I told her that if she truly was that mature she had an obligation in Jesus to share in the common life of her less mature brothers and sisters, to model maturity to them, and to help "drag them up" to a higher level. And there are others who are just satisfied to be alone: me, my Bible, and Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, that sort of thinking was inconceivable in Israel. Again, they were a family. The Jews in Rome and the Jews in Jerusalem knew they shared a common life together, not just within their own local assemblies, but across the world. And in coming as the embodiment of Israel and in reconstituting the people of God in and around himself, Jesus the Messiah calls us into that family as the New Israel. Paul says we are set apart and called as saints to be *together*. It should be as inconceivable for us to be loner Christians as it was for members of the family of Israel to be loner Jews. All who have, as Paul writes, called on the name of the Lord are *one* people and *one* family. As we read last week from Ephesians: one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

As he so often does Paul goes on to give thanks for the good he's seen in their church. He's got plenty of constructive criticism coming, but the fact is that for all their faults, they are a church that truly is showing the Spirit and proclaiming Jesus. Look at verses 4-9:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In verses 5-9 Paul begins with what God has done for them in the past, describes

who they are right now, and then goes on to remind them of the hope they have for the future. Again, it's all centred on and built around Jesus the Messiah. It's through Jesus that God has given them this grace. That grace has enriched them in speech and knowledge and it was this "testimony about the Messiah" that brought it about. Brothers and Sisters think about that. It's true for us too. We need to let the Good News that this Jesus who died and rose again and who is Lord and King, we need to let this Good News take ever deeper root in our life as a Church. The deeper the root of the Gospel grows, the more tightly we hold on to it, the more we come to understand it and its implication for life in Jesus and our common life together the more we will be enriched in our speech and knowledge. They were eager to learn and to grow. They were teaching each other and strengthening each other and confirming in the Spirit's power the truth of the Gospel, the truth about Jesus and his kingdom and the life God gives through him.

And, Paul writes, in all this they—and we—will also be enriched by the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit Jesus equips his people to minister in ways we can never manage on our own. The Corinthian Church had been blessed and enriched by the Spirit in amazing ways. In fact, they'd been so enriched by the Spirit that they struggled to use his gifts rightly and to know how to use them rightly and for the benefit of the church and the kingdom. That subject takes up much of the letter.

But what's important to Paul here at the beginning is that God in Jesus has called them and set them apart to be his people, he's equipped them and continues to equip them through the Spirit even though they're struggling to use his gifts rightly, and Paul reminds them that it's all worth it because they know that they're pressing on towards an amazing future hope. Sometimes it's easy for us to lose sight of the reason for our being called and set apart by God. If it's not our forgetting that Jesus is at the centre of our life it's often that we forget our future hope. Paul reminds them—and, again, he reminds us too—that they wait eagerly for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, we struggle here because we so often forget the big picture of the story of

redemption. God has been at work since the beginning, since we human first rebelled and subjected his good Creation to sin and death. He's been working to bring redemption, he's been working to break our bondage to sin and death, and he's been working to re-establish the communion we were created to have with him. This is why he called Abraham. Israel was called and set apart as a holy people to restore the knowledge of God, to be a light to the pagan nations. Of course the people of Israel were sinners too. Israel struggled to fulfil her mission. Moses, Joshua, the Judges, King David, and the Prophets were all called and set apart at various times to get Israel back on track to fulfil her mission. And finally Jesus came in fulfilment of God's promises to set it all to rights. In the death and resurrection of King Jesus Israel's mission was fulfilled, sin and death were conquered, and the life of God was unleashed. And we, the Church, are called to carry this Good News about the King and his life-giving kingdom to the nations. We've been equipped by the Spirit. But we need to remember and we need to stay focused on our hope. One day the King will return and finish what he started that first Easter. One day the King will come, when every enemy has been put under his feet and vanquished, he will come to resurrect his people to the life of the age to come, he'll come to restore his Creation. In the meantime he will sustain us. He's given his Spirit to do so and his Spirit serves as a promise and down-payment of that life of the age to come we so long for. Jesus feeds us at his Table each week on the bread and wine to remind us that he will, as Paul says, sustain us to the end, to that final day when Jesus will be revealed as King in all his glory. In the meantime, Paul urges to live in hope remembering the faithfulness of the God who has called us into the life-giving fellowship of his Son. Brothers and Sisters, as we are sustained by Jesus and the Spirit, remember the story into which we've been swept up. Tell the story. Proclaim the story. Live the story of redemption. Having experienced the goodness and faithfulness of God, let us proclaim the goodness and the faithfulness of our God who has given the world himself in Jesus to forgive and to restore and to make all things new.

Let us pray: Good and faithful Father, we asked earlier in the Collect for grace to

follow you with pure hearts and minds. You have called and sanctified us, setting us apart to be a holy people. Keep us holy, pure in heart and mind, we pray and keep our calling always before us. Let us never forget that you have called us, redeemed us, renewed us, and made us one with the Lord Jesus that having known your goodness and faithfulness we might proclaim the Good News of Jesus and his kingdom to the world. Give us grace to live according to our calling that the people around might see Jesus alive in us. And give us opportunities to proclaim the Good News, give us eyes to see those opportunities, and give us courage to use those opportunities when they come. We ask all this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.