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Called to Be Saints

(1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

1

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1-3)

Rather than placing their names at the end of a letter, as is the modern custom, ancient Greeks put their names at the beginning, allowing readers to immediately identify the author. In a joint letter, the names of the others involved in sending the message were also given. **Paul** always gave his name at the beginning of his letters and frequently named other church leaders who, in some degree or other, joined him in writing. In 1 Corinthians he mentions **Sosthenes**, and in 2 Corinthians, Timothy (2 Cor. 1:1; cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1).

Next was given the name of the addressee, the person or persons to whom the letter was sent, which for the present letter was **the church of God which is at Corinth**. Then words of greeting or blessing were often given, as in v. 3. Paul used such a threefold salutation in all of his New Testament letters.

Paul also generally referred to himself as **an apostle**, not for the purpose of identity—that is to distinguish himself from other Pauls in the church or simply

to inform his readers of his office—but to indicate at the very beginning that he was writing first of all as an emissary of the Lord. His apostleship established his authority. Even in his letters to Timothy, his close associate and “true child in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2), Paul calls attention to his apostleship (1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). Only in Philippians, the Thessalonian letters, and Philemon does he not mention his apostleship in his opening words.

His description of himself as **an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God** was not a reflection of pride or self-glory. He was not flaunting his position of authority, as some speakers and writers often do with their titles, degrees, and accomplishments. Self-glory was the furthest thing from Paul’s intent. Later in this same epistle he refers to himself as “the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (15:9).

Sometimes, however, it is important to establish one’s right to speak authoritatively on a subject. A person, for instance, who has no medical degree or training or experience would never get a hearing at a conference on medicine. A person’s credentials give some indication as to whether or not what he has to say should be taken seriously. Paul did not mention his apostleship in order to gain honor as an individual but to gain respect as a teacher of God’s Word. He was not an apostle by his own appointment, or even by the church’s appointment, but by God’s appointment—**by the will of God**. At the outset he wanted to establish that what he had to say was said with God’s own authority. Since his message was so corrective, this was of great necessity.

FIVE REASONS FOR PAUL’S ASSERTING HIS APOSTLESHIP

I believe there are perhaps five reasons why Paul, unlike the other apostolic writers, was so careful to assert his apostleship in his letters. First of all, he was not a part of the twelve. He had not been called by Jesus during His earthly ministry to be one of the inner circle of disciples who accompanied Him “beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us” (Acts 1:22). Of that original group, one (Judas) was disqualified and was later replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:21-26)—who, though identified by casting lots, was chosen by God (v. 24). With the selection of Matthias the apostolic ranks were again complete. Beginning at Pentecost the apostles were clearly the authoritative voice of the gospel. When Peter gave his message at that time, he did so “taking his stand with the eleven” (Acts 2:14; cf. v. 37), and the infant church in Jerusalem devoted itself to “the apostles’ teaching” (v. 42). The apostles were the Lord’s supreme earthly representatives, and they preached and taught with His authority. With Christ as the “corner stone,” the apostles were the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).

As far as we know, however, Paul never saw or heard Jesus during that time. Paul was first known to the church as a bitter enemy and persecutor, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1; cf. 8:1). He not only had not chosen to be a follower of Christ but had chosen to oppose Christ’s followers with all his might. Even after his conversion there was no way he could retroactively be-

come one of the twelve. Yet he declared himself to be an apostle, based on the same foundational qualifications as those of the twelve. He, too, had seen the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:3-6, 17; 22:11-15; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8) and he, too, in unique revelations, had been specifically chosen by the Lord to be an apostle (1 Cor. 1:1). He was concerned to establish the fact that he was equal to the twelve as a foundational teacher of revealed truth.

Second, I believe that he emphasized his apostleship because of his dealings with detractors and false teachers, by whom he was continually being challenged and harassed. The Judaizers were particularly strong and persistent in opposing Paul's authority and doctrine and in questioning his motives. Even some who claimed to be his friends resisted his leadership and questioned his teaching. Such ridicule and persecution Paul considered to be badges of apostleship. "For," he said, "I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (4:9). In spite of denials, Paul's teaching was true and reliable, for he was a divinely called apostle of Jesus Christ.

Third, Paul emphasized his apostleship because of his relationship to Christ. This emphasis was for the benefit of fellow believers. The Christians in Jerusalem, especially, had not been sure about the genuineness of Paul's faith. Having known him, or known of him, as Saul of Tarsus, the fierce persecutor of the church, they had difficulty believing that he could now be a reliable Christian leader, much less an apostle (Acts 9:26). Their fears were, of course, also fed by the accusations and detractions of the false teachers. It was not hard to believe the worst about him. Christians in other places also had misgivings. Legalistic Judaizers, for example, had confused many Christians in Galatia both about the gospel (Gal. 1:6; 3:1-5) and about Paul's authority in teaching it (1:11-2:10). He therefore carefully reminded the Corinthian church of his full apostolic authority in writing this letter to them, pointing out that, when he had ministered among them, he did so in God's power and wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-7).

Fourth, Paul emphasized his apostleship to point up his special relationship to the church in Corinth itself, which was "a seal of [his] apostleship in the Lord" (9:2). They, of all people, should recognize his special calling and position. Their very existence as a body of believers was a proof of his right to address them with divine authority. He had been the instrument God used to bring them to salvation.

Fifth, Paul emphasized his apostleship in order to show his special relationship to God as His emissary. He was **an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God**. He was saying, in effect, "What I say to you is delegated by God. I am His apostle, and my message to you is God's message to you."

When the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, was asked to arbitrate a serious dispute or to give an interpretation regarding Jewish law or tradition, they would send their decision by an *apostolos* to the parties involved, who were often represented through a synagogue. As far as the message was concerned, the *apostolos* possessed the full authority of the Sanhedrin. He did not speak for himself, but for the Sanhedrin. Yet he was more than a messenger. He was an emissary, an envoy, an

ambassador. Paul was God's envoy, God's ambassador (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20), God's **apostolos**. While among them he had not preached his own message to the Corinthians, but God's message. He was not now writing his own message to them, but God's message.

In light of the twelve, in light of false teachers, and in light of his relationship to Christ, to the Corinthian church, and to God the Father, Paul was fully an apostle. He was careful to establish the legitimacy of his apostleship in order to establish the legitimacy of his message.

THE PURPOSES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE APOSTLES

Apostles were chosen by God to work in the founding and forming of the church, after which time apostleship ceased. When all the apostles had died, the office of apostle no longer existed. They were selected, sent, and empowered by God for that period in the history of the church, which was over when their lives were over. As the human founders and foundation of the church, the apostles had particular purposes and responsibilities.

First, as eyewitnesses, they were to preach the gospel—the true, complete, and authoritative gospel of Christ's substitutionary atonement by His death and resurrection and of salvation by faith in Him (1 Cor. 1:17-18; cf. 9:14). Their teaching was equivalent to Christ's teaching. As will be developed in a later chapter, there is no distinction, as some interpreters maintain, between what Paul (or Peter or James or John) teaches in the New Testament and what God teaches. Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:12 ("I say, not the Lord"), for example, simply indicates that Jesus, during His earthly ministry, gave no specific teaching on the subject being discussed (that of a believer's remaining with an unbelieving spouse). As an apostle, Paul was qualified to teach in behalf of Christ, and his teaching was as authoritative as if spoken from Jesus' own lips.

The apostles also were to be devoted to prayer and to ministering the word (Acts 6:4) and to equipping believers for service in order to build up Christ's Body (Eph. 4:11-12). Finally, they were to evidence their apostleship by performing miracles (2 Cor. 12:12).

Sosthenes our brother may have been Paul's amanuensis, or secretary, at the time this letter was written. The fact that his name is included in the greeting, however, indicates that he not only penned the letter but fully agreed with Paul about its message.

This is no doubt the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18, one who knew the Corinthian situation well. He had been a leader of the synagogue at Corinth, probably replacing Crispus, the former leader who had become a believer (Acts 18:8). On one occasion Sosthenes was beaten for his involvement in bringing Paul before the civil court at Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). Some ancient manuscripts of the text report that the Jews beat him and other manuscripts report that the Greeks beat him. If by the Jews, it no doubt was because he represented them so poorly at court. If by the Greeks, it was because they resented his taking up their court time with a matter that concerned only

Jewish religion.

Now, however, Paul could refer to Sosthenes as “our brother,” indicating that some time after the incident just mentioned—and perhaps partly because of it—this former opponent of the gospel, like Paul himself, had become a Christian. Having likely been converted under Paul’s preaching and having worked with the apostle for perhaps a year or more in Corinth, Sosthenes was known and respected by the Corinthian believers whom he now joined Paul in writing.

SAINTHOOD

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. (1:2)

The church to whom Paul was writing was not the church of the Corinthians but **the church of God** which was located at Corinth. The church is a body of people who belong not to themselves or to any leader or group but to God. Believers, whether pastors, officers, or ordinary members in the church, together compose Christ’s earthly Body and all are called to be stewards of it (Eph. 4:11-13). We are not our own, individually or collectively, but have all been bought with the price of Christ’s blood (1 Cor. 6:20).

POSITION AND PRACTICE

All believers **have been sanctified in Christ Jesus** and are **saints by calling**. A saint, as the term is used in the New Testament, is not a specially pious or self-sacrificing Christian who has been canonized by an ecclesiastical council. The Greek word translated **saint** is *hagios*, meaning “set apart one,” or “holy one.” The Corinthian believers were holy in God’s sight, regardless of their sinful living and distorted doctrine. They were saints because they had **been sanctified** (from *hagiazō*), set apart from sin, **made holy in Christ Jesus**. According to Scripture, every true believer in Jesus Christ—whether faithful or unfaithful, well known or unknown, leader or follower—is a set apart person, a holy person, a saint. In the biblical sense, the most obscure believer today is just as much a saint as the apostle Paul. This is the believer’s position in Christ.

Holiness, in that positional sense, is not a matter of good works, of holy living. As Christians we should live holy lives, but holy living does not make us holy. To the extent our living is holy, it is because, in Christ, we already *are* holy and have the counsel and power of His Holy Spirit. We are holy because the Sanctifier (the One who makes holy) has already sanctified us in response to our trust in Him (Heb. 2:11). Christ’s work, not our own, makes us holy. We are “saints by calling.” That refers to the efficacious call of God to salvation (1:24, 26).

Like all believers, the Corinthians were **saints** because God called them to

be saints (cf. Gal. 1:6; Eph. 4:1,4; Col. 3:15; 1 Tim. 6:12; 1 Pet. 2:9, 21; 3:9; 2 Pet. 1:3; Jude 1). “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10; cf. v. 14). By His own sacrificial work on the cross, Jesus Christ sanctifies those who believe in Him. He sets them apart (the root meaning of *hagiazō*) for Himself, cleanses them, and perfects them. God provides holiness through His Son. Man’s part is to claim holiness, to claim sainthood, by faith in the Son (Acts 26:18). We have a new nature, the divine nature, and have escaped the corruptions of the world, possessing all things related to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

Paul’s declaring all the Corinthian believers to be saints was quite a declaration in light of the things—very evident from the rest of this letter—that characterized their living. The Corinthian church was far from being saintly in the sense in which the term is often used. They were particularly worldly and immoral, yet in his opening words Paul stressed that every one of them who had truly believed in Jesus Christ was saved and was a saint. Not only are all saints saved, but all the saved are saints. Every believer has the right to call himself a saint. None of us is worthy of the title, but God has declared us to be saints because of our trust in His Son. Our practice, our behavior in our humanness, needs to be conformed to our “saintly” new divine nature.

Paul seems to have been especially determined to make that truth clear to the Corinthians. Virtually the entire letter of 1 Corinthians, beginning with 1:10, deals with wrong doctrine and wrong behavior. It seems that nearly every serious doctrinal and moral error imaginable could be found within that congregation. Yet Paul begins the letter by calling them saints. In practice they were gross sinners, but in position they were pure saints. We should note that there were, no doubt, some in the church who were not saints at all, who were unbelievers (16:22).

It is important for every Christian to keep in mind the great difference between his position and his practice, his standing and his state. God sees us as righteous, because He sees us through His righteous Son, who has taken our place, and because He has planted in us a righteous new nature. Without keeping this important and encouraging truth in mind, it is impossible to clearly understand 1 Corinthians or any other part of the New Testament.

Presidents do not always act presidentially, diplomats do not always act diplomatically, kings do not always act kingly—but they are still presidents, diplomats, and kings. Christians do not always act like Christians, but they are still Christians.

Some years ago a young boy, whose father was a pastor, was put in jail for stealing some merchandise from a department store. His father happened to be playing golf with some of the church leaders at the time and received a call while on the golf course to come down to the jail to get his son. Thinking it was a mistake, the pastor took the other men with him to the police station, where embarrassment abounded. The deepest impression of the incident left on the boy’s mind was made by the repeated reminders he received from those men, and from many others afterward, about who his father was. “Having a father like yours,” they would ask, “how could you have done what you did?” Yet as humiliating and painful as the experience was, the boy knew he was still his father’s son. He had not acted like a son of his father should have acted, but

he was still a son.

As Christians one of the strongest rebukes we can have when we sin is to be reminded of who our Father is. And reminding ourselves of whose we are should be one of our strongest deterrents to sin. Remembering our position can compel us to improve our practice.

Further, Paul increased the Corinthians' sense of responsibility by reminding them that they were linked in spiritual life to **all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours**. This is added to heighten their sense of identity and responsibility with all "who have received a faith of the same kind as ours" (2 Pet. 1:1).

Before Paul took the Corinthians to task for their failures as Christians, he carefully and lovingly reminded them that they were Christians. They belonged to God and to each other in a far-reaching fellowship. That in itself should have been a rebuke to them and no doubt pierced the consciences of those who were at all spiritually sensitive. In 1:2-9 he summarizes their position and their blessings as believers in Jesus Christ, as children of God, as saints. "Look at what you are! Look at what you have!" Only then does he say, "Now I exhort you, brethren" (1:10).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:3)

Paul used a common form of Christian greeting (cf. Rom. 1:7; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3; Rev. 1:4; etc.). **Grace** is favor, and **peace** is one of its fruits. Peace (Greek *eirēnē*) was used as the equivalent of the Hebrew *shālôm*, still the most common Jewish greeting today. The peace of which Paul speaks here is "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension" (Phil. 4:7). It is the peace that only Christians can have, for only Christ can give it (John 14:27). The world does not have and cannot give that kind of peace. The greeting "grace and peace" is appropriate only for believer to believer, because it speaks of blessings that only they possess.