

BEING CONFIDENT IN GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Introduction

Charles Swindoll – "It's not unusual to find situations today of squabbles and infighting within our local churches and within our denominations. We hear reports of conflict and trouble in our churches over any number of issues, and we often experience that conflict firsthand. What church body doesn't have its share of disagreements and divisions? Those experiences lead us to conclude that the first letter to the Corinthians is a thoroughly modern letter with a powerfully pertinent message for us."

Explain the background to this decision to look at 1 Corinthians – comment from Julianne...

We need to begin with the historical setting for this letter and in order to do that, we need to consider the church to which Paul was writing, and the city in which it was located. The city of Corinth was known for many things.

- A city in Greece – right on the small isthmus, about four miles wide that connected the northern and southern parts of Greece. The Mediterranean Sea lay to the west and the Aegean Sea to the East.
- A city of tremendous trade and commerce. People going from Athens to Sparta went through Corinth. Ships travelling from east to west had to travel around the Cape of Malea, which was noted for its terrible storms. So many ships came into the harbour at Corinth where their cargo was transported overland across the four-mile strip of land to be loaded on another ship on the other side.
- As a result of all of this traffic Corinth became a hub of great wealth and economic activity.
- It was also a hub of entertainment and the arts, which included every kind of vice and immorality. Swindoll says, "*Corinth was busy, loud, full of vice, unruly and heavily populated... Corinth was the place to live if you wanted to 'let the good times roll.'*"

- Corinth was also known for its religion (not Christianity). High on a hill overlooking the city stood a magnificent temple dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of sensuality. The temple boasted over a thousand temple prostitutes who offered themselves openly for every kind of immorality and sensuality in the name of religion.

It was into this kind of place that the Apostle Paul came in AD 51-52 to preach the gospel and to establish a church. You can find the account in Acts 18 – he spent 18 months there, and a church was established. But in a city like Corinth, a hotbed of unbridled immorality, it's no wonder that soon the church was being plagued by deep problems.

It was to this troubled church that Paul wrote the letter which we call 1 Corinthians. It was written about 2 years after he had left Corinth. This was actually the second letter he had written to the church there. The first has not been preserved for us, but Paul refers to it in this letter.

This is a letter to a troubled church. As you read through it you see some of the problems that plagued the church in Corinth.

- divisions over leadership
- immaturity
- disorder
- immorality
- carnality
- arguments over conscience
- corruption of the Lord's supper
- misuse and abuse of spiritual gifts
- false teaching regarding the resurrection

Yes, this church had a lot of problems. It was an immature body, fraught with division and disagreement, floundering in the areas of sin and morality. Yet there is something very interesting that Paul has to say in the opening remarks of his letter.

Briefly go through vv. 1-3 – Paul's greeting to the church.

Confidence in the future of the Church – vv. 4-9

In the next few verses Paul expressed great confidence in the future of this church and the people who made up this congregation, in spite of their downfalls and failures. The reason for his confidence is not

what the Corinthian believers have accomplished but rather what God has done. Listen again to the words of Paul – *read vv. 4-9.*

1. God's grace
2. His enriching in their lives
3. His gifts to them for ministry
4. His strength and power
5. His calling on their lives
6. His faithfulness in provision of all things

Application

There are a number of things which need to be noted as we consider the truth of this passage. (*Adapted from Bob Deffinbaugh*)

1. The certainty of God's work being completed – notice that in spite of the weaknesses and willful sins of these saints, Paul does not begin by questioning the reality of their conversion, but by affirming the present and future benefits. There are texts which do question the reality of the faith of persistently wayward professing believers, but this is not one of them. These saints needed to be reminded of the certainty of their salvation. The certainty of their salvation rests not within themselves, but in the One who called them and the One who will complete all that He has begun. This certainty also assures Paul that his continued ministry to this church is not in vain.
2. There is no such thing as a perfect church, not even in the New Testament. So often Christians look back to the New Testament times as though the church in those days was nearly perfect. If you read the Book of Acts the way I do, there is a wonderful period of bliss in the infancy of the church, but this lasts only from late in chapter 2 to the end of chapter 4. In chapter 5, a couple is struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. In chapter 6, there is strife between two groups of Jews over the care of their widows. And by the time we get to the Corinthian church, it is far from perfect and hardly what could be called good. The final words of our Lord to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3 are not complimentary either. The church was not perfect in New Testament times, and neither is it perfect today. The same sins which Paul exposes in 1 and 2 Corinthians are present and evident in evangelical churches today.

And so Paul's words of admonition and correction are just as applicable to us today as they were to the saints of his day.

3. There is hope even in failure because the outcome is in God's hands not ours. If there was hope for the Corinthians, then there is hope for anyone. The first nine verses of this epistle are saturated with reason for hope. Just look at the writer of this letter. The apostle Paul was once Saul, the Saul who stood by and held the garments for those who stoned Stephen, the Saul who went from city to city seeking to find Christians whom he could arrest and even put to death. This Saul is now willing to give his life for the sake of the gospel.
4. If there is hope for the lost, there is also hope for those who are saved but whose life falls far short of the standard set by the Scriptures. Here is a church that seems almost beyond hope. There are divisions, immorality, and opposition to the apostle Paul and to apostolic teaching. Is Paul discouraged? Does Paul give up hope? No! Paul's first words to this church are those of hope and confidence. Paul's confidence and hope are not in the Corinthians, in their good intentions, or in their diligent efforts. His hope is in the One who called him and who called the Corinthian saints as well. His hope is in the fact that God has abundantly provided for every spiritual need in that church. His hope is in the faithfulness of the God who started the good work in these believers and who is committed to bring it to completion.

Conclusion

I am so glad that God has chosen to show us not only the glory but also the darker side of human nature. Even in the early church there were problems. But Paul did not despair, and neither should we. Sometimes the church of today may look like the Corinthian church, divided, floundering, succumbing to the moral decadence of the society around us. Yet God does not give up. Where there are true believers, He is still at work. He will not abandon His church – it is Christ's body.

As an individual, if you have ever felt that your life was beyond hope, this epistle is for you. *Its very first words remind you of the character and the work of God in the saints, through the work of His Son,*

Jesus Christ. We need to stop trusting in ourselves, in our good intentions, in our own efforts, and continually place our trust in the One who alone can save and sanctify.

Over the coming weeks we are going to see not only the weaknesses and failures in the church at Corinth, but also the grace and the power of God to work in spite of our weakness.

Close in prayer.