

Cliques and the Cross

1 Corinthians 1

Once Paul has greeted his readers and given the customary prayer of thanksgiving for the blessings they have received, he plunges immediately into the first major problem he has to address, that of factions in the community. It leads him to a lyrical preaching of the cross (1:17–2:5), one of the most powerful passages of the entire New Testament.

Address and Greeting (1:1–3)

¹Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ²to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

OT: Ps 99:6; Joel 3:5

NT: Acts 2:21; 9:14; 18:1–21; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 10:32

Catechism: all called to holiness, 542–43, 2013–14; holiness of the Church, 825; union with Christ, 1694

Lectionary: Votive Mass of the Most Holy Name of Jesus

Paul follows the conventions of Greek letter writing by beginning his letter with an address, a greeting, and a thanksgiving. He adroitly uses each part of this template to hint at three of the major concerns of the letter—holiness,

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unity, and the †charisms. But first he titles himself **apostle of Christ Jesus**, thus emphasizing the authority with which he writes. (Contrast 1 and 2 Thesalonians, where he uses no title at all, and Phil 1:1, where he calls himself “servant.”) Although Paul will use this authority when necessary (as in the case of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5:13), he will prefer to leave it implicit, while he exhorts his readers by reminding them of the great graces of their calling. In fact he himself is apostle only because he was **called** by Christ and thus sent not by his own eagerness or choice but **by the will of God**. “Apostle” means one who is sent, like an ambassador authorized to speak for the sender. Although the title is used occasionally for other †ministers (Acts 14:14; Rom 16:7), in applying it to himself Paul is equating his authority with that of the Twelve, who not only were chosen by Christ but also saw the risen Lord and thus were doubly equipped to be his witnesses (“Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” 1 Cor 9:1).

Paul calls **Sosthenes**, the cosender of the letter, **brother**, the term early Christians used for one another and Paul also used for his collaborators (2 Cor 2:13). Early Christians understood themselves to be an extended family, after the example of Jesus, who called his disciples his brothers, sisters, and even mother (Matt 12:49–50). Sosthenes is possibly the same one mentioned in Acts 18:17 as a leader of the synagogue in Corinth whom other Jews roughed up in front of the governor Gallio. Why they beat Sosthenes instead of Paul is not clear. Perhaps he had angered them by converting to the new faith proclaimed by Paul or by merely showing himself sympathetic to him. Local supporters of an unpopular outsider are often more vulnerable than the outsider himself, because they show a threatening crack in the domestic defense against foreign invasion.

In mentioning a cosender of the letter, Paul follows the practice of other letters.¹ Paul is not a Lone Ranger but a team player.

- 2 The addressee is not an individual but a community, **the church of God . . . in Corinth**. Though the letter was apparently delivered by Timothy (1 Cor 4:17), who probably read it to the community, offering his own comments to explain when necessary, the absence of a leader-addressee indicates that Paul still feels so close to the community he founded that he can address them directly, though we may assume there were local leaders (16:15–16; 1 Thess 5:12–13). He is himself the authority without equal but also one who has an unparalleled affection for his spiritual children (1 Cor 4:15). By this time, if the number of converts has grown beyond the capacity of one house, which is likely, there would be more than one house church in Corinth (1:11), each no doubt having

1. As in 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Philem 1.

All Are Called

The universal call to holiness is stressed by the Second Vatican Council: “All the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father himself is perfect” (*Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church], §11). “If therefore everyone in the Church does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God (cf. 2 Pet 1:1)” (§32).



some kind of coordinator. Yet it is significant that he does not speak of churches in the plural but only of a singular church in Corinth—a precursor of dioceses with multiple parishes. If “church” here refers to the sum of house churches, it is easy to see how it could be applied to the one Church universal, as it so clearly is in the letter to the Ephesians. Thus in the desert narrative of the Old Testament, the “assembly of the Lord” includes all the tribes gathered as one. There the Israelites were the people the Lord called out of Egypt to be his own. So God has called the Christians out of the world to a saving union with Christ (1 Cor 1:9). Calling the community the “church of God” links the Corinthian church with the Jewish Christian churches of God in Judea (1 Thess 2:14), as well as those of Galatia, Asia, and Macedonia. Already in this title “church,” Paul is inviting them to think beyond their personal interests.

Paul then strikes a major chord when he says that they have been **sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy**. Sanctified means consecrated: set apart for a divine purpose, as a chalice or church might be consecrated today. Though remaining in the world, Christians do not belong to the world (John 15:19; 17:14). We are saints, not in the sense of being consummately holy as are those heroes of holiness who are canonized today. Rather, the radical consecration is that of our baptism. We belong to Jesus Christ. This is the union that sanctifies us, and it has its source in God’s call, a gratuitous, unmerited act of love on God’s part. The Greek translated “sanctified . . . called to be holy” can also mean “saints because called” by the Lord. In Paul’s mind the radical consecration, which he considers a real change in being, calls for a corresponding behavior. “Action follows being,” as the philosophers would say. At this point Paul stresses the gift and dignity of the Christian state, which would hopefully evoke gratitude in the Corinthians and provide the basis for Paul’s later specific ethical challenges. Chrysostom points out that the idea of “call” is central to this address,

signifying that the gospel was not Paul's idea but came from God, as did the call of the Corinthians, who in turn "call" on the Lord.²

Paul invites his listeners (the letter would be read publicly) to think beyond their borders. They are part of a much larger community of believers **everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours**. To call upon the divine name is a frequent Old Testament expression for adoring God (Ps 99:6; Joel 3:5). Used here with reference to Christ, it means that divine honor is given him. Thus today those who "call on the name of Christ" would not include those who deny his divinity, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims, who reverence him only as a prophet. As the invoking of the name of Yahweh expressed the unity of the people in the Old Testament, so does the name of Christ express the unity of Christians wherever they are. Paul is laying the groundwork for his later condemnation of the maverick attitudes and behaviors of the Corinthians. The word of God did not originate with them; there are many others whom it has already reached (1 Cor 14:36). The customs of the other churches create a law of sorts (11:16).

3 The greeting is in the form of a blessing. Paul takes the customary Greek greeting *chara* or *chaire* ("joy, rejoice") and tweaks it into *charis*, **grace**. This word recalls God's merciful love shown in Jesus Christ and bestowed on Christians through the Holy Spirit. **Peace** is the customary Jewish greeting *shalom*, meaning the fullness of life, well-being, and prosperity. In Paul it means the interior gift that flows from the indwelling Spirit and from charity (Gal 5:22), the spirit of harmony and well-being in the soul reconciled with the Father in the Son. In this initial blessing, Paul combines a tweaked Gentile greeting with a Jewish one, fitting the ethnic mix of the community.

Reflection and Application (1:1–3)

The very beginning of this letter jolts us into an awareness of who we really are. We are a consecrated people. We are set apart by a call from God himself to be holy: consecrated to God and his service. But this is not a private Jesus-and-me arrangement. We are part of a holy people, a holy community, linked with every Christian community throughout the world—from Boston to Bangkok, from London to Lusaka, from San Francisco to Samoa. We are joined with people of every language and every color in the world. And we belong to the community of the past and the future and what we today call the communion of saints. One of the most powerful experiences I have had is attending an

2. Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 1.1.

international conference where brothers and sisters of dozens of languages united in one great tide of worship and praise. That is the real meaning of “Catholic”: universal. The Second Vatican Council wrestled with the tension between honoring local cultures in the liturgy, on the one hand, and the need for basic uniformity, on the other, so that I can know that the Eucharist I celebrate in San Antonio is the same as what is being celebrated in Africa. Note how in these three opening verses we find the four marks of the Church as one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic (Catechism, 811–70).

Most Catholics still think today of “saints” as those who have either been canonized or are worthy of canonization, those separated from the rest of us sinners by their exalted holiness. Unfortunately, a by-product of such a conception is the all-too-easy, albeit unconscious, release of any serious expectation of our becoming really holy. Many laypeople tend to think of holiness as the call of priests or the religious but not the call of the laity. Such is not the case. “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 40; see also Catechism, 2013–14).

In these first three verses we have also met Paul’s “become what you are” theology, which will run through the entire letter. Holiness is not so much a goal we are called to reach as it is a consecration we are called to live out.

Thanksgiving (1:4–9)

⁴I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, ⁵that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, ⁶as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus (Christ). ⁹God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

NT: Rom 1:8; 12:6; 1 Cor 12:1–14:40; Phil 1:3–4, 6; 3:20–21

Catechism: prayer of thanksgiving, 2637–38; Church as communion, 787–96, 959

Lectionary: First Sunday of Advent (Year B); Votive Mass of Thanksgiving

The typical format of Greek letters calls for a thanksgiving at this point, but for Paul this is far from a formality. No one more than Paul is aware of the **grace of God** in his own life and in that of his communities (the word “grace” appears eighty-nine times in the Pauline Letters, seven times in 1 Corinthians). Though

Greek letter writers would often thank the gods for keeping the addressee in good health or for some other material boon, Paul always thanks God for some spiritual blessing experienced by his readers, or, in the case of 1 Tim 1:12–17, for the grace of his own conversion. In an earlier letter to the Thessalonians, he thanked God for their faith, love, and hope (1 Thess 1:3). But in the case of the Corinthians, Paul makes no reference to their faith and love, and hope is only implied in their looking forward to the coming of Christ. Why is this? No doubt because Paul finds their faith poorly formed and their love singularly deficient, as we will see in the rest of the letter. Nevertheless, he thanks God for the charismatic graces, which the Corinthians so highly prize, and thus Paul hopes to prepare their hearts to hear what else he will have to say.

5 They have been **enriched in every way**. The image of riches or being enriched by the grace of God is a favorite of Paul, especially in Romans and the †Captivity Epistles.³ **With all discourse**, or “in all your speaking” (NIV), appropriately translates the literal Greek “in every word,” since the Corinthians’ assemblies are quite noisy, with some not waiting to speak until others have finished (14:29–33). What kinds of speech would be covered by this generality? Certainly words of praise, thanksgiving, adoration as an upward movement toward God, but especially speech *from* God, such as prophecy or preaching or **knowledge**. The latter apparently refers to an insight into the †mystery of Christ (13:2), perhaps also to the knowledge that some of them claim about idols (8:1–6). Inasmuch as the knowledge here is a prophetic gift, it might include a fact known only by a direct illumination by the Holy Spirit (like Jesus’ knowing that the Samaritan woman has had five husbands; John 4:18).⁴ Paul here assesses these gifts positively, though later he will say that without love they mean nothing (13:1–13) and “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1 NRSV).

6–7 The reason for Paul’s positive assessment is given in verse 6. These gifts show that **the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you**. The “testimony of Christ” (Greek) has at least two levels of meaning. At a foundational level it refers to the testimony that Jesus gave to God’s love by dying on the cross and rising from the dead (the Greek word for “testimony” here is *martyrion*, from which our word “martyr” is derived). But here it also refers more specifically to the “testimony to Christ” that Paul bore in his initial preaching of that message to the Corinthians, which was followed by confirming signs (1 Cor 2:4; Mark

3. See Rom 2:4; 9:23; 11:33; Eph 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16; Col 1:27; 2:2.

4. See also Mark 11:2; 14:13; John 1:48. Examples of this kind of charismatic knowledge are frequent in the Old Testament: Nathan knows about David’s sin (2 Sam 12:1–12); Samuel knows that Saul’s asses have been found and tells Saul what will happen to him on his journey (1 Sam 10:2–6); Daniel knows and relates King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan 2:28–35).

16:17–20; Gal 3:1–5). The outburst of praise and inspired speech, and probably other signs that followed their conversion and acceptance of Christ, was a surprising visitation of the Holy Spirit, which empowered them in ways they never before experienced. Thus they **are not lacking in any spiritual gift**. The two references to the abundance of gifts (vv. 5 and 7) frame the “testimony of Christ” in verse 6, showing the important relation between the gifts and faith in the message about Jesus Christ. That relation was twofold: they experienced the gifts because they believed in the message, and the gifts gave visible manifestation of the nature of the message—amazing new life. The word “gift” here is *charisma*, referring not to the grace that saves but to the †charisms. (The NAB adds the word “spiritual” in the translation, lest the reader think merely of the Corinthians’ natural talents.) After capturing the goodwill of his readers, Paul will soon show how the abundance of these gifts contrasts sharply with the absence of charity in the community. By adding **as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ**, Paul subtly hints that the Corinthians have not arrived at their perfection. The abundance of spiritual gifts in the community does not mean that the day of the Lord is already here (2 Thess 2:2)—a kind of excessively realized †eschatology. On the contrary, the consummation of the kingdom is still to come, and there is much to be done for their own spiritual growth in the meantime. But it will be more the work of the Lord than their own efforts.

He will keep you firm to the end, irrefragable on the day of our Lord Jesus (Christ). The translation “He will keep you firm” could suggest that the grace is merely one of perseverance, but the Greek verb can also be translated, “He will strengthen you,” which suggests that they have weaknesses that the risen Lord will progressively replace with his strength. Paul’s positive belief in this happy outcome rests in the fact that **God is faithful**, a belief Paul already held as a Jew and mentions elsewhere (10:13; 1 Thess 5:24; 2 Thess 3:3). The concluding mention of “God” forms a frame with the earlier mention in verse 4, providing an †inclusio typical of Jewish †rhetorical style.

Just as Paul’s mission was based on a call given him by God (1:1), so too the new state of Christians is due to the initiating grace of God, by whom **you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord**. It is striking that in these six verses (vv. 4–9) Jesus is mentioned five times. Obviously it is the Person of Jesus who dominates every consideration of Paul. “Fellowship” is the Greek *koinōnia*, which is sometimes rendered as “union,” “communion,” or “community.” The climax of Paul’s thanksgiving is that, through Paul’s ministry and their faith, God has called the Christians in Corinth to be one with his Son, which gives them the right to be called God’s sons and daughters. At the same time *koinōnia* evokes

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community with other brothers and sisters, so that it has a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension. Thus the spiritual gifts that so excite the Corinthians derive from their union with Jesus Christ and are ordered to building the community made by faith in him, thus demanding a sensitivity to the common good. In the rest of the letter Paul will draw these consequences. But in this thanksgiving Paul is content to show that they all flow from the unspeakable grace and the holy state with which, through no merit of their own, the Corinthians have been gifted.

Reflection and Application (1:4–9)

Before praying for needs, whether our own or those of others, here we learn from Paul to begin with thanksgiving for gifts that we have already received, whether these be natural gifts or gifts of grace. What do we think of a friend who comes to us only when he or she wants something? Perhaps if we spent as much time thanking God as we do asking for things, we might receive what we ask for more readily! Petitions, Paul tells the Philippians (4:6), should be presented with thanksgiving. It is so easy to get caught up in our anxieties and needs that we pay scant attention to what God has already done for us, and even less to who God is in himself.

Factions in the Community (1:10–17)

¹⁰I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you. ¹²I mean that each of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I give thanks [to God] that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I baptized the household of Stephanas also; beyond that I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning.

NT: Acts 16:15; 18:24–28; Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 15:17

Catechism: Baptism, sacrament of initiation, 1212; ordinary †ministers, 1256; unity of charity, 814–15

Lectionary: 1:10–13: Votive Mass for the Unity of Christians

From the exalted vision Paul has presented in the address and thanksgiving, he now begins to tell his listeners what this means in practice. He will have many abuses to correct in this letter, but chief among them is that of divisiveness. He plunges into his subject with a cry of urgency: **I urge you**. The Greek verb *parakaleō* here means more than encourage or exhort, but not quite command. It is almost an adjuration, as the mention of the **name** suggests, yet tempered with affection and directness by the term **brothers**, which Paul often uses when he has something painful to relate (1:26; 3:1; 7:29; 10:1; 12:1). The most obvious symptom of the Corinthians' party spirit is their open wrangling. That **all of you agree in what you say** is the translation of what is literally "to speak the same thing," a Classical Greek expression for peace or settling a dispute.⁵ The spirit of concord should be visible and audible in a community bearing the name of Christ. The divisions are not heresies but factions or cliques that militate against charity; they could in the long run precipitate defections in graver matters. **United** translates a verb that is elsewhere used for cleansing and mending fishing nets that have been torn (Matt 4:21; Mark 1:19) or for assembling parts of a whole, as when persons are brought together and mobilized for a common task (noun form in Eph 4:12). Paul's concern for the unity of the local church, like our parishes today, will run throughout his letters (see esp. Phil 2:2).

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Paul's concern is based on a recent report from **Chloe's people**. We know nothing of Chloe otherwise, but these informants, whom Paul delicately avoids naming, lest he irritate involved persons even more, belonged to her household either as members of the family or as slaves, or perhaps as agents of her business whose duties brought them occasionally to Ephesus.

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The divisions are not over doctrine but over personalities. First of all Paul blasts those who claim him as their hero ("**I belong to Paul**") in opposition to others, diplomatically first challenging those most likely to give him ear. Paul's title to prestige in the Corinthian community lay in his role as founder and in his labors of nearly two years there. The Roman element of the community may have especially rallied to Paul's side after the riots of the Jews, the favorable decision of Gallio (Acts 18:12–17), and Paul's choice of the house of Titus Justus (a Roman name) as headquarters for his preaching (Acts 18:7). When, after Paul's departure, **Apollos** arrived and began to preach, he must have presented a considerable contrast with his predecessor, especially by the [†]rhetoric he had learned in Alexandria (the Oxford of the day). His oratory would have appealed to the Greek passion for the beautiful and the mystic.

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5. Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens* 3.3.

The converted Jews would be more inclined to identify with **Cephas** (Peter), for he not only had the prestige of being head of the Twelve but also represented the Palestinian roots of the early Church. If Peter came to Corinth, as Dionysius of Corinth attests⁶ (around AD 170), it was certainly after the foundation of the community (3:6, 10; 4:15). That the community knew him would explain the frequent references to Peter in this epistle (3:3–8, 21–23; 4:14–16; 9:4–6; 15:5).

Would not every Christian want to say, **“I belong to Christ”**? This is a puzzle for biblical scholars. In it some see Jews of Palestinian origin who had known Jesus “in the flesh” and who now are appealing to their direct knowledge of Jesus as justification for their party and perhaps for Judaizing practices they wish to promote. Others see it referring to a group of well-intentioned Christians reacting fittingly to the party spirit of the others, though this is unlikely in view of Paul’s condemnation of them as well. The best solution appears to be that it is a group who are denying dependence on any human intermediary in favor of their own private relation to Christ.

This party spirit involves an absurdity, and Paul uses ironic rhetorical questions to expose it. **Is Christ divided?** Is Christ cut into pieces, so that each of the four persons would have a part? Or perhaps better, is Christ divided against himself? **Was Paul crucified for you?** Here is one of the earliest written affirmations, though indirect, of the saving power of Christ’s death for those who accept it. In Rom 3:22–25, Paul will speak of the shedding of Christ’s blood as an atonement for sin, as Matthew will later report Jesus’ having said at the Last Supper: “This is [the cup of] my blood of the covenant, which will be on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). Paul had surely preached this to the Corinthians, but their championing of different leaders, including Paul, seems to make saviors of those who are only instruments of Christ.

Were you baptized in the name of Paul? further skewers the absurdity. Christians were not baptized in the name of the preacher or the baptizer. The Greek says literally baptized “*unto* the name.” Papyrus documents from this period use this expression to mark the transfer of purchased goods from one person to another. Ascribed to the new name, the goods become the property of the new owner. For Paul, that is what baptism does: it signifies that the person is now the property of Jesus Christ. In this case the transfer of ownership is a consecration. In the Old Testament, invoking the divine name on the people means that God has set them apart as his own, thus making them holy (Deut 28:9–10; Isa 63:19; Jer 7:10; 14:9). Thus baptism “into the name” of Jesus (also

6. Dionysius of Corinth, *Fragments of a Letter to Rome*, in PG 20:209; ET, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/dionysius.html>.

Alternate Baptismal Formulas?

The Catholic Church accepts as valid only the Trinitarian formula, as found in Matt 28:19. It is the only place in the New Testament where a baptismal formula is said to be specifically ordered by Jesus. In the Acts of the Apostles, people are said to be baptized “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5), but this does not necessarily mean that such was the formula used. For example, in Acts 19:5 baptism in the name of Jesus is contrasted with the baptism by John the Baptist. This indicates that “baptism in the name of Jesus” was used to distinguish Christian baptism from other types of baptism or ritual baths. Hebrews 6:2 indicates that the initiation of converts included instruction about different kinds of “baptisms” (note the plural). Today some groups do not use the Trinitarian formula for baptism (Unitarian Pentecostals, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, among others). If at one time the early Church may have baptized “in the name of Jesus,” that was not in denial of the Trinity, as is the case in some groups’ baptism “in the name of Jesus” today. The quest for inclusive language has led some today to replace the traditional names of the Trinity with “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier,” an erroneous move that led the Vatican to declare invalid any baptism so performed, or any other in which the traditional divine names are not used.



used in Acts 8:16; 19:5) is a consecration of the person to God in Jesus Christ. We are not sure whether “baptism in the name of Jesus (Christ)” was the formula actually used in the baptism of converts in the Pauline communities or the communities described in Acts. In Matt 28:19 the disciples are told to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit.” Paul is also clearly Trinitarian (2 Cor 13:13), so if the simple formula “in the name of Jesus” was used, it would clearly imply everything that Jesus revealed about the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Paul left the ministry of baptism to others, having baptized, he says, only **Crispus and Gaius**. Acts 18:8 tells us that Crispus was a leader of the synagogue and that he was converted with his entire household. In Rom 16:23 Paul, writing from Corinth, says that Gaius “is host to me and to the whole church.” Gaius, therefore, must have been wealthy enough to have a house large enough for the entire community to meet in. Since Paul dictated his letters, we can imagine that after mentioning Crispus and Gaius, he has an “oh, yes” moment, remembering that he **baptized the household of Stephanas also**. Paul singles out Stephanas and his household at the end of the letter as “the firstfruits of Achaia,” who have “devoted themselves to the service of the holy ones” (16:15).

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What If the Minister Is a Sinner?

In the fourth century a group called the Donatists held that the validity of the sacraments, especially baptism, depended on the holiness of the minister. In this view, if the priest or deacon was in the state of mortal sin, the baptism they performed would be invalid. A serious consequence of this would be that Christians would never know whether they had really received the sacrament. Saint Optatus and later St. Augustine countered the Donatists' position by insisting, as Paul does here, that the minister baptizes only as an instrument of Christ. Although it lasted for a century, Donatism eventually died out.



That means that they were his first converts and that the entire household has been ministering to the fledgling community. Thus they have assumed some kind of leadership role, for Paul urges the church to “be subordinate to such people and to everyone who works and toils with them” (16:16). By the time Paul finishes dictating his letter, he can say that Stephanas has arrived in Ephesus from Corinth, along with Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17), who may have been bearers of a letter from the community. “Give recognition to such people,” he adds (16:18). We can conclude from this that Paul has heard not only from “Chloe’s people” (1:11) but also from some of the leaders of the community, and part of the problem he is dealing with seems to be insubordination to the leaders (16:16). Some biblical scholars have proposed that Paul’s early communities were so charismatic that they really had little or no authority structure and that the institution of deacons and presbyters came at a later date and then evolved into “early Catholicism,”⁷ with its hierarchical structure. This is difficult to sustain in the light of Paul’s statement here and also his injunction to the Thessalonians several years earlier: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who are laboring among you and who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you, and to show esteem for them with special love on account of their work”

7. “Early Catholicism” is a term used by some Protestant scholars to describe a movement they perceive in the early Church, from a charismatic form, in which the imminent end of the world was expected, to a later and more structured institutional form with hierarchical authority, resulting in the quenching of the original inspirational fire. The Epistles to Timothy and Titus, which reflect an ordered community life, are often cited as indications of this tendency. Careful study of the evidence, however, reveals an authority structure in the Christian churches from the beginning, albeit less developed than it appears, for example, in the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch, from the beginning of the second century. “Early Catholicism” is used by some as a pejorative term to shore up the claim of certain free churches to be closer to the supposedly authority-free original churches.

Writing or Dictating?

Paul did not write his letters. He dictated them. Why? In the ancient world it was common practice for the author of a letter to dictate it to a scribe who was skilled in penmanship and could write rapidly. There is an allusion to this in Ps 45:2: “My tongue is the pen of a nimble scribe,” or, literally, “a rapid scribe.” Even today in countries like India one can see men sitting in front of a store with a typewriter, ready to listen to the dictation of an illiterate person who wishes to send a letter, for a fee. But even quite literate persons like Paul would prefer dictation, both because it allowed him time to think and also because his own penmanship was not particularly skillful, if we can judge by the note he adds in Gal 6:11: “See with what large letters I am writing to you in my own hand.”

BIBLICAL
BACKGROUND



(1 Thess 5:12–13). And in his Letter to the Philippians (1:1) he addresses the “overseers and deacons” (*episkopoi kai diakonoi*).⁸

It appears, then, that as soon as Paul had baptized his early converts, he handed over the baptizing to those he had first baptized, reserving for himself what Christ called him to do—to preach and to found assemblies of “the called,” the *ekklēsia*, the church. As the church expanded, there was need for catechists to prepare candidates for baptism, and the rite became more extensive. Paul shows the wisdom of an administrator by delegating responsibilities to others and thus raising up new leaders. As for his preaching, Paul does so **not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning**. “Emptied of its meaning” is just one word in Greek, *kenōthē*: that the cross of Christ might not be “emptied.” The various translations strive to complete the thought, as does the NAB above: “emptied of its power” (NIV, NRSV), “pointless” (NJB). Paul’s meaning is that mere rhetoric is hollow, but the cross of Christ is not, nor does its power come from eloquence.

Here Paul announces the theme of the following discourse, where he plays on the difference between the wisdom of mere words, or eloquence (“wisdom of word,” *sophia logou*; 1:17) and the message of genuine wisdom (“word of wisdom,” *logos sophias*; 12:8). We can see that what is at issue in Corinth is more than simple divisiveness (to which he will return in chap. 3). At a deeper level the penchant of the Greek mind for brilliant discourse (perhaps the Apollos party?) is at issue.

8. *Episkopoi* will later be used for bishops who have authority over priests, but in the Pauline literature, even in the later letters to Timothy and Titus, the term refers to leaders of the local community, what today would correspond to parish priests. In today’s terminology, “episcopal” reflects the Greek *episkopoi*.

Reflection and Application (1:10–17)

Addressed to us, Paul's words challenge our fleshly compulsion to align ourselves with ministers who appeal to us and to make unfavorable comparisons with others. Non-liturgical churches that have only the ministry of the word are more likely to focus their satisfaction or dissatisfaction upon the preacher. Though sacramental churches are not indifferent to preaching, they tend to focus more on the †mystery relived in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, in which the personality of the priest is less important than the mystery being enacted.

In the Catholic Church, pastors are appointed by the bishop, not elected by the people, and although bishops are certainly aware of how much affirmation the parishioners give their pastor, the ultimate decision as to who is pastor and how long he remains at a given parish is that of the bishop (or the provincial, as the case may be). This policy avoids making the appointment a popularity contest; in its own way it reflects the sacramental nature of the Church, by affirming that leadership in the Church is not primarily a matter of competitive competence but of the grace of God. For centuries the Church had to fight to keep civil authorities and others from interfering with the appointments of bishops, and it still has that problem today in certain countries, such as China and Vietnam.

But more relevant for the mission of the Church everywhere is Paul's condemnation of party spirit. Catholic institutions have not avoided the secular pitfall of internecine rivalries, jealousies, turf fights, backbiting, and other sabotaging of the work of the Lord because of petty personal interests. An institution without any of this is rare indeed; an institution with a lot of it will eventually self-destruct. Many Christians need to learn that maturity means embracing the asceticism of the common good, being willing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of the body, the Church.

The Gospel, Divine Paradox (1:18–25)

¹⁸The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

**“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the learning of the learned I will set aside.”**

²⁰Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation