

CHAPTER 1

In this chapter we have,

- I.** The preface or introduction to the whole epistle (v. 1-9).
- II.** One principal occasion of writing it hinted, namely, their divisions and the origin of them (v. 10-13).
- III.** An account of Paul's ministry among them, which was principally preaching the gospel (v. 14-17).
- IV.** The manner wherein he preached the gospel, and the different success of it, with an account how admirably it was fitted to bring glory to God and beat down the pride and vanity of men (v. 17 to the end).

~~1~~ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9

THE APOSTLE'S SALUTATION

We have here the apostle's preface to his whole epistle, in which we may take notice,

- I.** Of the inscription, in which, according to the custom of writing letters then, the name of the person by whom it was written and the persons to whom it was written are both inserted.
 - 1.** It is an epistle from Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, to the church of Corinth, which he himself had planted, though there were some among them that now questioned his apostleship (~~1~~ 1 Corinthians 9:1, 2), and vilified his person and ministry, ~~2~~ 2 Corinthians 10:10. The most faithful and useful ministers are not secure from this contempt. He begins with challenging this character: *Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, through the will of God.* He had not taken this honour to himself, but had a divine commission for it. It was proper at any time, but necessary at this time, to assert his character, and magnify his office, when false teachers made a merit of running him down, and their giddy and deluded followers were so apt to set them up in competition with him. It was not pride in Paul, but faithfulness to his trust, in this juncture, to maintain his

apostolical character and authority. And, to make this more fully appear, he joins Sosthenes with him in writing, who was a minister of a lower rank. Paul, and Sosthenes his brother, not a fellow-apostle, but a fellow-minister, once a ruler of the Jewish synagogue, afterwards a convert to Christianity, a Corinthian by birth, as is most probable, and dear to this people, for which reason Paul, to ingratiate himself with them, joins them with himself in his first salutations. There is no reason to suppose he was made a partaker of the apostle's inspiration, for which reasons he speaks, through the rest of the epistle, in his own name, and in the singular number. Paul did not in any case lessen his apostolical authority, and yet he was ready upon all occasions to do a kind and condescending thing for their good to whom he ministered. The persons to whom this epistle was directed were *the church of God that was at Corinth, sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be saints*. All Christians are thus far sanctified in Christ Jesus, that they are by baptism dedicated and devoted to him, they are under strict obligations to be holy, and they make profession of real sanctity. If they be not truly holy, it is their own fault and reproach. Note, It is the design of Christianity to sanctify us in Christ. *He gave himself for us, to redeem us from all iniquity, and purify us to himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works*. In conjunction with the church at Corinth, he directs the epistle *to all that in every place call on the name of Christ Jesus our Lord, both theirs and ours*. Hereby Christians are distinguished from the profane and atheistical, that they dare not live without prayer; and hereby they are distinguished from Jews and Pagans, that they call on the name of Christ. He is their common head and Lord. Observe, In every place in the Christian world there are some that call on the name of Christ. God hath a remnant in all places; and we should have a common concern for and hold communion with all that call on Christ's name.

II. Of the apostolical benediction. *Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ*. An apostle of the prince of peace must be a messenger and minister of peace. This blessing the gospel brings with it, and this blessing every preacher of the gospel should heartily wish and pray may be the lot of all among whom he ministers. Grace and peace — the favour of God, and reconciliation to him. It is indeed the summary of all blessings. *The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace*, was the form of benediction under the Old Testament (⁴¹⁶⁵Numbers 6:26), but this advantage we have by the gospel,

1. That we are directed how to obtain that peace from God: it is in and by Christ. Sinners can have no peace with God, nor any good from him, but through Christ.

2. We are told what must qualify us for this peace; namely, grace: first grace, then peace. God first reconciles sinners to himself, before he bestows his peace upon them.

III. Of the apostle's thanksgiving to God on their behalf. Paul begins most of his epistles with thanksgiving to God for his friends and prayer for them. Note, The best way of manifesting our affection to our friends is by praying and giving thanks for them. It is one branch of the communion of saints to give thanks to God mutually for our gifts, graces, and comforts. He gives thanks,

1. For their conversion to the faith of Christ: *For the grace which was given you through Jesus Christ*, v. 4. He is the great procurer and disposer of the favours of God. Those who are united to him by faith, and made to partake of his Spirit and merits, are the objects of divine favour. God loves them, bears them hearty good-will, and bestows on them his fatherly smiles and blessings.

2. For the abundance of their spiritual gifts. This the church of Corinth was famous for. They did not come behind any of the churches in any gift, v. 7. He specifies *utterance and knowledge*, v. 5. Where God has given these two gifts, he has given great capacity for usefulness. Many have the flower of utterance that have not the root of knowledge, and their converse is barren. Many have the treasure of knowledge, and want utterance to employ it for the good of others, and then it is in a manner wrapped up in a napkin. But, where God gives both, a man is qualified for eminent usefulness. When the church of Corinth was enriched with all utterance and all knowledge, it was fit that a large tribute of praise should be rendered to God, especially when these gifts were a testimony to the truth of the Christian doctrine, a confirmation of the testimony of Christ among them, v. 6. They were *signs and wonders and gifts of the Holy Ghost*, by which God did bear witness to the apostles, both to their mission and doctrine (~~scribes~~ Hebrews 2:4), so that the more plentifully they were poured forth on any church the more full attestation was given to that doctrine which was delivered by the apostles, the more confirming evidence they had of their divine mission. And it is no wonder that when they had such a

foundation for their faith they should live in expectation of the coming of their Lord Jesus Christ, v. 7. It is the character of Christians that they wait for Christ's second coming; all our religion has regard to this: we believe it, and hope for it, and it is the business of our lives to prepare for it, if we are Christians indeed. And the more confirmed we are in the Christian faith the more firm is our belief of our Lord's second coming, and the more earnest our expectation of it.

IV. Of the encouraging hopes the apostle had of them for the time to come, founded on the power and love of Christ, and the faithfulness of God, v. 8, 9. He who had begun a good work in them, and carried it on thus far, would not leave it unfinished. Those that wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be kept by him, and confirmed to the end; and those that are so *will be blameless in the day of Christ*: not upon the principle of strict justice, but gracious absolution; not in rigour of law, but from rich and free grace. How desirable is it to be confirmed and kept of Christ for such a purpose as this! How glorious are the hopes of such a privilege, whether for ourselves or others! To be kept by the power of Christ from the power of our own corruption and Satan's temptation, that we may appear without blame in the great day! O glorious expectation, especially when the faithfulness of God comes in to support our hopes! *He who hath called us into the fellowship of his Son is faithful, and will do it,* ~~1~~ 1 Thessalonians 5:24. He who hath brought us into near and dear relation to Christ, into sweet and intimate communion with Christ, is faithful; he may be trusted with our dearest concerns. Those that come at his call shall never be disappointed in their hopes in him. If we approve ourselves faithful to God, we shall never find him unfaithful to us. *He will not suffer his faithfulness to fail,* ~~103~~ Psalm 89:33.

~~101~~ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-13

PARTY-SPIRIT REPROVED

Here the apostle enters on his subject.

I. He extorts them to unity and brotherly love, and reproves them for their divisions. He had received an account from some that wished them well of some unhappy differences among them. It was neither ill-will to the

church, nor to their ministers, that prompted them to give this account; but a kind and prudent concern to have these heats qualified by Paul's interposition. He writes to them in a very engaging way: "*I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; if you have any regard to that dear and worthy name by which you are called, be unanimous. Speak all the same thing; avoid divisions or schisms*" (as the original is), "that is, all alienation of affection from each other. *Be perfectly joined together in the same mind, as far as you can. In the great things of religion be of a mind: but, when there is not a unity of sentiment, let there be a union of affections. The consideration of being agreed in greater things should extinguish all feuds and divisions about minor ones.*"

II. He hints at the origin of these contentions. Pride lay at the bottom, and this made them factious. *Only of pride cometh contention,* ²¹³⁰ Proverbs 13:10. They quarrelled about their ministers. Paul and Apollos were both faithful ministers of Jesus Christ, and helpers of their faith and joy: but those who were disposed to be contentious broke into parties, and set their ministers at the head of their several factions: some cried up Paul, perhaps as the most sublime and spiritual teacher; others cried up Apollos, perhaps as the most eloquent speaker; some Cephas, or Peter, perhaps for the authority of his age, or because he was the apostle of the circumcision; and some were for none of them, but Christ only. So liable are the best things in the world to be corrupted, and the gospel and its institutions, which are at perfect harmony with themselves and one another, to be made the engines of variance, discord, and contention. This is no reproach to our religion, but a very melancholy evidence of the corruption and depravity of human nature. Note, How far will pride carry Christians in opposition to one another! Even so far as to set Christ and his own apostles at variance, and make them rivals and competitors.

III. He expostulates with them upon their discord and quarrels: "*Is Christ divided? No, there is but one Christ, and therefore Christians should be on one heart. Was Paul crucified for you? Was he your sacrifice and atonement? Did I ever pretend to be your saviour, or any more than his minister? Or, were you baptized in the name of Paul? Were you devoted to my service, or engaged to be my disciples, by that sacred rite? Did I challenge that right in you, or dependence from you, which is the proper claim of your God and Redeemer?*" No; ministers, however instrumental they are of good to us, are not to be put in Christ's stead. They are not to

usurp Christ's authority, nor encourage any thing in the people that looks like transferring his authority to them. He is our Saviour and sacrifice, he is our Lord and guide. And happy were it for the churches if there were no name of distinction among them, as Christ is not divided.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:14-16

PARTY-SPIRIT REPROVED

Here the apostle gives an account of his ministry among them. He thanks God he had baptized but a few among them, *Crispus*, who had been a ruler of a synagogue at Corinth (~~488~~Acts 18:8), *Gaius*, and the household of *Stephanas*, besides whom, he says, he did not remember that he had baptized any. But how was this a proper matter for thankfulness? Was it not a part of the apostolical commission to baptize all nations? And could Paul give thanks to God for his own neglect of duty? He is not to be understood in such a sense as if he were thankful for not having baptized at all, but for not having done it in present circumstances, lest it should have had this very bad construction put upon it — that he had baptized in his own name, made disciples for himself, or set himself up as the head of a sect. He left it to other ministers to baptize, while he set himself to more useful work, and filled up his time with preaching the gospel. This, he thought, was more his business, because the more important business of the two. He had assistants that could baptize, when none could discharge the other part of his office so well as himself. In this sense he says, *Christ sent him not to baptize, but to preach the gospel* — not so much to baptize as to preach. Note, Ministers should consider themselves sent and set apart more especially to that service in which Christ will be most honoured and the salvation of souls promoted, and for which they are best fitted, though no part of their duty is to be neglected. The principal business Paul did among them was to preach *the gospel* (v. 17), *the cross* (v. 18), *Christ crucified*, v. 23. Ministers are the soldiers of Christ, and are to erect and display the banner of the cross. He did not preach his own fancy, but the gospel — the glad tidings of peace, and reconciliation to God, through the mediation of a crucified Redeemer. This is the sum and substance of the gospel. Christ crucified is the foundation of all our joys. By his death we live. This is what Paul preached, what all ministers should preach, and what all the saints live upon.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:17-31

THE EFFICACY OF THE GOSPEL

We have here,

I. The manner in which Paul preached the gospel, and the cross of Christ: *Not with the wisdom of words* (v. 17), *the enticing words of man's wisdom* (~~1~~ 1 Corinthians 2:4), the flourish of oratory, or the accuracies of philosophical language, upon which the Greeks so much prided themselves, and which seem to have been the peculiar recommendations of some of the heads of the faction in this church that most opposed this apostle. He did not preach the gospel in this manner, lest *the cross of Christ should be of no effect*, lest the success should be ascribed to the force of art, and not of truth; not to the plain doctrine of a crucified Jesus, but to the powerful oratory of those who spread it, and hereby the honour of the cross be diminished or eclipsed. Paul had been bred up himself in Jewish learning at the feet of Gamaliel, but in preaching the cross of Christ he laid his learning aside. He preached a crucified Jesus in plain language, and told the people that that Jesus who was crucified at Jerusalem was the Son of God and Saviour of men, and that all who would be saved must repent of their sins, and believe in him, and submit to his government and laws. This truth needed no artificial dress; it shone out with the greatest majesty in its own light, and prevailed in the world by its divine authority, and the demonstration of the Spirit, without any human helps. The plain preaching of a crucified Jesus was more powerful than all the oratory and philosophy of the heathen world.

II. We have the different effects of this preaching: To those who perish it is foolishness, *but to those who are saved it is the power of God*, v. 18. *It is to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness; but unto those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*, v. 23, 24.

1. Christ crucified is a stumbling-block to the Jews. They could not get over it. They had a conceit that their expected Messiah was to be a great temporal prince, and therefore would never own one who made so mean an appearance in life, and died so accursed a death, for their deliverer and king. They despised him, and looked upon him as execrable, because he

was hanged on a tree, and because he did not gratify them with a sign to their mind, though his divine power shone out in innumerable miracles. The Jews require a sign, v. 22. See ⁴¹²⁸Matthew 12:38.

2. He was to the Greeks foolishness. They laughed at the story of a crucified Saviour, and despised the apostles' way of telling it. They sought for wisdom. They were men of wit and reading, men that had cultivated arts and sciences, and had, for some ages, been in a manner the very mint of knowledge and learning. There was nothing in the plain doctrine of the cross to suit their taste, nor humour their vanity, nor gratify a curious and wrangling temper: they entertained it therefore with scorn and contempt. What, hope to be saved by one that could not save himself! And trust in one who was condemned and crucified as a malefactor, a man of mean birth and poor condition in life, and cut off by so vile and opprobrious a death! This was what the pride of human reason and learning could not relish. The Greeks thought it little better than stupidity to receive such a doctrine, and pay this high regard to such a person: and thus were they justly left to perish in their pride and obstinacy. Note, It is just with God to leave those to themselves who pour such proud contempt on divine wisdom and grace.

3. To those who are called and saved *he is the wisdom of God, and the power of God*. Those who are called and sanctified, who receive the gospel, and are enlightened by the Spirit of God, discern more glorious discoveries of God's wisdom and power in the doctrine of Christ crucified than in all his other works. Note, Those who are saved *are reconciled to the doctrine of the cross*, and led into an experimental acquaintance with the mysteries of Christ crucified.

III. We have here the triumphs of the cross over human wisdom, according to the ancient prophecy (²³⁹⁴Isaiah 29:14): *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?* v. 19, 20, All the valued learning of this world was confounded, baffled, and eclipsed, by the Christian revelation and the glorious triumphs of the cross. The heathen politicians and philosophers, the Jewish rabbis and doctors, the curious searchers into the secrets of nature, were all posed and put to a nonplus. This scheme lay out of the reach of the deepest statesmen and philosophers, and the greatest pretenders to learning both among the

Jews and Greeks. When God would save the world, he took a way by himself; and good reason, for *the world by wisdom knew not God*, v. 21. All the boasted science of the heathen world did not, could not, effectually bring home the world to God. In spite of all their wisdom, ignorance still prevailed, iniquity still abounded. Men were puffed up by their imaginary knowledge, and rather further alienated from God; and therefore *it pleased him, by the foolishness of preaching, to save those that believe*. By the *foolishness of preaching* — not such in truth, but in vulgar reckoning.

1. The thing preached was foolishness in the eyes of worldly-wise men. Our living through one who died, our being blessed by one who was made a curse, our being justified by one who was himself condemned, was all folly and inconsistency to men blinded with self-conceit and wedded to their own prejudices and the boasted discoveries of their reason and philosophy.

2. The manner of preaching the gospel was foolishness to them too. None of the famous men for wisdom or eloquence were employed to plant the church or propagate the gospel. A few fishermen were called out, and sent upon this errand. These were commissioned to disciple the nations: these vessels chosen to convey the treasure of saving knowledge to the world. There was nothing in them that at first view looked grand or august enough to come from God; and the proud pretenders to learning and wisdom despised the doctrine for the sake of those who dispensed it. And yet *the foolishness of God is wiser than men*, v. 25. Those methods of divine conduct that vain men are apt to censure as unwise and weak have more true, solid, and successful wisdom in them, than all the learning and wisdom that are among men: “*You see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called*, v. 26, etc. You see the state of Christianity; not many men of learning, or authority, or honourable extraction, are called.” There is a great deal of meanness and weakness in the outward appearance of our religion. For,

(1.) Few of distinguished character in any of these respects were chosen for the work of the ministry. God did not choose philosophers, nor orators, nor statesmen, nor men of wealth and power and interest in the world, to publish the gospel of grace and peace. Not the wise men after the flesh, though men would apt to think that a reputation for wisdom and learning might have contributed much to the success of the gospel. Not the mighty

and noble, however men might be apt to imagine that secular pomp and power would make way for its reception in the world. But God seeth not as man seeth. He hath chosen the foolish things of the world, the weak things of the world, the base and despicable things of the world, men of mean birth, of low rank, of no liberal education, to be the preachers of the gospel and planters of the church. *His thoughts are not as our thoughts, nor his ways as our ways.* He is a better judge than we what instruments and measures will best serve the purposes of his glory.

(2.) Few of distinguished rank and character were called to be Christians. As the teachers were poor and mean, so generally were the converts. Few of the wise, and mighty, and noble, embraced the doctrine of the cross. The first Christians, both among Jews and Greeks, were weak, and foolish, and base; men of mean furniture as to their mental improvements, and very mean rank and condition as to their outward estate; and yet what glorious discoveries are there of divine wisdom in the whole scheme of the gospel, and in this particular circumstance of its success!

IV. We have an account how admirably all is fitted,

1. To beat down the pride and vanity of men. God hath chosen *the foolish things of the world to confound the wise* — men of no learning to confound the most learned; *the weak things of the world to confound the might* — men of mean rank and circumstances to confound and prevail against all the power and authority of earthly kings; *and base things, and things which are despised* — things which men have in the lowest esteem, or in the utmost contempt, to pour contempt and disgrace on all they value and have in veneration; *and things which are not, to bring to nought (to abolish) things that are* — the conversion of the Gentiles (of whom the Jews had the most contemptuous and vilifying thoughts) was to open a way to the abolishing of that constitution of which they were so fond, and upon which they valued themselves so much as for the sake of it to despise the rest of the world. It is common for the Jews to speak of the Gentiles under this character, as *things that are not*. Thus, in the apocryphal book of Esther, she is brought in praying that God would not give his sceptre to those *who are not*, Esther 14:11. Esdras, in one of the apocryphal books under his name, speaks to God *of the heathen as those who are reputed as nothing*, 2 Esdras 6:56, 57. And the apostle Paul seems to have this common language of the Jews in his view when he calls Abraham the *father of us all before him whom he believed, God, who calleth those*

things that are not as though they were, ~~6017~~ Romans 4:17. The gospel is fitted to bring down the pride of both Jews and Greeks, to shame the boasted science and learning of the Greeks, and to take down that constitution on which the Jews valued themselves and despised all the world besides, *that no flesh should glory in his presence* (v. 29), that there might be no pretence for boasting. Divine wisdom alone had the contrivance of the method of redemption; divine grace alone revealed it, and made it known. It lay, in both respects, out of human reach. And the doctrine and discovery prevailed, in spite of all the opposition it met with from human art or authority: so effectually did God veil the glory and disgrace the pride of man in all. The gospel dispensation is a contrivance to humble man. But,

2. It is as admirably fitted to glorify God. There is a great deal of power and glory in the substance and life of Christianity. Though the ministers were poor and unlearned, and the converts generally of the meanest rank, yet the hand of the Lord went along with the preachers, and was mighty in the hearts of the hearers; and Jesus Christ was made both to ministers and Christians what was truly great and honourable. All we have we have from God as the fountain, and in and through Christ as the channel of conveyance. He is made of God to us *wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption* (v. 30): all we need, or can desire. We are foolishness, ignorant and blind in the things of God, with all our boasted knowledge; and he is made wisdom to us. We are guilty, obnoxious to justice; and he is made righteousness, our great atonement and sacrifice. We are depraved and corrupt; and he is made sanctification, the spring of our spiritual life; from him, the head, it is communicated to all the members of his mystical body by his Holy Spirit. We are in bonds, and he is made redemption to us, our Saviour and deliverer. Observe, Where Christ is made righteousness to any soul, he is also made sanctification. He never discharges from the guilt of sin, without delivering from the power of it; and he is made righteousness and sanctification, that he may in the end be made complete redemption, may free the soul from the very being of sin, and loose the body from the bonds of the grave: and what is designed in all is *that all flesh may glory in the Lord*, v. 31. Observe, It is the will of God that all our glorifying should be in the Lord: and, our salvation being only through Christ, it is thereby effectually provided that it should be so. Man is humbled, and God glorified and exalted, by the whole scheme.