

02. I Corinthians 1-4



This is not Paul's first letter to the community in Corinth (see 1Corinthians 5:9), but it is the first to have survived.

The regular traffic between Corinth and Ephesus meant that Paul was constantly in touch with the Corinthians and some of the news which reached Paul in Ephesus was not good (see 1:11; 5:9). Then a delegation came to Ephesus from Corinth bearing a letter seeking clarification of some of Paul's teaching and instructions, and informing him of groups that were challenging his authority and the gospel he had preached. This letter is Paul's response.



In Galatians Paul focuses attention on the cross and reveals his passionate concern lest people seek security in ways that distract them from the love that is revealed there. We find the same focus here.

Most of the converts in Corinth were from the lower economic strata of the town, but some were well off. This was one reason for the problems which they were experiencing in living Christian community. A central theme of this letter is that the various gifts we have come from the risen Christ. They are given not to divide the community or so that some would have an advantage over others, but so that each person can enrich the others, and the whole community grow in love.

Part of the special interest which First Corinthians has for us is the insight it gives into the life, organisation, problems and questions of the community which Paul had chosen as the centre of his missionary endeavour from late 50AD to the spring of 52AD.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Paul, called to be an **apostle of the Messiah Jesus** by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in the Messiah Jesus, called to be **saints**, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, both their Lord and ours: **Grace** to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Paul refers to himself as an ‘**apostle**’, because he is writing an official letter by virtue of the commission given him by Christ himself and by the will of God.

Paul refers to himself as an apostle ‘**of the Messiah Jesus**’, because he is writing out of the communion which he has with the Risen Jesus.

Paul includes his co-missionary, **Timothy**, because he writes as a member of a community and is conscious of the fact that his missionary commission is a shared one. His letters are part of that apostolate.

‘**Holy**’ because the Holy One is present in the community of ‘**faithful brothers and sisters**’.

‘All the congregation are holy (‘saints’), everyone of them: the Lord is among them’ (Numbers 16:3).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

The customary Greek greeting was χαίρειν (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, χάρις ('**grace**') – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God's action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul's prayer for the community is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

The customary Jewish greeting was shalom ('peace' εἰρήνη). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.

The grace and peace which is offered to us as Christians is an overflowing of the grace and peace with which the Father has filled the heart of his Son. Throughout this letter Paul stresses the fact that fullness of life is found only in Jesus, and it is to him, and to him alone, that we must look for life.

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

I give **thanks** to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in the Messiah Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of the Messiah has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing (ἀποκάλυψις) of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. **God is faithful**; by him you were called into the **communion** (κοινωνία) of his Son, Jesus the Messiah our Lord.

In our creed we declare that we believe in ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’. We declare also that we believe in ‘the **communion** of saints’.

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

Now I appeal (παρακαλῶ) to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions (σχίσμα) among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:13-17

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus (Acts 18:8) and Gaius (Romans 16:23), so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptise also the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:17); beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of the Messiah might not be emptied of its power.

When Jesus was baptised the Spirit of God descended upon him. When Christians are baptised, the risen Jesus pours out this same Spirit upon them, thus creating a bond of consecration between the disciple and himself, and between the disciple and all those already baptised. All are 'baptised into the Messiah' (Galatians 3:27).

1 Corinthians 1:17-21

‘The Messiah sent me to proclaim the gospel (εὐαγγελίζω), and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of the Messiah might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God’. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart” (Isaiah 29:14). Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

‘Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim the Messiah crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, the Messiah, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.’

The ‘wisdom’ which Paul is rejecting as foolishness is the ‘wisdom’ that does not recognise God in Jesus crucified.



1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in the Messiah Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:24).

Paul is challenging them to reflect: if they are dividing the community, they do not partake of Jesus' wisdom, they are not in the right relationship to God, they are not experiencing the saving grace of his Spirit, and they are not truly free.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery (μυστήριον) of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus the Messiah, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Pau's knowledge comes only through an intimate sharing of life. Paul knows Jesus crucified, for he shares in the suffering of the servant of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed (προορίζω) before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (see Isaiah 64:4) – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

'Even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you' (Wisdom 9:6).

'From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him' (Isaiah 64:4).

‘No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.’

- the Spirit, the mysterious inner being of God which God chooses to express in creation, in which the radiance of God’s glory is manifest.
- the Spirit who invites us into dialogue and who speaks through the words of the prophets.
- the Spirit of love, for God is revealed as love.
- the Spirit that finds perfect expression in the life, in the words, and especially in the love-giving of Jesus on the cross.
- the Spirit that is the bond of the eternal love in which the glory of the risen Jesus consists.
- the Spirit of love that draws Paul into the divine embrace and that inspires his mission as an apostle and his proclamation of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 2:11-12

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’ (Luke 10:21-24).

1 Corinthians 2:13-16

We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual (πνευματικός). Those who are unspiritual (ψυχικός) do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" (Isaiah 40:13). But we have the mind of the Messiah.

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in the Messiah. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh (σαρκικός), and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

1 Corinthians 3:5-11

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants (διάκονος) through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus the Messiah.

1 Corinthians 3:12-17

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you [plural] are God's temple [ναὸς] and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

It is, of course, the sinner (not God) who brings about his or her own self-destruction. To do this we must break through the arms of Jesus stretched out on the cross, for he gave his life to save us. The gospel is that in doing so he revealed the design of God: God's power to save.

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness” (Job 5:13), and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile” (Psalm 94:11). So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to the Messiah, and the Messiah belongs to God.

All belongs to them because they belong to the Messiah and the Messiah belongs to God. If they leave the Messiah, they will lose everything that he has given them, and if they attempt to build on any other foundation it will come to nothing.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:6-8

I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, “Nothing beyond what is written,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another. For what makes you (singular) so special? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? Already you (plural) have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!

Surely you don't think you have 'all you want'? And can't you see who the source of all these gifts is? Surely you do not think that you are already participating in the fullness of the reign of the Messiah?

1 Corinthians 4:9-13

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of the Messiah, but you are wise in him. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

We think of the words of Jesus to Ananias about Paul: 'I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (Acts 9:16), and of Paul's own words: 'May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Galatians 6:14).

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in the Messiah, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in the Messiah Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in the Messiah Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church. But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the **kingdom of God** depends not on talk but on power. What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

‘My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until the Messiah is formed in you’ (Galatians 4:19).