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Becoming What You Are

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I Corinthians 1:1-17

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹² 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." ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

"I Corinthians 1:1-9 is page one, of the best text available to an everyday preacher trying to lead a set of believers to keep faith every day in the real world."

I wrote that last fall, before I had a handle on how truly nutty the church at Corinth had gotten by the time Paul wrote this letter. He's dealing with questions like: "What's the big deal if we visit local Temple workers -- who provide special 'experiences' to enhance worship? Or eat at the special feasts they have? Or prefer the teachings of some

Christian teachers over others? Or have services that are more like rock concerts and soccer matches than Christian worship?”

That barely scratches the surface of their problems, but enough for me to wonder, “*Are we that crazy?*” I don’t know -- largely because you all don’t tattle on one another like the Corinthians did. Nor are we a baby church like them. The oldest among them had been Christian five years. The apostles themselves were only 20-year-old believers. We have Christian history and tradition woven into our DNA that hadn’t been invented yet when Paul worked with the believers at Corinth.

And yet, I believe the heart of his communication to them is timeless: You can become what you are; you can become the human being that having been saved by Jesus Christ made you; the people -- the church -- that being saved by Christ made us. Jesus made us a certain way; we can become that way.

But not automatically. Not magically. We become what we are, with faith, with desire, with intention, with effort, with humility, with a vast, endless capacity for being changed, and the understanding that becoming what we are takes a lifetime and happens only in a community of believers on the same journey. We do not do it alone. We do not become who Jesus made us, without help from each other.

Over the next few weeks, I’ll fill in background about Corinth, the city and the people, which is useful. For now I’ll parse some of these first nine verses.

Verse 1 is the extended version of Paul’s business card:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

“*I am an apostle.*” Apostleship was distinguished by having been with Christ himself. Paul qualified his encounter with Jesus at his conversion as such. Though, reading Acts, I’m not sure the other apostles sat so easily with it. Paul’s authority as an apostle is huge in Corinthians. Because he sees them drifting to a way of faith still called Christian, but not gospel-centered. And for him, his authority and the supremacy of the gospel are completely co-dependent, in ways not entirely clear to me but definitely to him. Rejection of his apostleship equals rejection of the gospel.

This all gets unraveled as Paul continues, but here in verse 1 he sets forth his credential first of all. And in verse 2, theirs:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people together with those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours;

“*Sanctified,*” here, is mindful of language for certain utensils in the Temple that were set aside for a particular use. You have been set aside -- for a special purpose, that is, *to be God’s holy people.* Your translation might say “*saints.*” Paul was upset with his church at Corinth -- worried for them, for their future.

But that was not where he started with them:

- I am an apostle.
- You are God's holy people.
- Both of us set aside,
- called,
- made who and what we are by the will of God in Christ Jesus.

³ *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Grace and peace, when we wish each other what we already have -- knowing how difficult it is to remember we have them, to take them out and live from them. Like the country music lyric, "*standing knee deep in a river and dying of thirst.*" Or Ann Lamott's story about the refugee kids who, once they had plenty to eat, still slept better when they could hold a piece of bread. We really can't say "*grace and peace*" to each other often enough.

Then, a whole paragraph of the things about them for which Paul is thankful:

- their grace;
- their riches of every kind, especially *speech and knowledge*;
- their testimony in Christ.

The list goes on, repetitively so. And the paragraph feels a bit disingenuous after you've read the whole letter once, knowing how frustrated and harsh Paul is with them for most of it. You have to get a feel for him, learn to listen to the love that is in his snarly tone of voice, and sometimes pay closer attention to *what* he says than *how* he says it. Because here, in this paragraph of thanksgiving, Paul also sets up his basic teaching outline.

Wildly reduced, it is this:

- Having Christ, you have everything you need to live the gospel and be the church.
- Having everything in Christ is not the same as knowing what you have or what to do with it.
- You have so, so, so, so, so much room to grow in your attitude and your understanding of the faith in you and in your life together.

The Corinthians seemed to imagine themselves having most everything figured out, so much so they even questioned their need of Paul's advice, revealing their need of him all the more -- just like a normal kid. And him their good father, who praises and corrects and sticks with them through the long journey of growing up in Christ. That said, I think Paul and the Corinthians do have a message for us -- a church not as nutty

as them maybe, but in no less need of peace and grace and with no less room to grow,
as we become what we are already in Christ Jesus.

Would you pray with me?