

Howell Branch Fellowship
Arnold
Winter Park, Florida

Dr. Jack L.
Sermon #2

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Our Position In Christ I Corinthians 1:1-3

In the 1960s there was a famous college basketball player at UCLA named Lew Alcindor. Lew was searching for the meaning of life and investigated several world religions, including Christianity. He was impressed with the person of Christ but his reason for rejecting Christianity was, "I have never seen a real Christian. If I did see one, I might become one." Lew converted to the Muslim religion, taking the name Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Perhaps Jabbar had read Ghandi who said, "There was a time when I wavered between Hinduism and Christianity. I think I would have become a Christian if it would not have been for Christians."

Obviously these two men had a misunderstanding as to what a true Christian is. A Christian is a sinner saved by grace through faith in Christ with new desires for Christlikeness, but not yet totally perfect; yet, he is on his way to heaven. It is obvious that Ghandi and Jabbar were influenced against Christianity by those who called themselves Christians. The Christians with whom these men came into contact did not impress them. What we Christians must recognize is that the pattern of our lives determines the nature of our testimony. All Christians have a testimony, some good and some bad; but when it is bad we are not living in accordance with our tremendous position in Christ.

The Apostle Paul was deeply concerned for the testimony of the Corinthian church before the wicked city of Corinth. He had heard that the Corinthian Christians were carnal, worldly or fleshly, falling back into some of the old patterns which characterized them before they were converted to Christ. There were divisions and contentions among them. Some were involved in sexual immorality. Some were coming to the Lord's Table drunk. All were rebellious to authority. Divorce was running rampant among them. Some were taking Christian brothers to the secular law courts. Spiritual gifts were being abused, so much so that visitors were being repulsed at the disorder and confusion in the public worship. Some were even denying the general resurrection of Christians. The Corinthian Christians were bringing a black mark against Christ because of their sinful behavior, so Paul picked up his pen to exhort them to live godly lives in Corinth. However, before he laid out the proper Christian ethics, he laid a basic theological foundation for their morality. He exhorted them to live a certain way because God had done certain things for them. What is Paul's point? Truth precedes experience; doctrine precedes practice; theology precedes morality. What we do is directly related to who we are in Christ. There are people who live moral lives who are not Christians, but the reason they live the way they do is not to bring glory to Christ and His work on the cross but some other motive based on human glorification.

In I Corinthians 1:1-9, Paul gives an introduction to the epistle. It consists of a salutation (1:1-3) and a thanksgiving (1:4-9) in which he mentions the great themes upon which he would expand in the rest of the letter, namely the unity of the church, its purity, its spiritual gifts, and its future glory. In the salutation Paul deals with the

Corinthians' position in Christ and in the thanksgiving, with their possessions in Christ.
Position deals with what we are in Christ. Possessions with what we have in Christ.

DIVINE AMBASSADOR 1:1

Paul. Paul was the writer of I Corinthians but it was also recorded by Sosthenes. In this same verse Paul says, "And our brother Sosthenes." This man was a very famous person in Corinth because in the Greek this verse says, "And our brother (the) Sosthenes." He was the former leader of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth who hated Christ and the Apostle Paul because he preached Christ as Savior and Lord. Sosthenes led a group of Jews to charge Paul before the Roman court. "While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. 'This man,' they charged, 'is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law'" (Acts 18:13). Gallio, the Roman proconsul, would not get involved in Jewish law and dismissed the case. The Jews were so disgusted with Sosthenes, the new ruler of the synagogue, because he was unable to persuade the Romans of Paul's guilt, they beat him up in front of the tribunal. The beating apparently caused Sosthenes to lose faith in the Jewish cause. But there was even a deeper reason Sosthenes turned to Christ. The leader of the synagogue before Sosthenes was Crispus. Crispus and his whole family came to Christ and Sosthenes then replaced Crispus. Sosthenes undoubtedly had to observe and study much about why Crispus left the Jewish faith and embraced Christ, becoming part of a Jewish cult. In so doing, he became a Christian. God used various means to lead Sosthenes to Christ. God works in strange and mysterious ways to bring men and women to the Savior. It must have been a blow to the only Jewish synagogue in town to lose two leaders within a few months to the Christian cult. The amazing thing is the Jews in the synagogue were so hardened to the gospel it did not phase them because a couple of key leaders came to Christ. Anyway, it was the famous Sosthenes, the converted Jewish leader, who helped Paul write this letter to the Corinthians. He was probably Paul's amanuensis (recorder, scribe) who wrote the letter as Paul dictated it.

Called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. In the first sentence of this lecture Paul begins to hit at the problems in the Corinthian church, namely, their failure to recognize him as an apostle. They were rebellious to Paul's authority over them so he went right to the heart of the issue. The Corinthians had some basis to deny Paul's apostleship for he had not been with Christ through the three and one-half years of his public ministry, nor had he been an eyewitness of the crucifixion and resurrection. Yet Paul had seen the resurrected Christ in a dynamic way when he was converted on the Damascus Road and it was there this feisty Jewish Pharisee received his call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul stated his divine authority for his office to the Corinthians. Christ sovereignly called Paul to salvation and to apostleship. Paul had a calling from God that was not by his own choice nor by the authorization of a group of men. He was an apostle by God's choice. He was an "apostle of Jesus Christ" that is, Paul served Christ and Christ alone. He was not a man pleaser but a Christ pleaser.

All men called by Christ into the ministry should know Christ has called them to be pastors, teachers, missionaries or evangelists. There should be a conviction of divine vocation.

It is not a presbytery or a board of elders or a local church organization that calls a man into ministry but Christ. Ordination to ministry is merely a human act which recognizes God's call on a man's life (and it is biblical to ordain men). Many men have been ordained to the ministry but never were called by God to minister. Many men also have been called to the ministry by God who have never had human hands laid on them. The

man called by God to the ministry will experience the blessing of God in what God has called him to do. When God has called a man, whether there is human ordination or not, there will be blessing. Spurgeon said, "Most ordinations are simply empty hands on empty heads."

By the will of God. Paul was not an apostle because he desired it but because God decreed it! He had no choice in the matter. It was not the vote of an elder board or the vote of a congregation which made him an apostle. He had his appointment from God Himself. This must have given him great confidence. He had the reality of a divine commission.

No man should ever be in the ministry unless he can say that he is convinced God has called him to serve. A man called to the ministry can do nothing else but the ministry. In seminary they used to tell us that if we felt we could do anything else than be in the ministry, we should go do it. If we are called, we can only do ministry. Whenever I get discouraged in the ministry and want to quit, the one thing that keeps me from doing so is the confidence God has called me to the ministry. I did not volunteer.

DIVINE SOCIETY 1:2

To the church of God in Corinth. The word "church" comes from the Greek word *ekklasia* which literally means "to call out;" so the church is composed of the "called out ones." The word "church" was a common word in the Greek secular society and referred to an assembly of any sort of people. In the New Testament, it is given a general, technical meaning, referring to that group of people God has called to salvation through Christ from all the nations of the earth to make up His people in this present age. In New Testament times, there were no Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Independents or whatever other 250 plus denominations. The denominations have come about because of theological and cultural differences, but in actuality, there is only one universal church of God made up of all true believers in Christ. The church is a called out group of saved people who have been bought by the blood of Christ. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Membership in the universal church comes through a personal relationship with God by receiving Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior.

Sometimes the word "church" is used in a more specific way, referring to the visible, local expression of the universal church. We call this the local church. Paul actually wrote "to the church of God in Corinth. While the local church should be comprised of believers in Christ alone, there are obviously some in every local church who may not be saved. It is possible for a person to have his name on a membership roll of a local church and not be a member of God's true, universal church. There are many who are good church members who have never been saved, born of God's Spirit, having placed saving faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Notice also Paul called this "the church of God." This tells us that the local church is a divine institution, established by God. It belongs to God; it is the instrument of God. Men may despise, deride, defame and avoid the local church, but it is God's primary tool for building the saints and reaching the lost world for Christ. It was God's church, not Paul's. We often glibly say, "my church" or "our church" or even worse "Jack Arnold's church." This kind of an attitude causes us to become possessive and selfish; causing divisions in the church. Many problems in the local church would be solved if we could really believe in was God's church.

The amazing thing is that the church of God has been planted in a wicked city like Corinth. Even in that pagan city, amid its pride, its impurity, its absorbing rush for pleasure and for wealth, a brotherhood of believers had come into being by the supernatural workings of a sovereign God. What does this teach us? There is no place on earth so degraded, so depraved, so morally hopeless that the church of God cannot be established there.

To those sanctified in Christ Jesus. Paul said that these carnal Christians at Corinth were sanctified (past tense). How could this be, seeing the church was so messed up? He did not say that they are being sanctified (present tense) but they were sanctified. What does this mean? The word "sanctified" in its basic meaning is "to set apart," and it was a common expression among all Greeks. A piece of furniture could be sanctified (set apart) to some use. A prostitute in the temple of Aphrodite was sanctified (set apart) to her wicked profession. The Christians took the word "sanctified" and gave it a specific meaning for the church (the called out ones). The Christian use of the word "sanctified" means to set apart for God's use and God's possession. Christians have been given a new position; they are set apart to God.

Paul could have begun this letter by chewing out these Christians for living on such a low level spiritually. He might have become indignant or lashed out at them, but he did not do that. He began by reminding these carnal Corinthian believers about their position in Christ. They had been sanctified, set apart, by God to be a holy people.

"A body may be very corrupt both as to doctrine and practice, as such corruptions undoubtedly prevailed even in Corinth, and yet it may be properly recognized as a local church of God" (John Calvin).

And called to be holy (holy ones). Some have translated this, "Called to be saints." It appears the word "holy" in this context has both the idea of "set apart to be holy ones" and "being made holy."

God, through a sovereign, efficacious, infallible call, brought these Corinthian Christians to faith in Jesus Christ. "(God) who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (II Tim. 1:9). At the moment of conversion, they were sanctified positionally or set apart to God for worship, holiness and service. They were saints, holy ones, set apart to God in the same sense that in the Old Testament the temple, the altar, the priests and the prophets were set apart for sacred use. The Christian, therefore, has been called by God to salvation and set apart for sacred purposes. Paul reminded the Corinthians of what they were positionally in Christ -- set apart for sacred purposes.

Sainthood is not something a Christian enters into after death, having lived an exceptionally moral and spiritual life on this earth. Sainthood is a position of being set apart to God as the result of God sovereignly calling us to Himself through the message of salvation in Christ. Therefore, all Christians are saints: Saint Peter, Saint Paul, Saint Thomas, Saint Augustine, Saint Calvin, Saint Bob, Saint Sally, and Saint Betty. All Christians have been set apart to God for worship, godly living and service.

The phrase "called to be holy" can also imply "to make holy in one's experience." Christians are set apart to God positionally to bear the character of God in their experience. This appears to be a slight slam by Paul at the Corinthians who had lives which were falling very

short of their position in Christ. What Paul is implying to these Corinthians is, "Since you are saints, you should live saintly. Holy ones should live holy lives. Set apart ones should live lives of Christlikeness." An understanding of our position in Christ ought to help us live godly lives. In fact, our position is the basis for holy living. We are to constantly be becoming what we already

are in Christ. God called all Christians at salvation to live a holy life and if there is not a commitment to holy living, one should ask whether he or she has really been called by God to salvation. Paul assumed that most of the Corinthians were saved but after four letters and two visits, he challenges some of them to the reality of their salvation.

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you unless, of course, you fail the test" (II Cor. 13:5)?

We do not have to conclude that just because Paul acknowledged the Corinthians as saints or holy ones that every person who professed faith in Christ in that assembly was saved.

"It is not to be inferred from the fact that the apostle addresses all the nominal Christians in Corinth as saints and as sanctified in Christ Jesus, that they were all true believers, or that those terms express nothing more than external consecration. Men are uniformly addressed in Scripture according to their profession. If they profess to be saints, they are called saints; if they profess to be believers, they are called believers; and if they profess to be members of the church, they are addressed as really belonging to it" (Charles Hodge, First Corinthians).

Together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ their Lord and ours. This letter was not just a letter for the Corinthian Christians; it was for all Christians of every age. The Book of First Corinthians is timeless and it is for us today. Paul reminded these Corinthians that they were not an isolated colony of God's people but a part of the universal church which owns Christ as its Lord. Sectarianism was developing in Corinth. The church was beginning to divide, but Christ cannot be made a sectarian name; He is the one Lord of the whole church; He is both "their Lord and ours." Because the Corinthian church was turning away from the authority of Jesus and following after men, Paul drove home to them the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives. What was the core issue with these carnal, worldly, fleshly Corinthians? They had departed from the centrality of Christ and His authority in their lives.

There are many things in this epistle some Christians today would like to dodge, and very often we may hear, "O well, that stuff was for that age and that day but not for people today." Notice carefully Paul says this letter is to "all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

DIVINE BLESSINGS 1:3

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul expressed his desire that these Corinthians would experience God's grace and peace in their daily lives. They needed God's grace to deal with the problems in their own lives and in the local church. They also needed God's peace to rest patiently in Him while they waited

for Him to solve the problems in that local church. God's grace and peace can be experienced now in a Christian's life as he lives a life of faith in the resurrected Christ.

CONCLUSION

What does God want us to learn and apply from this section of Scripture. First, the basis for godly living comes from a realization that we have been called by God and are set apart to Him. No Christian will be motivated to live a holy life if he does not understand who he is positionally in Christ. Second, since every Christian is a saint, then each one is to live saintly. Our experience of Christ is to match our position in Christ. Third, the realization that we are set apart to God for worship, godliness and service makes us more responsible to God to act on the knowledge we have. We are to reflect the person we actually are in Christ.

Elliot Roosevelt, the son of the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, was picked up for drunk driving. As the officer was trying to get him out of his car, Elliot said, "Don't you know who I am?" It was those words which actually condemned him in that officer's eyes. Elliot's own claim emphasized his crime. As the son of a president, he ought to live like the son of a president. Because he did not, he got a ticket.

If you are not a Christian, I want to point out this section clearly tells you that a Christian is one who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. What does it mean to call upon Christ? It means to recognize Christ is Lord and to ask for His help. A Christian is one who recognizes Christ as his sovereign God, giving Him the right to rule in his life.

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

To call upon Christ is to ask a Him to save you from your sins, to deliver you from guilt, and to rescue you from eternal punishment. Jesus is the only way to salvation. He is Lord; that is, he is God. He is Jesus; that is, He is the deliverer. He is Christ; that is, He is the Messiah. How can you be saved? Believe that Christ is your Lord and that He died for your sins. Ask Christ to come into your life to save you and to take control of your life. If you will do this, Christ will come into your life. God's promise is true: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13).