

*Christ's Authoritative Messenger**1 Corinthians 1:1**Jimmy Snowden**Introduction*

Paul starts this letter out in standard Pauline fashion. He identifies the author (himself) in verse one, his recipients (the Corinthian church) in verse two, and then issues a Christianized greeting in verse three. I want you to notice that Paul does not merely say, "From Paul and Sosthenes. To the Corinthian church." Paul does not merely identify himself as the letter writer and the Corinthians as his recipients. He elaborates on both his identity and their identity. These statements of identity are important and worthy of our consideration. Paul knows that it is imperative that the believers in Corinth have a correct understanding of who he is in God's sight and who they are in God's sight. Paul rises above the earthiness of human relationships and gives them a view of both himself and themselves from the divine perspective. So we may ask; How does Paul identify himself and how does he identify the Corinthians? This morning we will be considering how Paul identifies himself.

1 Corinthians 1:1

You will see that Paul identifies himself most chiefly in terms of his relation to Christ.

Paul, called as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and our brother Sosthenes.

Why would Paul identify himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ? Well... we know that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. But why did he decide to hone in on this one aspect of himself here in 1 Corinthians when elsewhere he emphasizes other aspects of himself. For example, in Romans and Galatians Paul chose to identify himself as a slave (Romans 1:1 and Galatians 1:1), in Philemon he identified himself as a 'prisoner' (Philemon 1:1), and in 1 Thessalonians he didn't elaborate on his identity at all and just referred to himself by name (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Here Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. But he goes even further and identifies himself as a called apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will. Why would he do this?

I believe the answer to this question is quite simple. Suppose a car pulled up behind you while you were sitting at a traffic light. The man in gets out and begins to walk to your car. As he gets nearer you begin to wonder why he is approaching your car. Thinking that your rear tire may be flat (or something), you roll your window down. The man, folding his arms, says, 'Sir, I am going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle and put your hands on the hood.' You look back at the man realizing that he has bed head, is wearing a Homer Simpson T-shirt, and has really smelly breath. You candidly say; "Ummm... are you an undercover police officer or something?" He then retorts; "Well... not technically, but this morning I woke up and decided that I wanted to see what it would be like to be a cop for a day." How would you respond? I personally would say; "Unless you are threatening to put my health and life in danger by not getting out of the car, I am just going to go ahead and not listen to you and drive off as soon as the light turns green. Okay?! Have a good day!"

The fact of the matter is that this wacko doesn't possess the authority to tell me to get out of my car. Authority is not something that is simply grabbed; authority must be given or conferred if it is to be possessed and utilized. A policeman has the right to ask you to step out of your vehicle if he has reason to think that you have broken a law. What gives him the right to

exercise such authority? The city or state. The fact is that not just anyone can exercise the authority of enforcing the law. Before the state will grant a person the authority appropriate to a policeman, the policeman must first prove himself to be worthy and responsible to possess such authority. This is why there is such a thing as the police academy. A police academy is where the city or state tests and evaluates individuals on many different levels to make sure that the person interested in fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of a policeman will be responsible with the authority given.

Authority is not something to be grabbed; it is a conferred responsibility. You cannot just go down to the Boscawen police office and ask for an application with the hopes of starting tomorrow. No, you will be tested and evaluated and only after you have proven yourself to be both credible and responsible will they confer upon you the authority of enforcing the law.

You have to remember what 1 Corinthians is. 1 Corinthians is not a soft, fluffy, sentimental letter. 1 Corinthians is a hard hitting, authoritative letter. From 1:10 all the way through the end of Chapter 15, Paul is on the offensive. He is not writing to praise them nor to merely inform them (just look at 1 Corinthians 3:1-4); he is rebuking them on almost every front. In 1 Corinthians Paul is fileting the church, dissecting them, dismantling them; he is writing to expose their many sins that are threatening the life and reputation of Christ in their community. Paul questions the very foundation of their life in the Christian community. But he doesn't stop there. After exposing their many issues, he then seeks to authoritatively lay out for them how they are to go about fixing these problems. From beginning to end Paul writes as one with authority.¹

Imagine if you as an individual or our church as a corporate entity was the recipient of this letter. Imagine if someone were to write a letter the size of 1 Corinthians to Sovereign Grace Fellowship with the purpose of setting us straight by exposing our many problems (in love, of course)? Imagine if someone were to write a letter to you the size of 1 Corinthians for the purpose of exposing your failure as a husband and a father with a view to rebuilding a foundation

¹ Thus, I am in full agreement here with Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corintios*. Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forth coming), 42, Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 30, C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1968, 2006), 31, David W. J. Gill, *1 Corinthians in Romans to Philemon*; Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary, Vol. 3, Edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 108, and Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*; Geneva Series of Commentaries (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1857, 2000), 2, in their assertion that Paul calls attention to his apostleship as a way of establishing his authority as opposed to Anthony C. Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 64-68 and David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 24-25 who suggest that Paul establishes the divine origin of his apostleship for the purpose of setting himself forward as some sort of a imitable example of Christ—and as a Gospel spectacle. Although these two senses are certainly clear in Paul's apostleship, the context seems to heavily favor the fact that Paul is referring to the divine origin of his apostleship not as a way of 'pulling rank' (as Garland sloppily asserts) but as a way of establishing his place in the kingdom of Christ for this duty. I do not think that Paul giggled (playfully enjoying his responsibility as an apostle) as he wrote this tearful letter! This was not a time to pull rank, but it certainly was a time to establish authority as he was calling a broken church back to Christ for repentance and healing. It also seems that Thisselton may be falling into the trap of the enemy by letting the Nietzsche's and Foucault's of the world make him suspicious of any biblical claims of authority. Although authority may have been and continues to be abused in the realm of religion, it does not justify an anti-authoritative interpretation if the context (and the larger canon) would affirm such an interpretation.

for your family life. The immediate question you would ask would be, “Who are you to get up in my biz? Who or what gives you the authority to write such an offensive and authoritative letter?”

Paul begins 1 Corinthians not just by identifying himself by name, but by elaborating on his unique position in the body of Christ. He identifies himself as one “called as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will.” I want to consider two things about this elaboration of Paul in regard to his own identity. First, consider with me what an apostle was. Have you ever asked yourself why the apostles are called *apostles*? Did Jesus call them His apostles just because he like the way it rolled off His tongue? No... I mean, we know who the apostles were (all 14 of them, which includes Judas, Matthias, and Paul), we know what qualified the apostles to be apostles (Acts 1:21-22: to be qualified a person had to have been with Jesus from His baptism to His ascension), but why did Jesus decide to refer to them as *apostles*?

Just the other day I was watching the Detroit Pistons play basketball on TV. I came to the realization that although I knew what sport the Detroit Pistons played and who the Detroit Pistons were, I had no clue why they were called the *Pistons*. I obviously knew the reason for the first part of the name, but I was confused as to why they were referred to as the *Pistons*. I thought about it for a second and then slapped myself upside the head for not connecting the dots sooner. The Detroit Pistons are called the *Pistons* because Detroit is one of America’s leading automobile producers and pistons are found in cars! Duh!

Why, then, did Jesus call the apostles ‘apostles’? First of all, it is important to know that the word ‘apostle’ is not unique to the New Testament. The word ‘apostle’ was a word that was commonly used in the ancient world. It was commonly used to refer to a messenger or an envoy. Walter Bauer (BDAG) explains the use of the word ‘apostle’ (*apostolos*) in the ancient world:

“... in isolated cases it refers to persons who are dispatched for a specific purpose, and the context determines the status or function expressed in such Eng. terms as ‘ambassador, delegate, messenger’”²

In other words, an *apostolos* was an “authorized delegate”,³ one sent in the authority of another. As I have said before, when my mom sent me (one of her kids) into the other room to silence my obnoxious brothers I was acting as my mom’s authorized delegate, because mom was sending me as her authorized messenger. Ignoring the words of mom’s sent authorized delegate (Jimmy, the kid) was tantamount to ignoring mom herself. This is why mom stormed into the room when the delegate kid came back with the news of having been ignored. And why? Because ‘The one whom mom sends is like mom herself.’⁴ To reject the word of mom’s delegate is equivalent to rejecting mom herself. This is especially true in international relations; ambassadors and representatives are seen as legit stand-ins, speaking with the very (delegated) authority of the ruling sender. This is true as well when it comes to the police; the police are the delegated authority of the state. The state gives the police the right to enforce the laws of the

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*; Edited by Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 122. Bauer explains how this usage of *apostolos* relates to its use in the New Testament. “It is this isolated usage that is preferred in the NT w. nuances peculiar to its lit. But the extensive use of *apostello* in documents relating to pers. of merit engaged in administrative service prob. encouraged NT use of the noun, thus in effect disavowing assoc. w. the type of itinerant philosophers that evoked the kind of pejorative term applied by Paul’s audience.” Ibid.

³ I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 178.

⁴ This is of course a personalization of the maxim, “The one whom a man sends is like the man himself.”

state. When an individual refuses to comply with an officer, he is not so much failing to comply with the officer himself as he is failing to comply with the state since the officer is nothing more and nothing less than an authorized enforcer of state law.

Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He knew that his authority was derivative; he had no authority in and of himself. He was an authorized delegate of Jesus Christ. Therefore, for the Corinthians to take Paul lightly they would be taking Christ Himself lightly, since Paul was Christ's apostle.

Second, notice that Paul did not chose to be an apostle. Paul was called to be an apostle by the will of God. God made Paul an apostle. In other words Paul was not like the man with the Homer Simpson t-shirt who woke up one day and decided that he was just going to enforce the law. Paul wasn't even looking to become an apostle. What was Paul doing when God saved him and commissioned him to be an apostle? He was seeking to imprison and kill Christians! Paul was not seeking the office of an apostle when God made him one. He was seeking to kill the apostles of Christ, not become one! So Paul's apostleship was not something that he conferred upon himself and it was also not something that other men conferred upon him. Paul makes this implicitly clear here in 1 Corinthians 1:1 and explicitly clear in Galatians 1:1.

Paul, an apostle—not from men or by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead.

In other words, it was not as if Paul had a huge fan club who decided that he was a good candidate to fulfill the role of an apostle. He was made an apostle by God, period. He was not seeking to be an apostle and others were not seeking to make him an apostle. God made him an apostle. And why does Paul put such an emphasis on the **divine origin of his apostleship**? Because he knows that he has to lay a foundation. He knew that that this letter was going to hit the Corinthians right between the eyes and their knee jerk reaction was going to be to question his authority. 2 Corinthians attests to just this knee jerk reaction. Paul knew that he had to establish the divine origins of his authority as an apostle to say the things he was about to say.

Application

By way of application, let me ask you; How differently would you read 1 Corinthians if it read, 'Paul, called as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God... To God's church in Boscawen—to Sovereign Grace Fellowship'? Could you imagine being the church of Corinth, receiving a letter that bears the very authority of Christ? If 1 Corinthians was personally addressed to our church, how much more seriously would we take it? Or imagine if it was written to you as an individual. "Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God... To James R. Snowden of Penacook, NH." Would I read it differently? I suppose I would. My ears would be a bit more perked. But doesn't this expose a fatal error in our thinking? Just because 1 Corinthians was originally written to the Corinthian church does not mean that it is somehow less bearing on us. It is not as if God's word through Paul is emptied of its binding authority upon us because it was not originally written to us. 1 Corinthians stands as the word of God just as much today as it did to the Church in Corinth two thousand years ago. And thus it is just as authoritatively binding upon us as it was on them.

How would you respond? Would you immediately become offended and defensive? Would you immediately question; "Who does this Paul think he is to stick his nose in my biz?" Would you receive Christ's word through Paul with openness and humility? Your answer to this question may expose some areas that you may need to work on. Because we are so far removed

from the folks in Corinth, our eyes often times glaze over as we say to ourselves, “We can’t be that bad!” But we must let the Spirit of God work us over with His word. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews suggests that this is one of the main purposes of the word of God.

For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as to divide soul, spirit, joints, and marrow; it is a judge of the ideas and thoughts of the heart. No creature is hidden from Him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Maybe you are as bad as the Corinthians. Maybe I spoke to soon last week when I said that I have never seen a church as messed up as the Corinthian church. Maybe we go to the word of God thinking ourselves to be much better off than we actually are. Maybe the reason why we think we are not as bad as them is because we will only let the Word of God go so far—as soon as the word of God begins to cut us we withdrawal and numb ourselves to what the word of God is clearly saying. Could it be that we are worse off than the Corinthians and that our spiritual malformations just show themselves in different ways than those of the Corinthian church? I submit that we should be more suspicious of ourselves than we often times are. This is not to say that we should live defeated lives, but it is to say that we, more often than not, have a higher opinion of ourselves than we ought to have. We are not above the instruction in 1 Corinthians. In fact, we may be more in need of it today than they were back then.

Notice in the last part of verse 1 that Paul doesn’t minister to the Corinthians alone. Paul has a co-laborer with him. His name is Sosthenes. Many question whether or not he is the same Sosthenes that is in Acts 17:17 because the Sosthenes was a popular name in the first century. However, I do not see any good reason to question that these are one and the same individual. Paul does not identify Sosthenes as a fellow apostle, but as a fellow brother in the Lord. Maybe he mentioned Sosthenes to follow the two or three witnesses principle (e.g. Matthew 18:15-20). Sosthenes is obviously in agreement with what Paul had to say to the Corinthians.

Conclusion

Paul identifies himself from God’s perspective in 1:1—he is a called apostle of Jesus Christ by God’s will. Next week will consider how he identifies the Corinthians. It should be no surprise that Paul most chiefly identifies the Corinthians in terms of their relation to Christ (just as he identified himself). The temptation is to assess all things and people in worldly, fleshly terms, but Paul will not allow this. Paul identifies the Corinthian church in four ways in 1:2: 1. as God’s church, 2. as those sanctified in Christ Jesus, 3. as those who are called to be saints, and 4. as a Church which is part of something much larger than their own assembly.

Paul seeks to identify himself and the Corinthian church in terms of their respective relation with Jesus Christ. Once again, we see that the Gospel is the grid through which Paul views and evaluates all things. This means that Paul is not afraid to appeal to the authority that he has been given as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and that he is not driven to despair as he looks at the Corinthian church in spite of their many problems. Paul can speak authoritatively and encouragingly at the same time because he evaluates the situation with spiritual, cross-centered maturity.