

# 1 Corinthians 1

by John Nelson Darby

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*The sermon explores the themes of sanctification, the gifts of the Spirit, and the identity of Christians in Christ as presented in 1 Corinthians 1.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 29:14, John 3:6, Acts 18:17, 1 Corinthians 1:2-30, Ephesians 4:4-6, Hebrews 10:26, 1 Peter 2:9

**Topics:** "The Nature of the Church", "Sanctification"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby explores the first epistle to the Corinthians, emphasizing the distinction between being 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' and merely calling on the name of the Lord. He highlights the importance of the local church in Corinth as a representation of the broader Christian community, addressing both their gifts and shortcomings. Darby notes that while the Corinthians were enriched with spiritual gifts, they lacked grace and were warned about their behavior. He underscores the faithfulness of God in confirming believers to the end, despite their current failings, and stresses the necessity of recognizing the true nature of wisdom and understanding in relation to God. Ultimately, he presents a comprehensive view of what it means to be a Christian, rooted in Christ's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

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## Transcript

The first epistle to the Corinthians consists of details more than of great truths, and therefore not so much has been written on it. Sosthenes is associated with Paul, as having laboured there, where he had also been chief ruler of the synagogue; Acts 18. The association of others does not hinder the sole authorship of Paul. So, in addressing the Galatians, he speaks of "all the brethren which are with me," because he was shewing that the whole church of God was against them.

Verse 2 brings to view the roots of the main question of the church of God, two classes of persons being taken up there. This gives importance to the epistle. "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." Those that call on the name of the Lord Jesus are professors, assumed to be faithful till they went or were put out, not necessarily the body of Christ but the house of God. The assembly in Corinth, as elsewhere, is recognised as representing the church there. They were not born like the nation of Israel, but saints by call; sanctified in Christ Jesus, not after an external sort merely. The universality of the application is carefully maintained, its divine claim over all Christians everywhere. The direct address is to the Corinthian assembly, but the apostle takes in all the Christian profession elsewhere. He addressed them as saints, and I have no doubt that he considered them truthful,

unless they were proved hypocrites. But calling is professional simply; just as John says that whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him; but of hypocrites this would not be true. Though there might be hypocrites there, they would be characterised as of the church of God at Corinth. It is not what my judgment of individuals may be, but the statement of what their character is in such a place. There may be, and there was, an assembly of God in Corinth; and the apostle treats them as sanctified in Christ Jesus; then the rest as calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is a different thing from sanctified in Christ Jesus. Though a man who calls on the name of the Lord, unless he be a hypocrite, is sanctified, yet the calling on the name of the Lord does not give him title as such to be styled "sanctified in Christ Jesus."

201 The epistle is addressed to the church of God with all that call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; that is, generally, till chapter 10, to the house of God; after that, to the body specifically. There is a different state of things now. If men take the name of the Lord, they are bound by all that is written to such; but it does not follow that Paul would have written such a letter to them now, nor do I believe he would. He gives meat in due season. He would have to do with what is practically fallen away from the truth, and he would not deal with this as with a body of persons like those gathered in Corinth. As yet we have not the fact that false brethren had crept in. "Sanctified in Christ Jesus" is not the same thing as "sanctified by blood" in Hebrews, but quite different ideas; the latter not necessarily rising beyond external consecration, though, where faith is, it consecrates to God.

In Ephesians 4 the distinction re-appears more definitely, which we have seen in 1 Corinthians already. First, "one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling"; next, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," the wider circle of profession; and then the largest of all, "one God and Father of all," etc., returning to the intimacy of His children "who is in you [or 'us'] all." So the apostle, in Acts 17, quotes a Greek poet, "for we are also his offspring." Compare also Ephesians 3:15, "Every family"; and Adam was thus called son of God. It is not, of course, the spiritual bearing of the name; it is used as here naturally. At the time when the epistle was written, all that bore the Lord's name were looked at as true believers, unless proved to the contrary. It is wholly different now; and Paul would not have written to them as to the Corinthians, though professors are now bound by what he then wrote, because they make the profession.

We shall find another thing in the epistle: that the consequence of the association in verse 2 is, that the local church has taken the standing of the whole body. It will come out more in chapter 12; but in associating all professors of Christianity with the church at Corinth, he deals with them as they stand, upon the ground of the body of Christ, though only a local assembly.

202 It is striking to see how the apostle, after the salutation in verse 3, takes up all that he saw to be good, as a testimony to their reality, before he begins to deal with the evil (v. 4-9). "Ye come behind in no gift." There was gift, but very little grace. "The testimony of Christ was confirmed in you"; "In everything ye are enriched by him in all utterance, and in all knowledge." They had the truth and power to communicate it. They were waiting also for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ; not exactly His "coming," nor more (I think) than that He is hidden as yet. There is nothing about the rapture here, nor the judgment. In Hebrews 10:26 it is the stronger word, meaning complete knowledge, or, as often elsewhere, recognition. Peter, in his second epistle (chap. 1:5-8), uses the two words. A speculative mind might learn all ever so accurately, without faith or renewal.

The testimony is said to be "of Christ" here, "of God" in chapter 2:1; because it is, not another testimony, but another way of looking at the same. Here it is personal to Christ. Christ's testimony confirmed in you is the testimony of God brought to you. You give a different name to a thing from the different feeling you have about it. In chapter 2:1 he did not bring what was human, because it was the testimony of God; and he determined not to know anything among them but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Words are used, but really with the power of them. He did not come with man's wisdom and man's speech to bring God's testimony; but it was the testimony of Christ all the same. The great thing is to see why he uses a word, not that it is a different thing necessarily, but why that particular word comes in. It is God's testimony, not man's.

It is striking, I think, that the apostle addresses them here as "sanctified," enriched with gift, etc., and also says they shall be confirmed to the end, that they may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ; but then he goes on to blame them for everything. They had got testimony to their place in Christ by the gifts, etc. They had the Holy Ghost in consequence of their faith in Christ, and then he reckons on God's faithfulness; so that there is a point of departure from which he can deal with them. Many were to be blameless in the day of the Lord Jesus; how be so blameable now?

203 Verses 8, 9 are exceedingly important. He had the hope that they were saints in a general way; then he casts them on God's faithfulness; so that they would be blameless in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is one of the blankest cases of the perseverance of the saints (not happily, but commonly so-called); for, at that time they were going on exceedingly ill, yet there he introduces that they would be not safe but blameless. This he connects with the faithfulness of God. Jesus Christ will confirm you to the end, and God is faithful by whom ye were called.

"Fellowship of his Son,"\* which follows just after, means having a part together, and with Christ (koinonia) and in the blessings that are with Him. Partaking (metokee) is not communion (koinonia), which last is a closer thing. I partake of a thing, and in that measure have it in common with another. It is more in the character of communication. For instance in Hebrews 2:14 we have the difference in an important case. "Forasmuch, then, as the children were partakers of [kekoinoneken] flesh and blood [because we all had it, it is all in common], he also himself likewise took part [metesken], of the same." Some misused it to teach that He took sinful flesh, which is nowhere said; but Christ did take flesh and blood. In Luke 5 the two words are used in a general way. "They beckoned to their partners" [metokois], v. 7, while [koinonoi], v. 10, shews they had common share, with nothing very definite for distinction. Words are used sometimes in a less, sometimes in a more, definite sense. We use a great number of words which have merely a different shade of meaning without an intention of making a difference. You might say, They both live in the same place, or in the same locality, but you do not mean another thought. Locality is the more general term. So going shares or partnership might have a shade of difference.

{\*["Communion with his Son," in the original Morrish edition.]}

The first thing we come to is definite: "I beseech you that ye all speak the same thing," etc. (v. 10-12). Then we have the character of the preaching of the gospel, that what is foolishness to man is what God has taken to put down flesh, the foolishness of preaching, and the shame of the cross to bring everything to nought by it. It is hard to keep steadily before your mind that, if you want to do God's work, you must have what the world will not have; and it is so, that no flesh should glory in His presence. It pleased God. when in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. Otherwise it would have been man's wisdom, that is, in the power of his mind.

204 I do not believe that a single thought of God ever enters into man's mind by intellect. It is always by conscience, not by intellect. There is faith, and there is love; but conscience is the topknot, as you call it. And in that way all the philosophy of man goes at once. The fact is, God is not in His place at all if my mind sets to work to judge about Him. It is when I say, "I am a poor sinner, and I believe in God," that God has His right place, even if my heart is wrong; still the conscience is that which directly owns the claims of God. There is no knowledge of God in intellect.

Responsibility comes in thus. God is revealed, and the moment there is a revelation, it is revealed that I may receive ideas which my mind of itself cannot take up; but if I have received an idea, I am responsible to be found in the right place by it. If I have the idea that you are my child, I am responsible to act as your father; but the mind is incapable of forming an idea of God, and that is where the philosophers have all gone wrong. They say the mind can form an idea without man's conscience, but it cannot: though it does not follow that God cannot reveal it to him. It is the supposition that the power within us is the measure of all that we can be apprehensive of. This I deny altogether; it is a total mistake. Suppose a poor old woman, and a strong man gives her his arm, that would not be power in her.

If there comes a revelation of God, there is the responsibility to receive it, but it does not follow that my mind could have formed the idea. In these days it is well to be clear as to this. The worst kind of infidelity says, "Man can have no idea beyond his senses, and a few original deductions which he may draw." I reply, All true; but that leaves you as ignorant of God as an animal. Do not pretend that there is nothing outside of yourself, and here comes in revelation. Like the woman in John 4, conscience has to be reached from without: "If thou knewest the gift of God." The woman says in effect, "What of that?" And then how does Christ deal with her? "Go, call thy husband, and come hither," and this arrests her. Real intelligence of God is in the conscience. I do not say the heart may not be drawn.

205 As to the distinction between "conscience" and "heart," the affections are in the heart, and conscience is my responsibility for right and wrong. You may have natural feelings moved like the women of Jerusalem beating their breasts because some one was going to be put to death; but what detects the work of God is when these two go together. You may meet with natural conscience alone, which is much like Judas, who went and hanged himself. God is light and love, and if He reveals Himself, you need have both. Where the light comes and deals with the conscience, the love attracts the heart, and both are moved. Thus Peter went to Christ and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Why did he go to Christ at all? So I say, "I am a guilty sinner," when the light comes in; and where the work is of God, it is accompanied by the attraction of love. There may be much of natural feeling which is of no value. Just as in a time of the cholera raging, there is excitement enough in the terror of the moment; but the cholera goes, and all that goes too.

The heart is used for all sorts of feeling. What is described in the prodigal son is that he began to be in want. That proves nothing but that the soul was originally made to be fed. He had not yet come to himself; but the effect of beginning to be in want, when God had not revealed Himself, was that he went farther and farther away. So it is with every man who goes thoroughly into the world until he gets tired of it. Coming to himself may follow a remorse.

The conscience may be reached by Satan. Man commits murder, and it has passed into a proverb, "Murder will out." That is conscience. Man got it at the fall, and carries it with him. Adam had no knowledge of good and evil, but was subject to God's authority, and for that reason the thing imposed upon him in the garden was neither good nor evil in itself except by the command. Now we have the sense of wrong. If a

child only six months old slaps his mother, he knows it is wrong. Conscience may be defined as my own mind judging of good and evil as God does. That is why it is such a totally false thing to make it a law. A law is a thing imposed upon a person, whereas the essence of conscience is that I discern between good and evil in myself, and that becomes a law to me. Law is imposed by a lawgiver, as God does. In the garden Adam was going against subjection to God: "thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife."

206 As to the difference between wisdom and understanding (v. 19) in English, wisdom is the attempt to use what a man has learnt, but you could hardly call it that in Greek. We may say that the understanding of the prudent is more the character of discernment, whereas wisdom is acquaintance with truth more. In the Hebrew a great many more words are used for wisdom than we have in English. In Isaiah 29 (verse 14 quoted here), the prophet is taking up the case of Christ's coming. He had taken up Sennacherib and that leads him on, and he launches out into the Assyrian of the last day. That is how the prophets speak, and that is what Peter means by "of no private interpretation." You cannot take up a few words without the connection. In Isaiah 33 the whole scheme is developed. Verse 20 is a quotation from Isaiah 33:18, which follows, "Thine eye shall see the king in his beauty": sinners are afraid, and then he says, Where is the wisdom of man? Here they were 'counting up the towers' and so on; but to what purpose after all?

The "foolishness of preaching" (v. 21) is more the way of doing it, the means, but it also takes in the thing preached: you cannot separate them here. The "power of God" (v. 24) is not exactly the same as "kept by the power of God." In the latter it is more absolutely in Himself, and Christ is the one in whom it is all deposited; but when you speak of "Christ the power of God," it is more the means by which it is brought out. In the one case it is "unto salvation" because righteousness of God is revealed in it: there is power of God in it to save us.

The expressions "foolishness of God," and "weakness of God" (v. 27) are used merely to put the thing in the strongest way. For instance, death is weakness: "crucified in weakness"; yet everything of man was set aside by it, and in that sense the weakness of God. It is the setting up of God absolutely. The weakness of God was the gospel, that is, as man would speak of it; and foolishness as man looks at it. And God chose that - took it on purpose, though to man it was merely some one hanging on a gibbet, and yet God was glorified in it. As to "things which are not" (v. 28), out of death is a thing which is not, but the apostle takes it as an extreme case in the whole scene of God in Christendom. God has brought to nought all of heathenism and Judaism.

At the end of our chapter we get the fuller expression of what a Christian is: "Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption," v. 30. Not wisdom in the mind being acted upon and so I am wise about God, but "of him," that is of God, "are ye in Christ Jesus." I am of God, and I have my wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption of God, all in Christ. I am of God in Christ, and have all there of God in Christ. It comes from Him; it is not my thinking about Him. And so man is totally set aside, flesh is put down. The world by wisdom was not to know God, but I am in Christ as a new being, a new creature, created again; and I have wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption all in Christ. These verses are a remarkably complete statement of what a Christian is, with full redemption itself at the end, body and all.

207 Here it is the measure and character and fulness of sanctification; it is not legal nor outward, but what is in Christ. It is practical: sanctification always is, except in Hebrews. We have the nature and the quality of it. If we look at Christ we see what sanctification is. People talk of its being imputed, but that is absurd. Think of the absurdity of talking about imputed redemption! But in Christ all these things are real to me. I

say, what wisdom I have! Am I a Platonist? No, Christ is my wisdom. Righteousness is imputed; the term is applicable, but you do not get it in this passage. What sanctification I have! Christ and redemption too when it is all complete in glory. It was all accomplished, but is not yet in its full effect.

As to the order of the words, I take it that wisdom is separated somewhat because that is what the apostle has been talking about. This was not man's wisdom: God had chosen the foolish things of the world, and so on; and then he brings out that Christ is made unto us wisdom, laying a little more emphasis on wisdom. There is a question of different text here, I know, and very likely it may be taken as, "who is made unto us wisdom of God"; but that only gives an emphatic character to it, and there is no real difference. Redemption comes in at the end as the full complete thing. The difference between ek and apo (v. 30) is that, when we say we are "of God," it is positive life; the other is 'from,' on God's part; whereas we derive our life and nature from God by the Spirit's quickening power. In John 3 it is ek: "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," etc.

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