

Sermon Draft

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Sermon: "The Church"

Both Paul and the believers in Corinth were called by God. Paul was called to be an apostle, though undeserving (15:9). The Corinthian believers were called to be saints, though undeserving. God's call makes them what they are in his Church. Or as Paul would say, ***"because of him you are in Christ Jesus."*** (1:30) We are called to be saints and we too are undeserving. Their faith in Christ was something they expressed in worship and conversation and held with firm inner conviction, the result of the grace of God given them in Christ.

We confess in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the "Holy Christian Church." A Christian Church is made up of those who follow Christ, who believe in him as the Savior. Of course, there are other groups that are made up of Christians as well.

There are Christian singles' clubs, the Christian Motorcyclists Association, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Christian sewing clubs, Christian camping groups, etc. All of them have Christians as members. So they become a place for Christian folks to gather and share their common interests. Is that what the Church is? Is that what it's become, just a place for Christians to gather and share common interests? A social club to gather and all too often to gossip. Or is it something much more than that?

According to Paul's letter "to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus" (v 2), the answer is most certainly yes! It is the *Holy* Christian Church not just because it's made up of Christians, but because Christ is present here bringing us his heavenly kingdom.

Martin Luther wrote: **“Thank God, today a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd”** (SA III XII). It is the Holy Christian Church because Christ builds it, sanctifies it, blesses it, sustains it. It is His Church. That’s what makes it what it is. The church is what it is because it is Christ’s.

I wonder how the Corinthians felt and what they thought when they heard how Paul addressed them in the opening of his letter. Their consciences would have told them they were anything but saints. This congregation was plagued by divisions and factions, jealousy and strife. Just as many churches are today. They were taking one another to court, gossiping, indulging in sexual immorality, and their worship services had degenerated into displays of selfishness and sinning against Christ’s body and blood. How can it be that this people could be called “holy”?

The same can be asked about us here today. For here are folks who resemble this fallen world that is passing away. We don't seem much different from the rest of the world. We fight and squabble with one another. We strive after earthly things instead of the things of heaven. We pollute ourselves by indulging in sinful desires and activities.

But the holiness of the Church doesn't depend on the people who walk in the door. There is no one holy except the Lord. He alone sanctifies and makes holy. And he does that by granting participation in his holiness and his holy kingdom. That takes place when he calls us into Christ and his holiness through Baptism into his death.

We were baptized into the Body of Christ and share his holiness. Baptism is not something done in remembrance of the Christ who was. It's the sign of the Christ who is.

He is still here bringing the advent of the new creation in the hearts and lives of those dead in sin. Therefore, the Church's holiness is God's holiness, not the people's. It comes to us from heaven. *He* came to us from heaven. This means the Church's holiness does not depend on the holiness of its members, but on Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the Church. God brings his holiness wherever he is. And since he is always present in the Word and Sacraments, the Church is holy despite the failings of its members.

St. Paul not only acknowledges the Corinthians' status as holy in Christ Jesus; he also gives thanks ***"because of the grace of God that was given [them] in Christ Jesus"*** (v 4). Specifically that they were enriched in every way in him and not lacking in any gift. Though sinners will always find ways to abuse the gifts God gives, there's no problem with the gifts or the Giver.

In fact, those gifts were indication that Christ was still present in the midst of sinners.

Again, the blessings bestowed do not come because of our faithful stewardship of those gifts, though since they are his, we must be faithful. Rather the blessings come from him because they are his gifts from the cross. He gives and we receive. Where his gifts are, his kingdom is.

And so God's gifts of grace in the Church become the source of strength for Christians in this fallen and dying world. Already now, the new world that is yet to come is breaking through in Christ and continues to shine forth through his gifts—Word and Sacrament.

The Word we hear is not just a recitation and repetition of words long ago. They are God's words, from his mouth.

The Sacraments are the ways the Lord continues to deal with his people, bringing new life and giving the benefits of his atoning sacrifice. The Lord, who came to this world in human flesh, has not left it. He is still present, bringing us his kingdom by bringing us into fellowship with him.

And so, as we look forward to the day when the old world has passed out of existence, and the fullness of the new creation will be fully revealed, we know it is the mercy of God himself and his faithfulness that **“will sustain you to the end.”** He will sustain you **“guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (v 8).

This is the greatest gift of all—the forgiveness of all sin—knowing that we who are guilt ridden have been set free and so will stand before the throne of God on that day to be received with all the holy ones into his holy glory.

There are those who will settle for hoping that they have done enough here to be received there. But this is not the way it is in his Church. Here, we already have been received into fellowship with Christ and have our being in him. This is not like any other earthly fellowship. No, this is fellowship with Christ Jesus. This is what we share.

The Church isn't the place we pursue our interests. It's the place where Christ pursues his Father's will—the salvation of sinners. It's the place where Christ comes to take us into himself and his glory. And so "to the Church of God that is in Dunnellon, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Amen